
*THE CHURCH IS GOD'S, NOT OURS:
AN OPEN LETTER FOR MAINTAINING THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
IN A CHAOTIC TIME
Lifewatch
September 1, 2016*

Dear United Methodist Bishops and Commissioners, Laity and Clergy:

Pentecost Season grace and peace to you and yours.

Perhaps you know about, or participated in, this recent series of events. During General Conference 2016, Bishop Warner H. Brown, Jr. convened a small group for discussion of The United Methodist Church's way forward. It was composed of three of The United Methodist Church's active parties: Progressives, Centrists, and Evangelicals. Each party had four representatives at the table. Evidently, according to social media, this group had agreed that the time had come for The United Methodist Church to divide; then, it had formulated a proposal for division. News of a proposed division and its public release caught the bishops of the church by surprise, and they backed away from the proposal. However, one of the original architects of the proposal spoke to seminarians the next day and described a possible division of the denomination into three parts: a Progressive wing, a Centrist wing, and an Evangelical wing.

The chances are great that the twelve United Methodists, who agreed on a proposal to divide the denomination, will be appointed to the Commission that the bishops are charged by the 2016 General Conference to create. That is well and good. This original group will most likely be expanded to include others to enhance the Commission's racial, gender, geographical, and theological diversity. That is important. However, since the original twelve know each other, have worked with each other, are acquainted with each others' positions, and have agreed on an earlier proposal for division, they might well lead the larger Commission to sign onto their prior proposal -- which was to divide The United Methodist Church into three parts -- or a version of it.

A DEFICIT EXPOSED

The earlier, original group's proposal to divide The United Methodist Church, I believe, demonstrates the group's lack of a serious doctrine of the Church (or ecclesiology). That is not surprising. After all, each of the three parties, considered one at a time, appears to have the same ecclesiological deficit. In general, some Progressives, at their worst, seem to maintain a view of the church that is completely culturally accommodated; some Centrists, at their worst, in their commitment to grow their churches, tend to maximize options for clergy and laity and congregations, to minimize conflict; and some Evangelicals, at their worst, tend to understand the church as the communal gathering of individuals in need of religious experience. It makes sense that these three parties, each of which lacks a sufficient ecclesiology, agreed to a proposal that also lacks an ecclesiology that is strong enough to resist division. Again, that is not surprising.

"The United Methodist Church does not have an ecclesiology," it is commonly repeated, particularly by seminary professors. Unfortunately, this claim appears to be true. Sadly, at precisely this time -- when The United Methodist Church is threatened by schism, when the church needs a sturdy, comprehensive understanding of the Church -- it is not readily accessible.

THE SCATTERED FRAGMENTS OF METHODIST ECCLESIOLOGY

However, though The United Methodist Church does not have in one place a comprehensive doctrine of the Church, I believe that The United Methodist Church does have fragments of an ecclesiology that can help sustain our denomination in unity through this time.

That is, United Methodist ecclesiology is found scattered throughout United Methodist faith and life -- in the church's doctrine and discipline, hymnody and history, liturgy and literature, sermons and studies, and so on. (This has been powerfully demonstrated in "A Resource Paper from The UMC Committee on Faith and Order" entitled "United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching on the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church" [May 3, 2013, http://www.gbhem.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/DOM_Nature_Mission_Faithfulness_of_Church.pdf].) For generations, by the grace of God, these fragments have gotten Methodism by. If they are now recalled, relearned, and relied upon, these ecclesiological fragments can help The United Methodist Church to avoid the schism (or division or separation) that threatens.

In the hope of assisting The United Methodist Church to avoid division, I will recall below several of our denomination's most important ecclesiological fragments. Taken together, they prove the existence of a United Methodist doctrine of the Church, however scattered. Furthermore, these fragments present a strong challenge for The United Methodist Church to remain one church.

*John 17: Jesus Christ prays for the Church: "I ask not only on behalf of these [the apostles], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they [the Church, the followers of Christ] also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21, NRSV, emphases added)

Commenting on John 17:21, Rev. John Wesley declares: "Here Christ prays for the world. Observe the sum of his whole prayer: 1. Receive me into thy own and my glory: 2. Let my apostles share therein, 3. And all other believers; 4. And let all the world believe." (Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament)

Jesus and Wesley understand that the unity of the Church, in a fractured world, is a powerful witness to the Gospel.

*The Articles of Religion, Article XIII--Of the Church (The Book of Discipline (2012), Paragraph 104. Section 3--Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules, p. 66)

*The Confession of Faith, Article V--The Church (The Book of Discipline (2012), Paragraph 104. Section 3--Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules, p. 71): "...We believe [the Christian Church] is one, holy, apostolic and catholic...."

*The Church Is One: "Christian unity is not an option; it is a gift to be received and expressed." (The Book of Discipline [2012], Paragraph 105. Section 4--Our Theological Task, p. 88, emphasis added)

*The Church Is Holy: "A means towards holiness, for Methodists, is discipline....Institutionally, this [holiness] is present in the discipline that governs our personal, congregational and institutional lives." ("United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching on the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church," p. 46) Such discipline, in a Methodist setting, is always employed for the sake of the unity of the larger body.

*The Church Is Apostolic: "[T]he entirety of Paragraph 105 ('Our Theological Task') might be considered a Wesleyan statement of the doctrinal or teaching dimension of the apostolic task, which is, living faithfully, courageously, and energetically out of Biblical witness. The section 'Theological Guidelines, Sources and Criteria' summarizes how we understand the doctrinal or theological force of apostolic..." ("United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching on the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church," p. 38) From the beginning, the apostolic witness was unified to serve the Church's unity.

*The Church Is Catholic: “John Wesley summoned Methodists to a ‘Catholic Spirit’ founded on the common witness of the orthodox heritage, unity in essentials, an orientation toward common mission, a disciplined life, and bonds of love.” (“United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching on the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church,” p. 30) Catholicity, from a Wesleyan perspective, is a means toward unity.

*Liturgy for Baptism: “Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ’s holy church...” (The Baptismal Covenant I, The United Methodist Hymnal [1989], p. 33) Christ’s holy church!

“As members of Christ’s universal Church, will you be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?” (p. 38, emphasis added) Only one church and only its ministries are part of this vow.

*Liturgy for Holy Communion: “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.” (A Service of Word and Table I, The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 10) Obviously, the key word is one.

*Bishops for Unity: Early in the service for the consecration of bishops, those who are to be consecrated are reminded: “You are called to guard the faith, to seek unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church; and to supervise and support the Church’s life, work, and mission throughout the world.” (“The Order for the Consecration of Bishops,” The United Methodist Book of Worship, no. 703, emphases added)

Later in the same service, those being consecrated are tested: “Will you guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church against all that is contrary to God’s Word?” They are urged to respond: “I will, for the love of God.” (The United Methodist Book of Worship [1992], no. 703) Were United Methodist bishops, who are called to a unifying ministry and who vow to minister in unifying ways, to participate in the division of The United Methodist Church, that would be a particularly egregious failure in episcopal ministry.

TWO GUIDING TRUTHS

The above ecclesiological fragments (and many more could be listed) remind United Methodists of two truths.

First, the Church is of God. Again and again, through various ways and means, our ecclesiological DNA boldly declares and strongly suggests that God creates and keeps the Church.

With that in mind, those baptized into Christ and His Church, and especially those ordained into servant leadership in The United Methodist Church, are called to approach and serve the church in faith and in faithfulness. Since the church is of God, her members, clergy, and bishops should never, under any circumstance, assume that the church is theirs; nor should they lead the church according to their own light, intelligence, and organizational savvy. We are baptized into God’s Church, so we order the church’s life, according to God’s Word, for the sake of the world.

Second, the Church is one. God gives unity to The United Methodist Church, and God has given The United Methodist Church the ecclesiological truths to maintain that unity.

However, today, there is so much chaos in The United Methodist Church over human sexuality, including: the election of an openly lesbian woman to the office of bishop, the declaration of several annual conferences that they will not conform to the church’s doctrine and discipline regarding human sexuality, and the statement of several conference boards of ordained ministry that in their work they will neglect matters related to human sexuality.

Especially now, it is tempting for church leaders to formulate solutions that would involve division to restore a semblance of order and peace to United Methodists. Well

intentioned leaders, who have been successful in their various ministries for years, who have led their congregations and their institutions by making hard decisions often, might respond to the current chaos by trying to take control of the church (or their parts of the church). Their plans and proposals for the church might look good. They might sound well intentioned. They might appear to be practical and workable. But precisely such solutions would violate the ecclesiological truth that the Church is God's, and they would breach the ecclesiological imperative for unity that runs deeply throughout United Methodist faith and life.

Some will object, "You are making unity an idol. You are pushing unity at all costs." My reply, "You are correct. Unity is not a god. But unity is given, by God, to the Church, and the Church's responsibility is to receive and maintain that gift. In truth, unity is not an idol, but unity is an essential dimension of the Church's nature and life."

A FUTURE WITHOUT DIVISION

I propose, for your consideration, three challenges.

First, The United Methodist Church should not divide. (Would the Head divide His own Body? Of course not.) However, if there are United Methodist clergy and laity who, and congregations that, on the claim of conscience, cannot abide by the church's doctrine and discipline and insist on disrupting the church, The United Methodist Church should allow them to leave -- with their pensions and properties intact. That is not a negotiated division of the church, on which all agree. That is a diminishment of the church, in which convinced and disruptive dissenters depart. That, to be sure, would be a sad day in United Methodist history. But a denominational division, in which the church's leaders are collaborators, would be a scandalous day in United Methodist history. Covenant keepers and guardians cannot, should not, and will not negotiate a breach of the church's covenant.

Second, in the midst of today's chaos, the Council of Bishops would be faithful to appoint to their Commission many who are deeply learned in The United Methodist Church's ecclesiology, fragmented and scattered though it is. On the Commission, those who are ecclesiological will speak for the church -- not for a party within the church.

And third, I implore all United Methodists to recognize and receive anew God's gift of unity to The United Methodist Church and our challenge to maintain it. God has blessed The United Methodist Church with the ecclesiological wisdom to work through this difficult time and maintain unity. So we United Methodists can step back from plans for division -- no matter how attractive and promising they might appear to be. By the grace of God, we can stay the course -- by faithfully teaching and living church doctrine about human sexuality, by faithfully upholding church discipline, by faithfully pulling back from the dissent that involves disruption, and by faithfully maintaining the unity of the Church for which Christ prayed and died and was raised. All the while, we must rely on God the Spirit for gifts of patience and perseverance.

Continue faithful, to Christ and His Church, for the sake of the world.

In Christ



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