

COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

**President's Address
October 31, 2016**

WALKING THE WING

Introduction

Grace and abundant peace to you from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends and colleagues, welcome to this first meeting of our new Council of Bishops as we lay the foundation for our work together in the 2017-2020 quadrennium. We delight in the election of 15 new bishops of the Church, the re-election of Bishop Alsted, and the jurisdictional election of Bishop Ortiz in Puerto Rico. We eagerly await the election or re-election of several others across the Central Conferences in the coming months. This makes us a new Council, a new Leadership Team, a new community of sojourners. Much of this meeting is designed to invite our new colleagues into meaningful conversations, fellowship and sharing with the Council.

The entire United Methodist Church is holding its breath. And, there is probably some breath-holding happening in this very room. Is there to be found, discovered, discerned a Way Forward? Will the Holy Spirit break through and fill our Church with new breath, expanded breath, resurrection breath? Or will we expire, breathless? Much of this meeting, although abbreviated, is designed to engage us in exploring how we, as a Council, can lead the Church, in such a time as this, to breathe deeply from the Spirit's reservoirs of grace and truth, love and justice, unity and witness.

I have been living with God's words imparted through the prophet Jeremiah to the stubborn people of Judah:

"Go stand at the crossroads and look around.

Ask for directions to the old road,

The tried and true road. Then take it.

Discover the right route for your souls."

Jeremiah 6:16a, *The Message*

We clearly are at a crossroads. And, God is calling us to discover the right route for our souls. Friends, there is more at stake here than the structural and confessional unity of our church or the vitality and reach of our mission. I believe we are faced with discovering the right route for our souls.

And, let us not forget how the people responded to Jeremiah's prophesy. Do you remember?

"But they said, 'Nothing doing.

We aren't going that way.'"

Jeremiah 6:16b, *The Message*

Before we can lead the People Called United Methodist, we will need to attend to our own spiritual and covenantal life. Before we can lead the People Called United Methodist in finding a Way Forward, we will need to surrender our own tendencies to shake our fingers at God and say, "Nothing doing. We aren't going that way." Before we can lead the People Called United Methodist toward unity, we will need to build and model unity within this Council.

This morning I want to suggest five specific leadership roles for the Council as we prepare to lead the People Called United Methodist into a future with hope. This is not an exhaustive list, but a place to begin our conversation.

- Teach our people to walk the wing
- Embrace God's unlimited imagination
- Lean into our mission
- Maintain the unity of the Spirit
- Humble ourselves before the Lord

Teach Our People to Walk the Wing

I doubt there is anyone present today that remembers when airplanes were a fascinating new phenomenon. In the early days of aviation in the United States, stunt pilots barnstormed the country putting on air shows and taking people for rides. The most popular stars of these shows were the wing-walkers. They thrilled the crowds below by teetering along the edge of disaster while the plane dipped

and rolled. The object was to move from strut to strut on a bi-plane until the wing-walker had walked the length of the wing. Now, the first rule of wing-walking is ... you guessed it ... “Don’t let go of whatever you are holding on to until you are sure you have hold of something else.”

Oh, did I mention that the struts on a bi-plane were positioned so that the strut the wing-walker needed to grab, as he let go of the one he was holding, was approximately a foot beyond the wing-walker’s reach? The wing-walker could only walk the wing if he was courageous enough to step into the gap between what was certain security and an uncertain future.

One of the reasons I like the apostle Thomas so much is that Thomas was a wing-walker. The events of Passion Week – the arrest of Jesus, the trial, crucifixion and burial – had moved very fast. Presented with the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas held fast to what he knew. He could not live in the gap of believing without seeing. Is this, not all too often, our story as well? We tend to forget that the very nature of the faith journey is to walk the wing. We, too often, tend to approach changing circumstances and challenging situations as if it is good enough to hold on for dear life and endure the ride. And, in some cases, simply brace for the crash!

A real wing-walker cannot freeze by the cockpit without taking a step. A real faith venturer – anyone going on to be made perfect in Christ’s love – must, as Jesus taught, believe without seeing. A real wing-walker draws strength and hope from the biblical record – the story of a God who is relentless in calling us to step into the gaps, the unsure places. A God who is always calling us forward. A God who is always calling us beyond our fear, “our brokenness and rebellion and estrangement.” (Bishop Ken Carter) A God who promised that even as we are invited to let go and believe, God will never let us go. Friends, we do not need to freeze by the cockpit holding tightly to the strut of fear, or doubt, or even certainty, because God is holding us tightly. That is the covenant promise!

- What would it look like for this Council to walk the wing in addressing racial injustice, tribalism and xenophobia across our global Connection, and to teach our people to walk this wing?
- What would it look like for this Council to walk the wing in addressing climate justice, and to teach our people to walk this wing?

- What would it look like for this Council to walk the wing in reclaiming our evangelistic task, and teach our people to walk this wing?
- What would it look like for this council to walk the wing of developing a truly sustainable, nimble and fully contextualized global church, and to teach our people to walk this wing?
- What would it look like for this Council to walk the wing in addressing our impasse regarding human sexuality and to teach our people to walk this wing?

The letter of I John captures the tension and the affirmation inherent in wing-walking. I like how Eugene Peterson paraphrases the first two verses of chapter 3:

What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are. But that's also why the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to. But friends, that's exactly who we are: children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up! What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we'll see him—and in seeing him, become like him. I John 3:1-3a (*The Message*)

I have always been intrigued by the phrase from this text, "What we will be has not yet been revealed." That's unnerving! "Who knows how we will end up!" What if we do not have all the answers or see clearly on all matters? Sounds like wing-walking to me!

Even though, as beloved children of God, and as Wesleyan Christians, we are on a journey with an end result not yet fully revealed, the pathway is clearly identified – we are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, for therein lies our salvation, our transformation, our hope, even the joy of waiting and anticipating the magnificent future God has planned for us.

Let's resolve today to teach our people to walk the wing and trust that the future – where we will end up – is in God's hands.

Embrace God's Unlimited Imagination

At the recent World Methodist Conference in Houston, Texas, Rev. Ted Campbell, a professor at Perkins School of Theology, gave a brilliant lecture that built to the following crescendo: the restrictive church law regarding homosexuality “now has the functional status of an essential or ‘necessary’ teaching alongside the teachings of the ancient church and the Reformation and the Wesleyan movement as something that unites and divides us.” And, then he concluded by saying, “The question at this point is not whether we divide or not... That I fear is a given now.” There are certainly many in our church, and perhaps, in this room, who have come to the same conclusion.

I shared with Ted privately, and later with the press, that in my opinion, such despairing comments, although candid and clearly realistic when viewed through the trained eye of a church historian, assume that our fate is sealed, and leave no room for God's imagination to break through our impoverished human imaginations.

Theologian John McIntyre speaks of Pentecost as the “wholehearted expression of the unlimited imagination of God.” The Holy Spirit is an experience, let loose in the Church and in the world, of the imagination of God. That is what happened at Pentecost as Jews from all over the known world were gathered for the Feast of Weeks. God gave them, and all who believe in Jesus Christ, the gift of God's presence. God gave us the advocate that Jesus promised. God gave us God's unlimited imagination. And, this gift – this unlimited imagination – is according to John's Gospel “to be with us forever.” (John 15:16)

This gift of the Spirit prevails. God's unlimited imagination prevails. The Holy Spirit prevails over all our differences, even the differences of our nationalities and our languages, our differences of class, of race, of gender, of theology. Over all the hindrances to speech, over all the barriers to understanding, over all our human resistances and inadequacies. The Holy Spirit prevails. Through the Holy Spirit, our preferences give way to God's purposes. Our limited knowledge gives way to God's unlimited imagination.

How many of you remember the significant debate in our denomination when we were in the throes of deciding to eliminate the General Council on Ministries and replace it with the Connectional Table? I was invited to be part of a focus group on this structural reform. After an all-day session, one of the participants rose and said he thought reform was impossible. “The old structures are too entrenched. People are too slow to change. There are too many power blocks. There is too much apathy.” He went on and on, and then concluded his speech by asking the group, “What gives you any hope that we will now or ever change?” We sat in stunned silence. Then a voice called out from the rear of the room, “THE HOLY SPIRIT!”

Let us resolve today that this Council of Bishops will be that person in the back of the room of this denomination that rises up in the face of fatalism and despair and pre-determined outcomes and cries out, “THE HOLY SPIRIT!” Let us resolve to go forth with a narrative that God’s unlimited imagination is still available to us and, if we surrender our fatalism, despair and pre-determined outcomes, the Holy Spirit will prevail.

Lean Into Our Mission

We certainly are in a season of holding our breath. Or, perhaps, we are in a season of living “between the times” as we prayerfully await the work of this Council and the Commission on A Way Forward.

But, this season of breath-holding or waiting; this season of tension and chaos; this season of acts of non-compliance, reactions, and counter-actions is no excuse for us as a Council and residential bishops to abdicate our role to lead the church in fully embracing our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And to lift high our “call to action” to express this mission through vital congregations engaged in the four areas of missional focus. I urge us to lean heavily into our mission in this season. I celebrate that we have begun to do so by calling together our Extended Cabinets for the purpose of rehearsing our core mission and taking a deeper dive into what we teach and how we lead in this regard.

I don’t know about you, but I want this Council, and my Episcopal Area, deeply committed and fruitful in:

- raising up 3 million “difference makers”;
- starting 10,000 new faith communities;
- partnering with 400 communities to help end poverty; and
- reaching 1 million children with life-saving health interventions.

Let us not wane or be distracted or buffeted by the winds of discord, cynicism, anxiety, division and despair. As people of the Methodist Way, we are first and foremost a movement of God, marked by our love for God and neighbor, born of revival, and persuaded to spread holiness of heart and public life across the world.

Let us resolve at this very gathering that we will not waver in claiming and living and preaching and teaching who we are and how God is using the people of the Methodist Way to form new disciples and change the world.

Maintain the Unity of the Spirit

I became an instant and ardent admirer of Pope Francis. I believe God is working through him to energize all of Christendom. In an interview in the Jesuit magazine, *America*, shortly after his election, Pope Francis spoke directly to my Wesleyan heart when he said, “The church has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you.” He went on to say, “A beautiful homily, a genuine sermon, must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation.” John’s Gospel articulates the first proclamation this way: Jesus “is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 NRSV) This is the core of the Good News. This is the proclamation that unites all of Christendom – all who take the name of Christ. Our fundamental unity as the Body of Christ, with multiple expressions and traditions, is in the first proclamation.

But, from the beginning of the Methodist movement, the seeds of tension and, at times, division, were sown over how we would give ecclesiastical and Christological expression to this first proclamation. Are we saved from our sins through Christ to be set apart from the world? Or are we saved from our sins

through Christ to become a movement for healing a broken and unjust world? The answer, of course, is “yes” to both.

Our fathers and mothers in the Methodist movement did a remarkable job of holding these two concepts in creative tension. And, all of us in this room have taught and celebrated the distinctiveness and richness and synergy of this creative co-existence – rooted in the Gospels and in our Wesleyan tradition.

But, there is also plenty of evidence that this tension has led to fragmentation and division. You only need to attend a World Methodist Conference to witness how many times we have divided over what constitutes holiness. Most of us in this room are familiar with our own denominational debate whether to add the phrase “for the transformation of the world” to our relatively newly-minted mission statement “to make disciples of Jesus Christ” – a mild, yet poignant example of the theological tension inherent in our Body.

Bishop Ken Carter, in a very thoughtful article he recently wrote titled, “Just Resolution as an Expression of Restorative Justice,” provides a very real and current example of this tension. I quote from his article:

“And so, with the recent consecration of a practicing gay bishop, there are sharply different interpretations. One part of the church sees this as a significant step toward separation, and the recent Episcopal/Anglican experience provides a blueprint. Another part of the church views this as an historical breakthrough, a matter of justice and inclusion.”

Let’s admit it – this Christian unity stuff is difficult, in part because we tend to forget that authentic unity is a Spirit gift – not something we create or enforce by rules and law. Paul makes this clear in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NRSV)

Paul understood we do not create unity. We are called to maintain unity. We cannot create a gift. We are called to affirm, celebrate and maintain unity. We don't create the Body of Christ; it is a gift. We are initiated into the Body – into this gift – through baptism by water and the Spirit. And this Body has many different parts. Pope Francis went on in his interview to remind us:

“...it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognize what the Spirit was sown in the other as gift for us. ... We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.”

I want to suggest to you this morning that authentic unity is essentially a Pentecost phenomenon. Authentic unity is ultimately a Fruit of the Spirit rather than a fruit of purity codes, polity systems, polite relationships or political compromises.

- Authentic unity is born of Christ's death on a cross – putting to death our hostility.
- Authentic unity is incarnated in Christ – the Lamb of God—and made visible in the loaf and cup.
- Authentic unity flows from the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- Authentic unity is expressed in loving others as God loves us.
- Authentic unity is maintained by honoring Jesus' prayer for the Church.

Let us resolve, at this very meeting, that this Council of Bishops will, at all personal costs, “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3, NRSV) Let us commit to one another that we will not give credence or quarter to schism in our ranks or in our residential settings or in the denomination. Let us affirm, unequivocally, that division is never the will of Christ for his church. Let us resolve, at this very meeting that the Council of Bishops is one body and we will stand together against anything that will divide us.

Humble Ourselves Before the Lord

Hear these words from Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit priest and philosopher:

Patient Trust

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally, impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ
excerpted from *Hearts on Fire*

This is a statement, a prayer really, about humility; about humbling ourselves before God.

- **Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you/us will be.**

Friends, can we open ourselves to the possibility that God is already at work forming a new spirit, a new possibility within us?

- **Give our Lord the benefit of believing that God's hand is leading you.**

Friends, can we humble ourselves to acknowledge that we are not clever enough or sufficient enough on our own to lead, but trust God to lead us and the Church?

- **And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.**

Friends, can we surrender to the anxiety, suspense, messiness and incompleteness of our circumstance and during this season, beat our swords into plowshares, do no further harm to one another, and give God space to bring forth the new creation?

I believe, with all my heart, that God is trying to do a new thing within and through The United Methodist Church and this Council of spiritual leaders. But, I also believe God cannot accomplish God's purposes among and through us unless we assume the posture of confession and prayer – unless we are completely vulnerable to the transforming presence and power of Christ. The posture of confession and prayer is always on our knees.

And so, as we begin this new quadrennium together, as we prepare to launch the Commission on A Way Forward, as we earnestly seek to give God the benefit of believing and fully trusting that God's hand is

leading us, I am going to invite you to kneel with me as we confess our sin and seek Christ's mercy and forgiveness. If you are able, I invite you to kneel and use your chair as your prayer altar.

Holy and gracious God, we bow before you, mindful of your sovereignty and seeking your mercy.

We confess we are prisoners of our own cleverness, methodologies, histories, and affiliations, rather than being prisoners of your hope, imagination and call.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that, in spite of your commandment and example to love all, we continue to exclude those we deem unacceptable.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that we desire to fulfill Christ's vision to be one in the Spirit, but fail to even listen and learn from one another.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that we are evangelical in belief and tradition, but have become distracted or grown indifferent to the first proclamation.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that we desire to have our congregations experience new vitality, but fail to recognize that such new life begins with our personal yearning and willingness to be born of the Spirit.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that people go hungry and without shelter or are denied justice, all within a few blocks, kilometers or miles of our churches.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess you have given us abundant resources and assets, but we have failed to keep them focused on your mission of reaching and forming disciples of Jesus that can transform the world.

Lord, have mercy.

We confess that we want to be courageous leaders, completely available to you, but we hold fast to what we know; we resist your movement toward the future; and we fail to walk the wing.

Lord, have mercy.

Come precious Holy Spirit; come, and fill us with your presence that we might live and lead as your Kingdom People – forgiven and free; reconciled to you and one another; ready to serve. Help us, we beseech you, to discover the right route for our souls and grant us the courage to take it. We pray in the name and Spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

Conclusion

When the president's gavel was passed to me on May 12 in Portland, I made, in part, this statement to the Council:

We need to "initiate a sustained, truthful conversation on the matters that truly divide this Council and rend the fabric of our life together. It is time to lean into one another and beckon one another to 'come closer to me.'"

To that end, we have invited Tim Schuster, an accomplished practitioner of Open Space Technology, to lead us over the next several hours in a process that will, I believe, lay the foundation for this “sustained, truthful conversation.” We will begin with the presenting question: How do we, the Council of Bishops, lead in such a manner that maintains unity? Following a break, I will introduce Tim to you. He, in turn, will introduce Open Space Technology and guide us in our conversations.

During the 2009 – 2012 quadrennium, I was privileged to serve as President of the General Board of Global Ministries. At one of our meetings, I was introduced to a song from Venezuela entitled, *Where There's Faith, There is Hope (Esperanza)*. I close with this verse from the song: Where there's faith, there is esperanza,

 there's a reason to be living.

 Keep the faith, live with esperanza, my brother;

 keep the faith, live with esperanza, my sister.

Where there's faith, there is esperanza,

 there's a reason to be living.

When you think that there's no reason

 for believing,

and your strength to fight the fight

 is almost gone,

just remember the faces of your people.

Only trust God, who will be

 your strength and esperanza.

Dear friends, let us draw strength and courage and decisiveness by remembering the faces of our people – those in our churches and especially those outside our churches. Let us trust God and God alone, to determine our pathway and guide our steps this week and throughout this quadrennium. For it is God who will be our strength and esperanza. For it is God who will lead us to discover the right route for our souls. For it is God who is faithful and will never let us go. Esperanza!

May it be so!

Amen.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough
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October 31, 2016