



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



President's Address November 6, 2017 Bishop Bruce R. Ough, President

IN LOVE WITH UNION

Introduction

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Creator and from Christ Jesus our Lord.

Dear friends and colleagues, welcome to this most critical and significant meeting of the Council of Bishops. It is always good to be together, to see each other's faces and to share our common burdens and unique blessings.

As you know from our stated agenda, the Council will devote the vast majority of this meeting to receiving and responding to a preliminary report from our Commission on a Way Forward. This work is essential to advancing the work of the Commission and preparing this Council to lead the special session of the General Conference that we have called for February, 2019.

But, we dare not live in a Commission cocoon. The mission of God is larger than our division, debate and discernment regarding homosexuality. And, our United Methodist work and witness as a part of the *missio dei* remains vibrant and fruitful. So, while we are together on the shores of Lake Junaluska:

- Nearly 500 young people and their adult mentors have just completed Exploration, a time for discerning God's call upon their lives;
- UMCOR and dozens of volunteer Disaster Response Teams continue to lead our hurricane recovery work in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico throughout the Caribbean;
- Our Immigration Task Force advocates for the hundreds of thousands of migrants throughout the world and for a clean DREAM Act here in the United States;
- new faith communities are being formed and new churches are being planted;
- e-readers are being distributed in Africa;
- our congregations around the world are feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless – today; and
- through our United Methodist witness and evangelistic ministries, individuals are professing faith in Jesus Christ, persons are being baptized, families are finding Christian community and being disciplined.

We dare not gather and cocoon ourselves in our, self-absorbed discussion on homosexuality without recognizing and remembering the cultural contexts in which we

have been called to bear witness to the Gospel. Violence, economic exploitation, unstable governments, and tribalism continue to lay siege to large parts of Africa. Poor farmers are expelled from their land in the Philippines. Here in the United States we are witnessing the escalation of crude, pugilistic rhetoric, narcissistic leadership, nativism, white supremacy, and the politics of division.

And our own denomination is not immune from these attitudes and behavior. In recent weeks, I have heard or been witness to all too many instances of threatening rhetoric and in some cases physical assault against those lay leaders, pastors and bishops – who have taken a stand against racism or stood with immigrants and refugees or witnessed for a fully inclusive church. We are in a dangerous time. The demonizing of one another that has become normative in all too many of our cultures, and particularly visible in the United States, is infecting our churches. The Executive Committee has asked a small team to draft a pastoral letter on our behalf to speak to these matters.

And we dare not cocoon ourselves in this meeting while the epidemic of mass shootings and the march toward becoming a weaponized society goes unchecked here in the United States. We grieve with these families who had loved ones shot and killed in the Sutherland Springs, Texas, on yesterday and we pray for the recovery of those wounded in yet another senseless or horrific act of gun violence. Even as we raise our voices to God in prayers, I urge us to find our voices to advocate for an end to this scourge.

I want to thank all of you who, in your respective residential assignments, are calling for the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, serving as peacemaker, modeling civil discourse and giving tangible expression to our baptismal vow “to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”

Canoeing the Mountains

I turn back to the primary work before us at this meeting. Shortly, we will receive and engage in discussing the work of the Commission on a Way Forward. I remind us that the Commission is in service to the Council. It is our Commission. They are not an independent entity or a Commission of the General Conference. They were formed by this Council to help us prepare for the called General Conference in February, 2019.

In July of this year, I was invited by the Commission moderators, Bishops Carter, Steiner-Ball and Yemba, to speak to the Commission at their meeting in Chicago. I based my comments on a book I had recently read, *Canoeing the Mountains* by Tod Bolsinger. It is an excellent book on Christian leadership in uncharted territory. Many of you may be familiar with this book. Some of you may have already heard or read my address to the Commission. If so, I beg your patience and indulgence as I share some of my learnings that are instructive to me, and I believe, may be helpful to the Council as we take up the Commission’s preliminary recommendations.

Rev. Bolsinger utilizes the experience of the Lewis and Clark Expedition’s exploration of the Louisiana Purchase as a metaphor for leading when we find ourselves “off the map” or in uncharted territory. I grew up in North Dakota at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers on Lewis and Clark’s route to the Pacific. I have driven a good part of their journey.

I am sensitive to the fact that the Council members from outside the United States may not be familiar with the Lewis and Clark Expedition, so allow me to set the context. In 1804, following the purchase from France of what is now nearly one-third of the United States, President Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, and what was named a Corps of Discovery, to travel from St. Louis, Missouri up the Mississippi River to seek a northwest water passage to the Pacific Ocean.

I hope you are following the parallel. In 2016, the General Conference authorized the Council of Bishops as the UMC's Corps of Discovery to seek a way forward for our global church. We, in turn, formed the Commission to serve us in this charge. The vision for the Corps of Discovery was to expand the knowledge of the Louisiana Purchase and to expand and maximize the footprint of the United States. The vision for the Council of Bishops and Commission on a Way Forward is similar – to “maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible ... with a desire for as much unity as possible.” Thus, we have asked the Commission to design a way of being church that balances mission, flexibility and unity.

In the summer of 1805, Lewis and Clark had led the Corps of Discovery up the Missouri River, the major northern tributary of the Mississippi River, to what is now known as Lemhi Pass in Montana. Captain Lewis thought he could walk up a hill, look down a gentle slope that would take his men a half day to portage with their canoes on their backs, and then they would see the Columbia River that would carry them swiftly by canoe to the Pacific Ocean.

They could not have been more disappointed. What Lewis actually discovered was that 300 years of experts had been utterly wrong. In front of him was not a gentle slope down to a navigable river running to the Pacific Ocean, but the mighty, rugged Rocky Mountains.

And, at that moment, everything that Lewis and Clark had assumed about their journey changed. They were planning on exploring the new world the same way they got up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers – by boat, by canoe, by rowing. They thought the hardest part was behind them. But, in truth, everything they had accomplished was only a prelude of what was in front of them. Our denomination's 45-year debate on homosexuality has only been a prelude of what lies in front of us at this meeting. There were no experts, no maps, no “best practices” and no sure guides who could lead the Corps of Discovery safely and successfully. They were about to go off the map. And, they realized that their canoes were now useless.

There is currently no larger or intractable barrier to the mission, unity and vitality of The United Methodist Church than the matter of homosexuality. The specific issues of same-gender marriage, the ordination of LBGQTQ persons, and the underlying issues of scriptural authority and biblical obedience are our denomination's Rocky Mountains, and it is clear there is no way forward unless we are willing to re-think and re-design what a global United Methodist Church looks like. We are clearly in uncharted territory. Actually, I think we have been off the map for quite some time, but have failed to acknowledge that our old canoes may be inadequate to advance our mission to attract, form and equip new disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The 2016 General Conference in Portland was like that moment when Captain Lewis stood atop the Lemhi Pass and, as historical geographer John Logan Allen noted, the “geography of hope” gave way to the “geography of reality.” A disappointing reality of recognizing that the means of transport that had taken the expedition to the edge of the Louisiana Purchase map would no longer work. General Conference 2016 was our moment when the UMC reached the edge of the map and the geography of reality took hold of us. We can no longer live in this state of dis-trust, division and the debilitating cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality.

There is a growing acknowledgement across the Connection and, I believe, within this Council that a number of emerging realities, beyond the matter of homosexuality, such as our financial sustainability, institutional obesity and antiquated governance structures and legislative processes that need to be addressed if we are to remain a unified global church advancing the kingdom of God in very distinct and rapidly-changing cultural and ministry contexts. There is an emerging acknowledgment that we need to leave the map, engage the uncharted territory and discover new vehicles for carrying the UMC forward.

I hope you noticed I said new vehicles and not new structures. New vehicles for traversing or canoeing the mountain might be new structures. But, I urge us to be honest and uncompromising in reviewing new structural models, even ones that may come before us from the Commission or are being advanced by groups within and beyond this Council. Often they are Trojan Horses, appearing innovative and adaptive, even revolutionary or at least politically expedient and practical, but carrying within them the destructive DNA and values that undermine our mission and actually restrict our adaptability. The Central Jurisdiction of African-American churches in the US created in 1939 at the time of the merger of The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church South and The Methodist Protestant Church is one obvious and painful example. Many historians would argue the formation of jurisdictional conferences in the United States was a similar structural compromise that has perpetuated sectarianism and disconnect within The United Methodist Church.

Tod Bolsinger quotes Ron Heifetz (the premier authority on adaptive leadership): “Adaptive processes don’t require leadership with answers. They require leadership that creates structures that hold people together through the very conflictive, passionate, and sometimes awful process of addressing questions for which there aren’t easy answers.” (p. 65)

So, as we begin to consider some models for a way forward, I encourage us to not settle for easy answers or try to fix the church, but have the courage to explore those vehicles that can help hold us together through not only this current division, but the conflicts that will surely follow this one. In other words, let us discern adaptable structures, vehicles, canoes that are intended and designed to be continuously adaptive.

I believe, as I am confident this Council and the Commission does as well, that a way forward that (1) maintains unity, (2) honors our distinctive Wesleyan connectional values and (3) has the property of being continuously adaptive must have a rock-solid, Christ-centered core of theological principles, formational practices and missional imperatives. If the core is not solid and affirmed, then we will continue the failed pattern of trying to

maintain unity through non-adaptive, rigid structures and regulations that do not have the power or Holy imagination needed to canoe the mountains. This is exactly what Tod Bolsinger means when he reminds us of Ron Heifetz' assertion that in nature, adaptability is a highly conservative process. A highly and continuously adaptive UMC will actually work to conserve the core – or, if you will, continuously reinforce and re-affirm the essential DNA that must be preserved, while discarding non-essential DNA and welcoming the creation of new DNA through experimentation and contextual expressions of ministry.

At the zenith of the Methodist movement in and across North America and in other parts of the world, this very dynamic was normative – the essential DNA core was operative, visible and taught. Most non-essential DNA from the Mother Church experience was being discarded and new DNA was being created through extensive, non-centralized contextual experimentation.

On August 12, 1805, Captain Meriwether Lewis made this entry in his journal: “I did not despair of shortly finding a passage over the mountains and of tasting the waters of the great Columbia River this evening.” (p. 87) I must admit I have had some moments of despair and doubt as I have observed and studied what appears to be the intractable matters facing our denomination. (Am I alone here?) But, like Meriwether Lewis, I am no longer despairing that there is no short or easy passage through our Rocky Mountains. My faith is firm in the Risen Christ, who can roll away any large tombstone choking off new life.

I have just completed a series of 15 gatherings across the Dakotas-Minnesota Area which I billed as “A Conversation: Praying and Seeking a Way Forward.” In addition to updating lay and clergy leaders on the purpose and work of the Commission on a Way Forward, I engaged the participants in dialogue with one another and with me on several questions best represented by this question: What might be a form of unity that would empower our living together and also advance the mission of the church?

Several common themes emerged from these conversations. One of the most dominant is the desire to maintain the unity of The United Methodist Church. This strong desire or hope was expressed by progressive voices as well as conservative voices. Admittedly, for some, this desire for unity was more about maintaining treasured relationships and partnerships than advancing or extending the mission of the UMC. Yet, even among those individuals who have concluded that formal structural schism is inevitable, I heard a deep longing for unity.

Although not universal, I believe there is strong commitment across our denomination for the unity of the church for the sake of Christ and our connectional mission. As Tod Bolsinger points out in *Canoeing the Mountains*, “The focused, shared missional purpose of the church or organization will trump every other competing value. It is more important than my preferences or personal desire... it's the tiebreaker in every argument and the principle by which we evaluate every decision we make.” (p. 125) Let us not ignore what may be the vast middle of our global church that is deeply committed to an adaptive form of unity for the sake of the *missio dei*, for the sake of our unique Methodist way of being obedient to that mission, and for the sake of maintaining a strong global connection.

I have not surveyed this Council, but based on our conversations, I believe most of us hold fast to this principle that mission trumps everything. I am confident we are not ashamed or

timid to give it full expression in our residential assignments. This is why for many, but certainly not all, homosexuality is not a church-dividing matter. Preserving and advancing the mission is the tiebreaker.

Bolsinger also points out that as, “A church that has maintained unity through homogeneity will find it difficult to welcome those who differ in lifestyle, education, mores and social class.” (p. 75) One of the principles that has defined the Methodist Movement from the earliest days of John and Charles Wesley’s revival work in England, through the rapid expansion of Methodism in both English and German language expressions across the frontier of North America, and then through missionary work across the globe, including and especially noteworthy in our new church starts throughout the Connection, is the principle of differentiation. This principle, as you know, maintains that the vitality, effectiveness, and unity of any organization is best achieved when we hold firm to the core mission and core proclamation (Pope Francis: Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world), but allow, and even encourage, varied expressions of fulfilling the mission in different cultural contexts and mission fields. I can guarantee you that there are different expressions of ministry between Bismarck, North Dakota and Birmingham, Alabama; between Copenhagen, Denmark and Kamina, Democratic Republic of Congo. And, as you know, differentiation in United Methodist expression of ministry is as wide and varied within an annual conference as it is between annual conferences or even regions of our global church. As Bolsinger points out, “A shared mission, when it is a matter of clear conviction, offers congregational differentiation. It allows us to affirm the wide Body of Christ and still be clear about the decisions we have to make to expand the church’s mission and witness.” (p. 126)

The Council’s Leadership Role

Before I leave my reflections on *Canoeing the Mountains*, I want to turn my attention to the role of the Council of Bishops over the next 15 months between this meeting and the February, 2019 called General Conference session. In particular, I want to address the months between the release of our final recommendation(s) and the called session. Tod Bolsinger has three insights that I believe may be instructive to our collective leadership role.

First, Bolsinger points out that Lewis and Clark would not have been trusted by the Corps of Discovery to lead them off the map into uncharted territory if they had not first demonstrated competent and trustworthy leadership on the map. We know this truth from our residential assignments. Our clergy, lay leadership and congregations will follow us into uncharted territory only if and when we demonstrate competent temporal and spiritual leadership in those areas we have already mapped out, such as our commitment to increase the number of vital congregations and the four areas of missional focus –

- developing leaders,
- forming new faith communities,
- ministry with the poor, and
- global health.

I, for one, refuse to be hamstrung or neglect my leadership in these on-the-map priorities during our current ecclesial crisis. I know if the Dakotas-Minnesota Area does not trust my leadership on the map, they will not follow me off the map, if and when that the comes.

Second, we need to avoid what Bolsinger calls a locked-in perspective. He identifies three dynamics of a locked-in perspective:

- an unending treadmill of trying harder;
- looking for answers rather than reframing questions; and
- either/or thinking that creates false dichotomies.

We all know and recognize these dynamics of a locked-in perspective. I encounter it often among clergy leaders and in congregations. Lewis and Clark were only able to sustain the Corps of Discovery's journey to the Pacific Ocean and back with the loss of only one person because they successfully avoided having a locked-in perspective. You don't allow a 17-year-old Native American girl with a small child, Sakajawea, to chart your course through the Rocky Mountains if you have a locked-in perspective. We will not be able to lead off the map or teach our people to canoe the mountains if we have already locked-in to only one solution, to say nothing of how this denies the power of Pentecost.

Third, Bolsinger points out that canoeing the mountains and maintaining focus while navigating off the map requires leadership to serve as a "holding environment." In many respects, the Council of Bishops serves the "holding environment" role for The United Methodist Church. A holding environment consists of all those ties that bind people together and enable them to maintain their collective focus on what they are trying to do. As we said in the Commission's foundation document on Mission, Vision and Scope, the Council is committed to the unity of the church, the expansion of our witness, and openness to new forms and structures of relationship. If we are to help the church maintain collective focus on these key elements of mission, flexibility and unity, the bishops individually and the Council collectively must come along side our General Conference delegations, conference leadership teams and local congregations and prepare them to imagine a new church. Many bishops have already engaged this task. All of us have responsibility to engage.

I urge you to plan now to dedicate time at next year's annual conference sessions to preparing your conference membership and leadership. We will own what we affirm and recommend at our meeting in May, 2018. It will be our responsibility, and ours alone, to lead in the acceptance and adoption of the recommendations.

In Love with Union

I have focused nearly all of this President's address on the theme of maintaining unity. It may be that my focus – what some of you may consider an obsession – is the result of being the one who, while representing this Council, spoke our commitment to maintain the unity of the church to the General Conference on May 17, 2016. I remind you, in part, what I said:

I stand before you today, on behalf of my episcopal colleagues, to tell you I have a broken heart – that collectively we have a broken heart. Our hearts break over the pain, distrust, anger, anxiety and disunity we observe and experience in our beloved United Methodist Church. This brokenness is centered on matters of human

sexuality, the interpretation of scripture, the inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, all fueled by the despair over the decline of the church in North America...

As shepherds of the entire flock, the Council of Bishops is committed to maintaining the unity of The United Methodist Church. Not a superficial unity to serve to veneer over our pain and disunity, but an authentic unity born of the Holy Spirit; a unity not afraid of the truth and respectful of all. Even as we call for unity in the entire church, we confess our Council is not united. This work begins at home and we have acknowledged such.

In a recent blog on United Methodist Communication's electronic forum titled, *Many Voices, One Faith*, Bishop Kenneth Carder (the retired Ken Carder) eloquently states (I am going to quote him extensively):

Here is the good news: The unity we seek has already been achieved! From the dawn of creation, God has willed the oneness of the human family and worked to foster, preserve and protect that oneness...

We don't create unity any more than we 'bring the kingdom of God!' We live the reign of God brought near in Jesus Christ and we participate in the unity that already is! Oneness does not result from legislative mandates, enforced doctrinal orthodoxy or judicial processes patterned after the courtroom. All such efforts are doomed to further fracture; they wound and crucify the body of Christ...

Schism, as John Wesley reminds us, is a failure to love as Christ loves us. Schism transforms doctrine and the Bible into weapons of mass destruction rather than agents for the formation of Christlike character. And, it belies faith in the present and final triumph of God's reign of compassion, justice, generosity, hospitality and joy...

Let's all repent of our idolatrous reliance on legislation and legalism and turn toward the grace that is at the heart of our Wesleyan tradition...

Bishop Carder's words beg a question that has haunted me for some time. It is a question I also asked the participants in the 15 Conversations on a Way Forward I conducted in the Dakotas-Minnesota Area.

Does the world need The United Methodist Church to teach it how to divide, or does the world need The United Methodist Church to teach it how to live together with its differences?

I was shocked to learn a few weeks ago that a new industry has recently taken hold and is flourishing in the United States. There are now several companies making billions of dollars a year facilitating the self-gerrymandering of our population. Individuals and families hire these companies to seek out and re-locate them to communities of people that share their same political views, religious affiliations, race, economic status and educational levels. This self-gerrymandering is changing the political landscape in the U.S. and is contributing, in large part, to the growing divisiveness, racism and violence in the country. I will not pretend to speak for this entire Council, but I do not want to be part of self-gerrymandering

The United Methodist Church into homogeneous enclaves of theological, doctrinal and political thought and the practice of ministry.

What will our witness be? Will it be to the oneness that has already been achieved in God through Christ? Will we seek to reflect the wondrous mystery and beauty of the beloved community? Or will our witness be to the fatalism, divisiveness and fear reflected in a self-gerrymandering world? Will we foster unity with God and one another? Or will we contribute to the brokenness of our fractured world through sanctioned schism?

Prior to the 2016 General Conference, Abingdon Press reprinted and distributed to the conference delegates Bishop Francis Asbury's little book titled, *The Causes, Evils and Cures of Heart and Church Divisions*. It was originally written by Asbury in 1792 and addressed to the Ministers and Members of The Methodist Episcopal Church. Most of you are probably familiar with this text.

In Part II on the Cures of Division, Asbury raises this troublesome question: "What but madness can cause one member to tear and split from another?" (page 49) But, then he goes on to suggest there are seven strong reasons to join together in unity, based on Ephesians 4:4-6 where Paul writes:

"You are one body and one spirit, just as God called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all..." (*Common English Bible*)

His seventh reason to join together is because there is One God. "Though there be three persons in the divine nature, and every person is God, yet there is but one God. Here is a union infinitely beyond all unions that any creature can be capable of. The mystery of this union is revealed to us to make us in love with union." (page 50)

I am Trinitarian. It is at the core of my orthodox theology. I am in love with the mystery of this oneness, even though I can scarcely comprehend it. Lord, have mercy on me, should I fall out of love with union!

Maxim for Leadership

One of Tod Bolsinger's most helpful insights in *Canoeing the Mountains* is his strategy for leading into uncharted territory. It is drawn from his observation of Lewis and Clark's model of leading the Corps of Discovery and the more contemporary work of John Kotter. Bolsinger maintains it is a maxim for any leader and a goal to be developed within the larger leadership group, such as this Council of Bishops. I have been trying to lead both the Dakotas-Minnesota Area and the Council, in my role as your president, utilizing this model. In his book (p. 128), Bolsinger says, "I encourage you to commit it to memory. Write it on a Post-It-Note and put it on your bathroom mirror. Make it your screensaver on your computer. And say it to yourself over and over again:

- start with conviction,
- stay calm,
- stay connected, and
- stay the course."

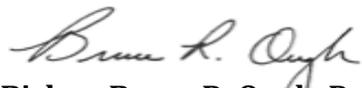
So, dear colleagues, as we seek to canoe the mountains together, I urge you to maintain our core conviction that Jesus is Lord; maintain our core mission to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world; and maintain our core evangelical passion to spread scriptural holiness across the land.

And, please stay calm. This begins by surrendering to God's yearnings and unlimited imagination. Staying calm is rooted in the realization that we – in spite of our drive and cleverness – cannot “make it happen.” So often we believe, and the episcopal office tends to reinforce, that if we are going to get ahead, get in shape, get it together, get it figured out, get it fixed, we have to “make it happen.” But the good news is that the Kingdom of heaven is given, not earned. The Kingdom of heaven is revealed by God, not created by us. The Gospel truth is that we will never speak or act with Kingdom authority if we believe we make things happen. We will never speak or act with Kingdom authority if we don't go to the Potter's house and ask the Master Potter to make us into vessels of mercy, into vessels of glory, into vessels of God's glorious goodness, into vessels that fulfill God's purposes. Let's stay calm, not dis-engaged, but calm. Let's let God be God.

And by all means possible, let's stay connected to each other. Let us be open to developing the adaptive vehicles for canoeing the mountains that keep us connected. We are nothing apart from our love and commitment to one another.

And, for the sake of the Gospel, let us stay the course. Let us not waver when the journey becomes difficult and perilous. Let us not waver in our commitment to lead the church forward.

May it be so. And, may God's abundant mercy and blessing be with us.



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