

WASN'T THAT SPECIAL?

Reflections on the 2019 General Conference—Rev. Dr. William Lawrence

The nationally syndicated columnist, Celia Rivenbark, recently acknowledged that she and her husband are long time United Methodists. They have taught Sunday school for years in the same local church where they were married three decades ago. And they both watched the live-streamed special session of the General Conference in St. Louis last month. In her summary of the special session, she wrote, “this one’s gonna leave a mark.”

She is right, of course.

Any session of the General Conference is a big deal. It is our most comprehensive church meeting of decision-makers in the world. Like a Southern Baptist Convention, “the basic body of the church” (though to us, that is the annual conference, not the congregation) chooses the people who can vote (though to us, they are the “delegates” not “messengers”). Like a Roman Catholic synod, all of our Bishops come from every continent where United Methodism has spread. We even have our own version of the World Court—the Judicial Council, with nine international members and several alternates who have an important place in the proceedings. Any session of the General Conference is a meeting of the only body with full legislative authority for the whole church. It is an immense opportunity for our church to show the world just how international, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-generational, ethnically inclusive, regionally diverse, and theologically decisive we are. It is a forum where we can display ourselves at our best.

Unfortunately, the 2019 special session of the General Conference did just the opposite. It demonstrated what a divided and divisive bunch we are. It displayed our deep distrust of one another and our deep dislike for one category of God’s people. What’s worse, its sole purpose was to discuss one topic. So the whole world could watch, as we appeared to demonstrate that the only thing of importance for us is to demonize homosexuality. It was tragic. It left a mark.

Forget the familiar hymn, “They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love.” We managed to tell the world: *you will know we are United Methodists by what we say about homosexual persons and their practices and their presence in our midst.* What the 2019 General Conference reiterated and reinforced is that homosexual persons are welcome to sit in our pews, serve on our committees, sing in our choirs, share in our sacraments, supply funds for our activities, sup at our church dinners, schmooze with our visitors, and spend time in our mission projects; but they are not welcome to speak in our pulpits, celebrate our sacraments, stand at our altars to be united in Christian marriage, or say that God is calling them into the ordained ministry.

The 2019 General Conference let the whole world know that we say there are two kinds of people in the world—homosexuals and heterosexuals. And one of them is unwelcome in the leadership of our church, because of how they are made and whom they love. Further, the 2019 General Conference told congregations, institutions, and individual clergy who did not like it then they could lump it—meaning, they can head for the exits and leave the denomination.

In displaying this message to the world, we managed to be sure everyone overlooks or ignores what they have ever heard about our Methodist involvements in education, health care, immigration, childcare, the abolition of slavery, the deliverance from substance abuse, and any other forms of good news we have brought to the poor through evangelical public ministries and missions in the past. We may have once pursued justice for all of God’s people. But in 2019 we told the world that homosexuals will simply have to remain on the margins of the church. In the process, we advised our current members and

any prospective members that they will have to go to some other church in order to attend the same-sex weddings of their family members and that they will have to encourage their loved ones to find some other church if they feel called into the ordained ministry of Jesus Christ.

We used the biggest, most visible, most global gathering of the world's most influential United Methodist leaders to make the announcement that now defines us. We had a special session of the General Conference and could have used it to bring good news to the world. But we botched the opportunity.

Now we still have a division over homosexuality. And we have a mess to clean. Even if we could afford to hire the highest priced PR firm in Dallas that specializes in repairing damage to a reputation, it may take a generation to recover from the harm that the General Conference has done to our image. Of course, no one knows if our denomination will last that long.

But image is only the surface of the problem for United Methodists. Beneath the “mark” that has been left on the church by what happened in St. Louis, we have substantive problems to address. I will mention only three of them. All three are problems that the church has created for itself in the way we have dealt with homosexuality:

- We have abandoned our doctrinal standards' fundamental theological reliance upon God's grace in favor of a reliance upon law [see Article VIII, Article IX, and Article X in the *Articles of Religion*];
- We have abandoned our doctrine that four sources are needed for discerning what it means to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—and “that all four guidelines must be brought to bear in faithful, serious, theological conversation” [see “Our Theological Task” in ¶ 105 of the 2016 *Discipline*, page 83], because we only use scripture and tradition now; and,
- We have abandoned our mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” choosing instead to accept things as they are, even if they threaten some of God's people or impose injustice upon them.

First, we have abandoned the doctrinal standard by which all of our teaching, preaching, leading, and serving are to be measured—faith in God's grace. We have been careless about our Wesleyan theology for much too long. Now our failures have caught up with us in this crisis over homosexuality. Our doctrinal standards measure the veracity and validity of everything we teach and do. One standard is that salvation is by grace alone. We enter into a relationship with God because God extends love toward us, not because we are good enough to earn the right to enjoy such a relationship. We abandoned this doctrinal standard for assessing the legitimacy of our doctrine and discipline when we invented a phrase that declared homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching.” We put that phrase in the 1972 *Book of Discipline*.

The words “Christian teaching” may sound authoritative, but they are undefined by the General Conference and vague in their meaning. Many things qualify as “Christian teaching.” Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree that “Christian teaching” limits ordained ministry to men. Mennonites insist that “Christian teaching” mandates non-violence. Pentecostals teach the centrality of speaking in tongues. Some “Christian teaching” focuses on a few passages in the Bible that prohibit the practices of homosexuality. Other “Christian teaching” focuses on the full message of the Bible and reads those few passages another way. Merely asserting that something is “Christian teaching” without measuring it against our doctrinal standards abandons the basic theological tenets of our Wesleyan tradition. In 1972, when The United Methodist Church began to express a denominational view of

homosexuality, we used language that was consistent with the Wesleyan conviction that we cooperate with grace—accepting God’s justifying mercy and embracing God’s sanctifying power to transform us. We emphasized education and exhortation. We put the statement in our Social Principles, as a guide for our spiritual formation in disciplined Christian living.

At various times in the ensuing years, the General Conference sharpened the words with which we expressed our views on homosexuality. More problematically, we moved our sharply worded statements into church legislation. This process culminated with actions by the General Conference in 1996 that enacted a church law with the words, “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” and banned homosexuals from serving as ministers. That 1996 General Conference also enacted a law declaring “any practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings” to be a chargeable offense. (Of course, there is only one “practice” which has been given that label!) Later, the 2004 General Conference revised the law, so it says that merely “being a self-avowed practicing homosexual” is now a chargeable offense that can be the basis of a complaint against a minister.

In effect, we abandoned the doctrinal standard of grace and shifted to an undefined legal standard called “Christian teaching” that only required a simple majority of General Conference votes to approve. Relying on God’s grace to move among all United Methodists in showing us mercy, offering forgiveness, and forming us as Christian disciples is our doctrinal standard. But, starting with the 1996 General Conference, we began insisting that the only way for the church to be delivered from the power of sin was by writing and enforcing church laws. We are now at the point where *The Book of Discipline* has a law that declares that merely being a homosexual is a chargeable offense for clergy. We have abandoned grace, and we have legislatively decided that only the law can save us. This is a devastating theological failure on our part. We should confess it, not reinforce it. We should repeal such laws, not reiterate them.

Second, as the debate during the 2019 special session of the General Conference clearly demonstrated, we have abandoned our officially stated doctrine that there are four sources and guidelines to determine theologically what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In speech after speech from the floor of the 2019 General Conference, the assertion echoed that scripture and tradition require us to reiterate and reinforce our laws opposing homosexuality.

Yet our doctrine mandates that four guidelines—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—be used in “faithful, serious, theological conversation.” At the 2019 special session, United Methodists abandoned our own doctrine in favor of a narrow theological method by which scripture and tradition could tendentiously support the retention of existing church law.

Our doctrine and disciplines emphasize that we receive God’s loving mercy through many means of grace. We should continue to use them: studying scriptures, meeting together, receiving Holy Communion, praying, and many more. But we have let those means of grace atrophy, while we have resorted to law and merit as the authorities for ecclesial decisions. We have let the General Conference set aside reason and experience as sources for theological clarity, at least when it comes to homosexuality.

Many delegates approach General Conference in a way that emphasizes the raw political power to marshal a majority that will enact a law. That way, it will only take half of the delegates to block our doctrinal obligation to use all four of the sources and guidelines for hearing God’s prophetic word and receiving God’s spiritual power. If legislating for the church means lining up votes rather than listening for the Lord, then we are not in conference with God, not listening for God’s gracious word. Rather, we are abandoning grace in favor of our own views, ingenuity, and laws. If we approach a General

Conference without a readiness to listen for a prophetic word that corrects our own views, then we are not allowing ourselves to be recipients of God's grace.

Having talked with delegates who favored the One Church Plan, the Traditional Plan, and the Connectional Conference Plan, I know that their approaches were mainly focused on finding votes, measuring whip counts, persuading uncommitted delegates, looking for ways to influence wavering delegates, and seeking other means to win. I also talked with delegates who said that they were going to read all the documents and wait for the Holy Spirit to guide them, as if pious inaction were the same as responsible discipleship. I never heard any delegates say, "I have read all the documents, I have reached my conclusion, and now I am going to find United Methodists who disagree with my views so I can learn from them."

We abandoned the means of grace that listening provides. We no longer use all four of the sources and guidelines for theological discernment. We no longer trust voices that disagree with our predispositions and biases, or hope that they might offer some grace from the Lord. Consider what happened in the last regular session of the General Conference in 2016. The delegates asked the Council of Bishops for help in their legislative stalemate regarding the issues involving homosexuality. The Bishops returned with a proposal to defer any discussion of the topic and allow the Bishops to name members of a Commission that could study the laws in the *Discipline* involving homosexuality and report back to the General Conference. But, having asked for a recommendation from the Bishops, the delegates barely listened. Their vote to do as the Bishop suggested was a skimpy majority of 51%.

Then consider what happened after the Commission on a Way Forward produced three plans and asked the church to decide. It was a peculiar conclusion for the Commission to reach. The 32 members had met many times during fifteen months. If they could not agree on a single approach to recommend, one can scarcely imagine how 864 delegates meeting for three days could find one best outcome. Nevertheless, an "overwhelming majority" of the Bishops favored the so-called One Church Plan. At the General Conference, though, an underwhelming minority of the delegates listened to the Bishops. Lack of listening to all four guidelines—and to each other—is distrust in our doctrine.

Third, we have abandoned our mission. When an immigrant named Francis Asbury arrived in North America, he brought with him the understanding of the Methodist mission on which John Wesley had sent him—to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness over the land. That mission statement has had various formulations through the centuries, and the current one speaks of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The important point is that Methodism—including The United Methodist Church today—is on a mission that is dedicated not solely to transforming individual souls but also to transforming societal systems.

The fact that The United Methodist Church is now a global body, not a narrowly North American one, does not alter the mission. It means that United Methodists on every continent share in the commitment that we are sent to transform souls and societies.

In the weeks prior to the 2019 General Conference, I talked with one delegate from an annual conference in the South Central Jurisdiction who had just finished a conversation with a delegate from one of the annual conferences in a Central Conference. The African delegate had argued that he could not vote for removing church laws that prohibit homosexuality because his home country outlaws homosexuality. He added that another nation in another part of Africa has laws that make the practice of homosexuality a capital crime, for which one can be executed.

The delegate from the South Central Jurisdiction was deeply perplexed. Not long ago, in parts of the United States, there were laws that banned interracial marriage and that would have prohibited a minister in our denomination from performing interracial marriage ceremonies. Other laws in parts of the United States prevented African-Americans from voting, from living in white neighborhoods, from attending certain schools, and from other actions in the world, based solely on race. People of courage in our church could have simply succumbed to such laws.

However, many American Methodists embraced our historic mission to transform the world and made countless sacrifices to alter unjust laws. People who opposed racist laws and segregated systems faced threats, beatings, arson, and lynching. People who marched were jailed, berated, harmed, and killed. One white Methodist minister in Birmingham, Alabama, prophetically addressed the evils of segregation in his Sunday sermons and had to endure the verbal tirades hurled at him from the pews by one of his parishioners—Bull Connor, who was the public safety commissioner for Birmingham, who authorized some horrific violence against those who sought an end to racist laws, and who was a Methodist.

If there are laws, cultural practices, and social patterns that violate the gospel in areas of the world where United Methodism is present, it is our mission to reform those continents and transform those public orders. We cannot limit our witness in the name of Jesus Christ to those places and situations where the law allows us to do so.

So the General Conference in 2019 did more than reiterate and reinforce existing church laws regarding homosexuality. It distanced us from our doctrinal standards, our doctrine, and our mission. It damaged our image in the world, to be sure. But it also exposed our faults and failures to be faithful.

We have made a mess. Now we have to clean it.