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# In the United Methodist Church

**Bishop Kenneth H. Carter Jr.**

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## Introduction

I begin by noting the complexity of this assignment. Some of those reading this will have an intense interest in the changes occurring and anticipated in The United Methodist Church, and many of those will have defined positions related to these changes. Many others will have less knowledge or interest, simply because it is outside their own context and sphere of professional responsibility. I will try not to make assumptions in this chapter, instead attempting simply to describe where we are.

This is my third Oxford Institute. I participated as a pastor in 2007 and as a newly elected bishop in 2013. One of my consecration vows was to seek unity of the church. Very soon after the beginning of my service I was asked to serve as one of three moderators of our global process related to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning or queer) identity and the unity of the church. And soon after that I was asked by my episcopal colleagues to serve a term (2018–2020) as president of our council of bishops. I have found myself

in the midst of the process of change occurring in our global (Africa, Europe, Philippines, US) denomination.

I want to begin by noting three important dates:

- **1968:** The formation of the UMC from the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Churches
- **1972:** The introduction of the language in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching<sup>39</sup>
- **2004:** The acceptance of the Ivory Coast Annual Conference into The United Methodist Church with one million members—approximately the size of the Virginia, Western North Carolina, North Georgia, and Florida Annual Conferences in my own jurisdiction

We have found ourselves at an impasse over understandings of human sexuality, and this has tested the unity of our church. And so we come to a next date: May 2016.

Our General Conference meets once every four years, as delegates to a global General Conference—half laity, half clergy—and we spend less than one hour on the topic of human sexuality. In Portland, Oregon, at the 2016 General Conference and by a very slim majority, the delegates voted to establish a study commission. There is a criticism of study commissions, but the alternative is not to study, simply to meet for a brief time, and whoever has the most power in an up-or-down vote wins.

By a slim vote a study commission was established. It was referred to as a “pause for prayer.” In July 2016, the executive committee of the Council of Bishops met in Chicago. I was elected one of three moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward, along with Sandra Steiner Ball of West Virginia and David Yemba of the Congo.

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39 This phrase is found in the Social Principles, ¶161 (G) in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016*.

## Organizing

Our first task was to name the members of the Commission, but then someone noted that we should take a further step back and identify the *mission, vision, and scope* of the work. This is the key sentence: “The Commission will design a way for being church that *maximizes 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*, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for *as much unity as possible*.”<sup>40</sup>

After defining the mission, vision, and scope, we composed the members of the Commission. We wanted diversity that looks like our global church, and we wanted men and women committed to finding a way forward. We ended with thirty-two persons: one-third laity, one-third clergy, and one-third bishops; approximately 30 percent of the members were from Africa. Bishops would not vote on the work of the Commission, which would be given to a called General Conference, but they would be the ones who would lead Conferences through any changes.

In the Commission there are persons from four continents, with theological differences, from urban and rural areas, younger and older, gay and straight, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large-church pastors. There is Korean, Hispanic, African American, Filipino, European, and African representation.

A decision we had to make was whether we would include persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups, such as Reconciling Ministries (RMN) and Good News. We made the decision to include them. And so we have had the board chair of RMN and Confessing Movement, for example.

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40 “Commission on a Way Forward: About Us,” The United Methodist Church, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://ee.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-about-us>.

## The Work

The key part of the work early on was to build trust among a group of people who had good reasons and experiences not to trust each other. They had been harmed by each other, and they had done harm to each other. And so we worked on relationship-building and trust.

At the heart of this was a book titled *The Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbinger Institute.<sup>41</sup> The book focuses on how we live with a heart at war or a heart at peace. When we have a heart at war, we see others as obstacles to what we want or as vehicles for what we want. When we have a heart at peace, we see them as people. A heart at war exaggerates our differences. A heart at peace sees what we have in common. In addition, *The Anatomy of Peace* talks about collusion and escalation of conflict.

We wrote covenants with each other. It was real, it was emotional and raw, and at the end of our first meeting we gave everyone the invitation to leave with honor. We were not there to represent groups or constituencies. We were there to try to find a way forward.

We planned nine meetings over seventeen months. The first few meetings were about building trust, working together, knowing each other. And along the way the Commission members were ready to work on models or plans for a way forward that might be given to the Council of Bishops and the called General Conference.

I mention that we listened to each other. We also listened to the Church. We have had an open framework for receiving documents, ideas, and testimonies. To speak personally, once I was asked to serve as a moderator I removed myself from some other commitments and responsibilities. In this season of my life, if I were not working with the Florida Conference, I would be working on this. And so I have spoken at several seminaries (at Duke University, Emory University, Claremont, Southern Methodist University, Boston University), in several Annual Conferences (among them Holston, Arkansas, California-Pacific, Tennessee, Western North Carolina), with institutional leaders

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41 The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015).

(such as the Duke Endowment and the Texas Methodist Foundation), in some local churches (like First United Methodist Church in San Diego, California, and Duke Memorial in Durham, North Carolina), and with the general secretaries of The United Methodist Church and a coalition of advocacy group leaders. Other Commission members have done similar work.

One significant conversation was with The United Methodist Church College of Bishops on the African continent. This was a two-day experience of listening to their own context and reflecting on colonialism and how United States divisions are imported to that continent.

## **The Report**

The final report, shared with the church in July 2018, included three plans: a Traditional Plan, which retains the language that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and heightens accountability at all levels of the Church; the Connectional Conference Plan, which includes three churches under the umbrella of a larger connection or communion, with more loosely defined relationships; and the One Church Plan, which removes the language about human sexuality while including protections for traditionalists that would prohibit them from being forced to conduct wedding services or receive ministry from practicing gay persons.

Two key concepts in the plans are *contextualization*, already noted in the mission, vision, and scope of the Commission on a Way Forward, and *convicted humility*. The latter term was defined by a small working group from our Committee on Faith and Order, which included Sandra Wheeler and Edgardo Colon-Emeric, and, from the Commission on a Way Forward, Bishops Scott Jones, Greg Palmer, and me.

“Convicted humility” was defined as

the recognition that our members hold a wide range of positions regarding same sex relations and operate out of sincerely held beliefs. They are convinced of the moral views they espouse, and seek to be faithful to what they see as the truth God calls the

church to uphold. It remains the case that their views on this matter are distinctly different, and in some cases cannot be reconciled. We pray the exaggeration of our differences will not divide us. We also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences. These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them. Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement, and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.

We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with those who share our fundamental commitments to scripture and our doctrinal standards, and yet whose views of faithfulness in this regard differ from our own.<sup>42</sup>

Additional key values in the plans are separation or space and unity. How much separation do we need? How much unity is possible? This goes back to the mission, vision, and scope.

The plans were translated into the four official languages (French, Portuguese, Swahili, and English) of our Church in the summer of 2018.<sup>43</sup> We have important ministries in Korean and Latinx contexts, and these communities are also receiving the report in their churches.

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42 Commission on a Way Forward's Report to the General Conference (report, May 2018), 7–8, [http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website\\_Properties/council-of-bishops/news\\_and\\_statements/documents/Way\\_Forward\\_Report\\_-\\_Final\\_-\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf).

43 Links to all the versions may be found here: "Way Forward Report Released in All Four Official Languages of General Conference," The United Methodist

The work was finally placed in the hands of the delegations to the called General Conference, held in St. Louis, Missouri in February 2019.

## Reflection

I was a pastor for twenty-eight years, and my relation to this work is shaped in part by the shepherding role of episcopacy. Two resources have been helpful. The first is Donald Miller's work on *StoryBrand*.<sup>44</sup> He insists that every great story has a main character. In this story, the main character is not The United Methodist Church, or the Council of Bishops, or the Commission. So who is the main character?

- The traditionalist pastor who has sacrificed to build a strong church
- The lesbian who has been a part of the United Methodist Church her whole life
- The young adult clergy who wonders if there will be a church to serve in
- The African Christian who wants to continue to do life-saving work

There is significant anxiety and even fear. It is worth noting that in each story there is a fear.

- The pastor wonders if all of life's work will be diminished because of conflict.
- The LGBTQ person wonders if this was ever really her church.
- The young adult clergy wonders if there will be a way to express ministry.
- The African leader wonders if the resources will be there to continue.

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Church, July 31, 2018, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/way-forward-report-released-in-all-four-official-languages-of-general-confe>.

<sup>44</sup> Donald Miller, *Building a StoryBrand: Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen* (Nashville: HarperCollins Leadership, 2017).

There are multiple main characters in this story. A second resource is the TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” by the African storyteller Chimamanda Adichie.<sup>45</sup> We do not have one story. We are a global church with twelve million members on four continents. There are many main characters and multiple compelling stories.

Thus, how can we write a *Book of Discipline* for multiple stories? A clue is in our *Book of Discipline* (2016), Paragraph 165, on pacifism and just war. One of my professors, Tom Langford, briefly referred to this in an address to the Council of Bishops in 1999. Kendall Soulen of Emory has written more recently about this. The only other place where the word *incompatible* appears in our *Book of Discipline* is in relation to war.<sup>46</sup> The words *conscience*, *honor*, *respect*, and *extending the ministry of the church* are prominent in this paragraph, acknowledging disagreement.

This past year I did some work at Harvard Law School in their program on negotiation. One of the learnings I took from the program is that it is very difficult to negotiate values, for example, between traditionalists and progressives. There is no splitting the difference. Kendall Soulen has noted that there are two primary frames involved here: one is orthodoxy and heresy, and the other is liberation and oppression. And neither frame can compromise.

My question is whether our Church can include both; said in a different way, I do not assume that human sexuality is a church-dividing issue.

In conclusion, I am very traditional in my theology, which is to say I am generously and unashamedly orthodox in my convictions. I believe in the Scriptures and the creeds. I am also led to believe that because of these convictions, I want the church to be open to all people, the grace of God is for all people, the ministry of the church is for all people. I have been blessed by the courage and gifts of LGBTQ

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45 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Danger of a Single Story,” July 2009, TED video, 18:33, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en).

46 This word is found in the Social Principles, ¶164 (I), in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 2016.



members of our churches, and I have known more closely LGBTQ persons who are on the same journey of holiness that I am on. At the same time, I have been nourished by the traditionalist streams of theological reflection in our church. And, in my reading of a book like Tom Langford's *Practical Divinity*, I believe we have had multiple streams of theological resources in our Church since the beginning, and in that work he speaks especially of American Methodism.<sup>47</sup>

These convictions and commitments ground my motivations to seek the unity of the church, for the purpose of finding a way forward. This unity is not a given. It is the work we do, and it is described in Ephesians: we are “bearing with one another in love” and “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2–3, NRSV).

We are grateful for your prayers as we seek a way forward in this season in the life of our Church.

## Postscript

The report of the Commission on a Way Forward was taken up by the called General Conference in 2019, which chose in contrast to adopt a traditional plan. The voting was marked by some documented voter irregularities. The response across the Church was one of lament from different places, and this unease led to a vision of Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone for renewed conversation. This resulted in the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, which was crafted into legislative form for the 2020 General Conference. This General Conference would be delayed until 2024 because of complexities related to the global coronavirus pandemic in a Church that exists in forty nations. The Church continues to explore, struggle, and discern its future as a connection amid a world that is increasingly fractured.

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

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