The United Methodist Church
Florida + Episcopal Area

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2 August 13

Bob,

Pam and I wanted to thank you for the wonderful hospitality in Boston, and for the time to share a meal. I'm grateful for our friendship.

Attached is a paper I gave this summer, which emerged out of a talk I gave in Orlando.

Take care and God's Peace!

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(THE JOY OF FAITH WHERE GRACE IS PRESENT)

COLOSSIANS: SCYTHIANS + BARBARIANS.

UNMERITED FAVOR.

12 THE CULTURE HAS CEASED TO CARE

JUSTICE (LEFT) JUDGMENT (RIGHT)

GRACE

SEXUAL ORIENTATION NOT OUR FUNDAMENTAL IDENTITY.

— CULTURE WARS. H. NO. EITHER CULTURE WAR OR WAR ON AGAINST?

RELEVANCE? IMITATION. UGH.

* LIKE DC → ON CAPITALISM?

NO, ON ORDINATION.

WE SHOULD REMAIN DEEPLY STANDARD

'TEACHING OFFICE OF BISHOP' ? ELDER

(SEXUAL ABUSE)

IS TOP?

) ... NO POSITIVE WARRANT... IN SCRIPTURE.

(REMOVE MENTIONED

? PATIENCE? AFTER ALONE TIME 40 YEARS?

"THE SENSE OF WHERE OUR CHURCH IS"?

MOST VITAL?

"God Hath Bid All Humankind": Generous Orthodoxy and our Mission with Gays and Lesbians In the United Methodist Church [1]

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Presented to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies
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Prayer: O God, your intention to give exceeds our readiness to receive.
Your boundless love is restricted by our small vessels.
Your generosity far exceeds our responding reception.
Your richness is restrained by our poverty of expectation.
Your expansiveness is channeled through our small hearts.
Enlarge our capacity. Increase our receptivity. Open us to your full life.
Make us more able to receive your generous grace. Amen.[2]

1. A Generous Orthodoxy

I was drawn to the United Methodist Church because of its deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of the grace of God. In this tradition I came to know, trust and worship the Triune God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and revealed in the scriptures. In my reading and re-reading of the Bible, I have come again and again upon an affirmation about the nature of God: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103.8). The nature of God is not fully defined by grace--there is, to be sure, justice and judgment, and these three terms are not mutually exclusive—and yet these are attributes of God that we humans, at our best, approximate with humility. At our best, we err on the side of grace. This might even be understood as a positive expression of our General Rule, to "First, Do no harm" (104).

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[1] This reflection is written primarily for those who are seeking to understand their own participation in the Christian life, or in a local church, as gay and lesbian United Methodists, and for those in ministry with them. Sections 1, 3-6 and 9 are written especially for this audience. I am also speaking, secondarily, to a smaller group of United Methodists who have an additional interest in the denominational conversation around this subject. Sections 2, 7 and 8 are written particularly for these constituencies. Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in the 2012 Book of Discipline. Writing as a bishop of the church, my primary focus is pastoral, theological and missional, rather than legal and political. I am grateful to those who gathered to hear and respond to these reflections at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Orlando, Florida on July 25, 2013, and to Rev. Bill Barnes, Rev. Jennifer Stiles Williams and Alice Williams of that congregation for their hospitality.

[2] Unpublished prayer by Thomas Langford. I am grateful to Dean Langford, late theologian and Dean of the Divinity School, Duke University, at several points in this essay.

As a bishop of the church, the promises I made in the service of consecration were in the areas of the unity, faith, discipline and mission of the church. Undergirding each of these realities is the grace of God, which we experience through Jesus Christ (Romans 5; Ephesians 2). Again, the church at its best is nourished and sustained by the grace of God. In our doctrine, we seek to explain and give an account for the meaning and implications of this grace. Randy Maddox has noted two distinctive understandings of grace in Western and Eastern Christianity: the former has focused on God's forgiveness of sin and removal of guilt, the latter on God's desire to empower us as the new creation and to restore the divine nature in us. These are gifts of God, and John Wesley sought to "integrate" them in what I am describing as a "deep, rich and lifelong doctrine of the grace of God."[3]

In a posthumously-published essay, Thomas Langford suggests that "grace is the distinct element in the Christian message, for it is the most fundamental depiction of God, of God's way of being, and of human possibility."[4] In the history of doctrine, grace has been juxtaposed to works (Augustine); in practical theology, grace is in conversation with the means of grace (Wesley); and in discipleship, there is a differentiation between "cheap grace" and "costly grace" (Bonhoeffer). When we fail to define the meaning of grace, it can easily degenerate toward confirmation of one's own self-interest, in which we are not held accountable. When we fail to grasp our need for grace, we are prone to self-sufficiency, wherein we are not dependent upon God or a higher power.

It is important that we be orthodox (literally, that we believe truthfully or rightly), and yet John Wesley was clear that believing right doctrines was not sufficient; faith is also an inward disposition of trust (note the Aldersgate experience) and faith is demonstrated through acts of love (Galatians 5). This synergy of belief and trust, grace and faith is at the core of our tradition, as United Methodist Christians. It is best captured, for me, in a phrase: Generous Orthodoxy. The Anglican preacher and theologian Fleming Rutledge defines generous orthodoxy as follows:

"We cannot do without orthodoxy, for everything else must be tested against it, but that orthodox (traditional, classical) Christian faith should by definition always be generous as our God is generous; lavish in his creation, binding himself in an unconditional covenant, revealing himself in the calling of a people, self-sacrificing in the death of his Son, prodigal in the gifts of the Spirit, justifying the ungodly, and, indeed, offending the "righteous" by the indiscriminate use of his favor. True Christian orthodoxy therefore cannot be narrow, pinched or defensive but always spacious, adventurous and unafraid."[5]

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[3] Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Kingswood: Nashville, 1994), 84-85.

[4] Reflections on Grace (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2007), p. 21.

[5] "What is Generous Orthodoxy? A Statement of Purpose". www.generousorthodoxy.org. See also her extraordinary sermon on "True Inclusiveness": "The gospel is more inclusive than anyone who does not know Scripture could ever imagine. Who could ever have spoken of the justification of the ungodly and the undeserving except by revelation? We do not stand on our spiritual gifts, our religious habits, our extemporaneous prayers, our

She is drawing upon an initial statement by the Yale theologian Hans Frei, who commented, "We need a kind of generous orthodoxy which would have in it an element of liberalism--a voice like the Christian Century--and an element of evangelicalism-- the voice of Christianity Today. I don't know if there is a voice between these two, as a matter of fact. If there is, I would like to pursue it."[6]

This generous orthodoxy is made visible, in United Methodism, in our practice of open communion.[7] In Luke 15, we are told that Jesus "eats with sinners", a phrase included in our liturgy of Holy Communion, and this is the impetus for his three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son (or, a "merciful father"). Holy Communion, like the meals that Jesus shared throughout the gospels, is not reserved for those who perceive themselves to be righteous; this is echoed in our Book of Worship: "We have no tradition of refusing any who present themselves as desiring to receive".[8] Holy Communion, as a sacrament, is an outward and visible sign of the grace, or unmerited favor of God toward all people. The practice of open communion has implications beyond our gathered worship. As Mortimer Arias notes:

"Surely the open table is much more than 'eucharistic hospitality.' It means open homes, open churches and open communities. I sincerely believe that one of the most exciting frontiers of

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right doctrines, our correct interpretations. We stand on only one thing: the grace and love of God freely given to us in the Cross of the One of whom it is written that at the moment of his death the curtain was rent asunder from top to bottom. There is neither first class nor second class, black or white, slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, oppressed or oppressor, liberal or conservative, gay or straight, deserving or undeserving." Help My Unbelief (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 77.

[6] "Response to Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal", Trinity Journal, Spring, 1987.

[7] For further reflection, see Mark Stamm, Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). Much of the conversation around the practice of open communion is related to the requirement that the communicant be baptized, a significant issue is beyond the scope of this essay. The General Rules for the early Methodist societies do not state this as a precondition. In "Who is Communion For?", Charles Hefling places the focus not on the recipient, or the need for inclusion, but on the nature of God: "In no way does divine grace depend on the recipient, and what is given is neither achievement nor prize. It is precisely gracious, gratuitous gift, and only gift" (25).

[8] The Book of Worship (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), p. 29. See also "This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion", adopted at the 2004 General Conference and commended by the 2008 and 2012 General Conferences. The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), pp. 942ff.

missionary outreach and evangelistic witness is through what I like to call "evangelization by hospitality."[9]

2. Beyond Culture Wars: Our Theological Task

I am a United Methodist because of our deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of the grace of God. Over the past few years I have had the growing sense that this doctrine is a neglected resource in our silence and impasse around mission with gays and lesbians. Further, I am convinced that the topic of gay and lesbian participation in the church is more a matter of grace than of justice or judgment. Those on the political left often frame the question as a matter of justice, and those on the political right as a matter of judgment. A generous orthodoxy begins with God, and more specifically with the grace of God.

One reason for our silence and impasse around mission with gays and lesbians is the dominant framing of the conversation in the "culture wars".[10] There are strong advocacy groups on both sides of this issue, which has legal, political and cultural implications. In the culture wars there are winners and losers--quite literally, there are casualties--and there is at times a moral rationalization that the end (gaining political or legal advantage) justifies the means. The church often finds itself in alliances with advocacy groups on either side of the gay/lesbian question, and some congregations have self-identified with movements for more or less inclusion.[11] Some want to be more open, others want to stand firm; each senses that it is doing so out of deep Christian conviction, and each perceives itself to be counter-cultural. Underneath the reality of culture wars is the desire of the church, especially in the United States, to be culturally relevant; this often takes the form of imitation. At the same time, the church is often less aware that it creates culture its use of power, formation of community and disciplined search for grace.[12]

In reflecting on this matter, my prayer is that I do not participate in or contribute to the escalation of the culture wars. Given the political landscape, I am not naive in believing that it

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[9] Announcing The Reign of God (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 81. On the relationship between God's grace and a culture of radical hospitality in the local church, see Robert Schnase, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), pp. 11ff.

[10] The primary rationale for avoidance of the culture wars is the collateral damage to persons and institutions. A secondary reason is articulated by David Brooks, who famously argued that "we can have a culture war or a war on poverty, but we can't have both." "A Natural Alliance", The New York Times, May 26, 2005.

[11] The Judicial Council Decision No. 871 (1999) was a response to this trend, which transcends matters of human sexuality: "A local church or any of its organizational units may not identify or label itself as an unofficial body or movement. Such identification or labeling is divisive and makes the local church subject to the possibility of being in conflict with the Discipline and doctrines of The United Methodist Church.

[12] Andy Crouch, Culture Making (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008).

will not be heard in such a way. The polarization across the church is so pronounced that agendas are assumed. But this is not my intention. My calling is to frame the question of our mission with gay and lesbian Christians from a generously orthodox perspective, which will help us in our mission and in our pastoral relationships.[13]

This reflection is, I believe, an expression of the teaching role of a resident bishop in the United Methodist Church. I am not arguing a dogmatic position here; rather, I am seeking to fulfill the promise I made to *"guard the faith, to seek the unity, to exercise the discipline of the whole church...and to supervise and support the mission of the church's life, work and mission..."*.[14] I receive a steady stream of requests to give more clarity to this topic, from clergy and laity in the annual conference that I serve. Not everything that can be said is included in this reflection, and I write not as an advocate, but as a bishop. The teaching office of a bishop holds together an exposition of scripture and tradition, a vision for the church and the fulfillment of its mission, and a prophetic commitment for the alleviation of human suffering (403).

As a missional and pastoral statement, I do not take up here the matters of marriage (161f) or ordination (304) which are important subjects and are at present clearly articulated in courts of law and in the Discipline, respectively. A part of the ongoing confusion related to marriage and ordination is the distinction between the church's language of gifts (in its liturgies) and the civil society's definition of rights (in its legal codes). An additional complication with understanding same-sex marriage is the disarray in which heterosexual marriage finds itself in the present moment. [15] I believe in the development of doctrine and discipline, or the living relationship between "Our Doctrinal Standards" (104) and "Our Theological Task" (105) and my hope is that these words will help the church to have a more constructive conversation, guided by the Holy Spirit. In defining what a constructive conversation would look like, I am grateful for the insight of Thomas Langford:

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[13] I am using the language of "mission" and "missional" in the sense of response to a basic question that was asked of Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" See Gil Rendle, Journey into the Wilderness (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010). In addition, see Lovett Weems' reflection on "Reaching More People, Younger People, More Diverse People", presented to the United Methodist Church Council of Bishops in 2007 and included in Focus: The Real Challenges That Face the United Methodist Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), pp. 74ff.

[14] "The Order for The Consecration of Bishops", The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), p. 703.

[15] Thus the traditionalist Ross Douthat writes that a "Christian case for fidelity and chastity will inevitably seem partial and hypocritical if it trains most of its attention on the minority of cases—on homosexual wedlock and the slippery slope to polygamy and beyond. It is the heterosexual divorce rate, the heterosexual retreat from marriage, and the heterosexual out-of-wedlock birthrate that should command the most attention from Christian moralists. The Christian perspective on gay sex only makes sense in light of the Christian perspective on straight sex, and in a culture that has made heterosexual desire the measure of all things, asking gays alone to conform their lives to a hard teaching will inevitably seem like a form of bigotry." Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics (New York: Free Press, 2012), pp. 289-290.

"Doctrine reflects the grasp of the church; theology reflects the reach of the church. To use another analogy: doctrine is the part of the cathedral already completed, exploratory theology is creative architectural vision and preliminary drawings for possible new construction."[16]

I turn now to the basis and motivation for that conversation.

3. Grace Will Lead Us Home

A generous orthodoxy reclaims a deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of grace, which is, for us, the way of salvation, both individually and as a church. To reflect on grace as prevenient, justifying and sanctifying is not to identify separate types of grace , but to express the relationship between God's providential gifts and our own experience in the journey.

Prevenient grace is the presence of God in all people, prior to our acceptance of faith or response to divine revelation: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5. 8). This grace is universal and at the same time resistible. [17] We believe that every person is created in God's image, that all persons are of "sacred worth" (161f), and surely this is common ground, in the Wesleyan tradition for ministries with all people. Our doctrine of prevenient grace is the basis for the conviction that no one is outside of God's love and God's saving activity, and that, at the same time, every impulse in our human nature to move toward God is a gift.[18]

Justifying grace is the gift of salvation, which is ours through faith and apart from any merit. The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross. This faith includes intellectual assent, trust and confidence, and a heightened perception of spiritual reality.[19] We are saved by grace, through faith, and this is a gift of God, not the result of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2). The assurance that we are justified by faith (Romans 5) was a strong emphasis in the Reformed tradition that flowed into our Wesleyan heritage; at the same time, however,

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[16] "Doctrinal Affirmation and Theological Exploration", Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991), p. 204.

[17] Robert G. Tuttle, in "God's Initiative in the Drama of Rescue: A Wesleyan Understanding of Prevenient Grace", unpublished paper, insists that prevenient grace "preserves the integrity of our own freedom and of a human response", while granting "God the initiative in the drama of rescue."

[18] This impulse is defined by Randy Maddox as "responsible grace". See Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Kingswood: Nashville, 1994), p. 92.

[19] Scott Jones, United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), pp. 184-185.

Albert Outler notes that Wesley grounds justification in the resources of his own (Anglican) tradition.[20]

Sanctifying grace is the journey toward holiness, and is our lifelong response to this grace. Here our divisions become evident. Many of those who emphasize personal holiness cannot embrace the practice of homosexuality as a behavior in the journey to becoming more Christ-like.[21] At the same time, there are others who value an intentional personal relationship with Christ and regard committed same-sex relationships as expressions of faithfulness. While there is no positive warrant for same-sex relationships in scripture, many interpret these relationships more generally and constructively within Jesus' commandments about love, or the prohibition against them as culturally-conditioned teachings, similar to those around issues of slavery or the role of women. As United Methodists, we have different interpretations of scripture, and this is related to the value we also place on reason and experience. Social holiness sees the desire for inclusion as a historical movement, wedded to the struggle for civil rights and the dignity of personhood. The traditions of social holiness are deeply embedded in Methodism, from our early opposition to slavery to present day efforts to eradicate malaria.[22]

4. The Simplicity and Complexity of Holiness

As we approach matters of sanctification, perfection and holiness, our judgments should be measured by an appropriate humility, or, in biblical language, the "fear of the Lord".[23] The closer we come in our approach to the throne of grace, the more we become aware of our imperfections. This is a word of caution for persons who may see this matter in diametrically opposing ways.

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[20] Albert Outler, ed. John Wesley (New York: Oxford, 1964), p. 197. Wesley often quotes homilies and liturgies that point to the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, and our faith in this act.

[21] A well-reasoned argument for this position is given by William J. Abraham in his address to the Council of Bishops on May 2, 2002: "The Church's Teaching on Sexuality: A Defense of the United Methodist Discipline on Homosexuality", in James K. Matthews and William B. Oden, ed., Vision and Supervision (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), pp. 188ff.

[22] For an alternative reading of social holiness, see Andrew Thompson, "From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition", Methodist Review (Vol. III, 2011). He writes: *social holiness* names the environmental context in which Christians are progressively transformed by grace, which is a fundamentally social one...social holiness refers neither to the historically later concept of social justice nor to a counterpart for personal holiness, whether under stood as a bifurcated way persons can exhibit holiness or to an individual/public division of the means of grace (pp. 22, 24).

[23] See Eugene Peterson's extraordinary reflection on this biblical phrase in Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 39-44. Among his phrases that capture, but not quite, the meaning of "Fear-of-the-Lord" are "awe", "worshipful respect", "walking on holy ground and living in sacred time", "plunged into mystery", "presumption recedes, attentiveness increases, expectancy heightens", "living in reverence before God".

The pursuit of holiness can bring out the worst and the best in us. At our worst, the pursuit of holiness can breed a judgmentalism toward our brother or sister: "he does not believe in the authority of scripture"' or "she is intolerant". The gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) are clear in cautioning us about our judgments of others. At our best, the pursuit of holiness immerses us in the love of God, which by intention flows into a love for our neighbor (I John 4). In the Wesleyan tradition, sanctification has always been understood, at the level of practice, as love of God and love of neighbor, [24]the two great commandments of Jesus (Mark 12). The goal in our journey of sanctification encompasses the truths that God loves righteousness and that God loves humanity; thus Stephen Gunter has expressed our divisions theologically:

"The 'left' wants to hold fast to the truth that God loves all humanity, and thus we should love all humanity without exception or expectation. The 'right' holds fast to the requirements for righteousness and refuses to countenance a love that does not require conformity to specific definitions of what constitutes righteousness."[25]

It is also true that the division of personal and social holiness is an artificial construct that expresses the political captivity of the church, and this division reveals the brokenness of Christ's body. The activist Jim Wallis defines the categories as "personal responsibility" and "social justice"; regardless of terminology, the divisions pervade many of our social organizations and public institutions.[26] It is also true that our methods for decision-making (conferences rules of organization) often contribute the very outcomes we lament--Robert's Rules of Order have not led us to the promised land! At the same time we have neglected rich traditions within Christian spirituality of Bible Study, corporate spiritual discernment, confession and intercession. To move beyond this polarization, as an act of individual and corporate will, is to hear the command of the apostle Paul: "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12).

5. Exclusion as an Obstacle to Mission

Setting aside the dramatic interruptions at each of the last several United Methodist General Conferences, which have served only to harden the divisions in an increasingly global church,

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[24] See the Articles of Religion, XI, in The Book of Discipline (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), p. 73.

[25] From personal conversation; see W. Stephen Gunter, Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments (Waco: Baylor, 2012).

[26] On God's Side (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013). While not Wesleyan, the book's concluding chapter is entitled "The World is Our Parish."

there is a steady and persistent change occurring in the United States, accompanied by prayer, conversations within families and in congregations, and reverse mentoring across generations.

This change is happening at the grassroots level, as local churches acknowledge the gifts of their own members and the mission field of gays and lesbians, and their families and friends, who feel excluded by the institutional church. Some of this sense of exclusion resides in the present language of the Book of Discipline (161f); some of it arises from negative experiences with religion; and some is the relentless stereotyping of American Christianity by a popular and secular media that cannot comprehend or communicate complexity around human sexuality and the church.

Many gay and lesbian Christians find fulfillment in their journeys as disciples of Jesus Christ in evangelical and mainline churches. At the same time, they often wonder why one particular lifestyle, orientation or issue is singled out for judgment; this present reality is surely not justified by the biblical attention given to homosexuality; as Richard Hays notes, "the Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern—in contrast, for example, to economic injustice". [27] This singular judgment is especially problematic for younger generations, and has been documented in recent research by evangelical and mainline scholars.[28] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons conclude, "When most of us engage homosexuals, we come across as arrogant, self-righteous and uncaring---the opposite of how Jesus engaged outsiders. Rather than articulating a biblical perspective and living out a biblical response to homosexuals, the research demonstrates how inconsistent and uncompassionate---how unChristian—we have been".

The conversation about our relationship with gays and lesbians is not a distraction from our mission; in the context of the United States, and especially in urban centers, on college campuses and in families experiencing the lived reality, it is the presenting issue that can lead us to a deeper theological conversation about the nature of God, the unity of the church and the ongoing work of grace in the lives of disciples of Jesus Christ.

6. Patience as an Expression of a Catholic Spirit

I would encourage Christians who cannot accept gays and lesbians, in orientation or practice, to place the judgment of them (and all of us) in God's hands. As the Apostle Paul asks, "Who is in a position to condemn?" (Romans 8.34) Thus Thomas Langford writes, "We must not equate our judgment with the judgment of God. Obviously we must make decisions, we must learn how to say both "yes" and "no" but we do so out of concern for the other and for the

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[27] The Moral Vision of the New Testament (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), p. 381.

[28] unChristian: What A New Generation Really Things About Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 93.

community of others. In every judgment there must be room left for God's judgment."[29] And I would encourage gays and lesbians to be patient with their brothers and sisters in the church who have not walked their journey. This is not a justification for continued injustice. And yet it is also true that sexuality itself is a mysterious, complicated and emotionally-charged subject, and rational conversation and dialogue will emerge only if those who disagree come to the table hearing the admonition of James: "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (James 1).

Patience is here understood not as a false tolerance of difference. I am speaking of the patience of God toward us, and the calling we have, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to more fully reveal the image of God to each other. Such patience is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) in families and in congregations across our denomination. This patience is an essential mark of our mission with gays and lesbians, which is itself grounded in generous orthodoxy. Patience resides in our participation in the lifelong experience of grace, which is the power of God to transform us.

In the gospels, a vivid portrait of patience is found in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13. 24-30). [30] We are sometimes tempted to see the vineyard as more holy, just or pure if those with whom we have conflict are no longer present. There was evidently a temptation in the early church, perhaps among the Zealots or the Pharisees, or in the Qumran community, to define communal discipline by weeding out those deemed to "belong to the Evil One" (13. 37). In the vivid image of Jesus' parable, we grow together, wheat and tares, in the church. It should also be said that the straight person is not interpreted as the wheat, and the gay and lesbian person as the tare; to say that the wheat and the tares grow within each of us is to acknowledge our acceptance of grace and our need for confession.[31] The warning about removing the tares or weeds from the wheat is not to condone passivity or complacency; rather, in removing the weeds, one will also uproot the wheat. We are not to take the place of God in this activity or judgment. In this way, the church is a kind of "greenhouse"[32] where we are planted, cultivated, pruned (John 15) and thus transformed. To live together is a gift of

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[29] "Grace Upon Grace", Address to the Council of Bishops, November 2, 1999. James K. Matthews and William B. Oden, ed., Vision and Supervision (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p. 152.

[30] See Edward S. Little, "Living with Tares", Christianity Today, March, 2006. As a Bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States, writing as an evangelical to other evangelicals, Little notes that "it is not our vocation to stand in the Lord's place as the sifter at the harvest or the sorter at the close of the age." He then quotes Augustine: "Let the separation be waited for until the end of time, faithfully, patiently, bravely" (p. 70).

[31] I am also grateful for Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "Learning to Live With Weeds", in The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1990). She writes: "The business about gathering and burning the weeds tends to make me a little nervous, and the burning question is: which am I? Wheat or weed? Blessed or cursed? The lovely thing about parables is that they rarely answer such questions, at least not directly.

[32] I am grateful to the Rev. Sue Haupert-Johnson for this image.

grace, to remain in the church is to participate in the means of grace (218), and these are essential activities in our maturing as disciples until the harvest where God is both redeemer and judge.

John Wesley's leadership was often exercised in response to controversies over doctrine and/or discipline. In "The Character of a Methodist", he commented that "as to all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think". And in "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection", he insists that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is at best a slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part at all." His sermon on the "Catholic Spirit" is focused around a question and an answer taken from 2 Kings 10. 15: "Is your heart right with my heart? If it is, then give me your hand." His interpretation of this verse of scripture is worthy of our reflection:

"If it is, give me your hand". I do not mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." I cannot; it does not depend on my choice. I can no more think than I can see or hear as I will. Keep you your opinion; I mine, and that as steady as ever. You need not endeavour to come over to me or bring me over to you. I do not desire to dispute those points or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Let all opinions along on one side and the other: only, "give me your hand".

He likens the catholic spirit to the universal spirit or universal love, and concludes: "lastly, love me not in word only but in deed and in truth. So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God, and let us go on hand in hand."[33] In the language of the Wesleyan tradition, a generous orthodoxy toward God is expressed through a catholic spirit toward each other (103), for the sake of our common mission in the world.

7. The Future of the United Methodist Church

Movement on the subject of gays and lesbians in the United Methodist Church has been shaped by our polity, particularly our process of revising the Book of Discipline every four years. Our present statement includes affirmation of gay and lesbian persons, a challenge to be in ministry with them and not to condemn them, and a statement that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching (161f). These ambiguities reflect the sense of where our church is, at the moment, and in this regard the church reflects the culture. Indeed, it reflects the ambiguity within many individuals.

A very good statement by Adam Hamilton and Michael Slaughter, lead pastors of two of our largest and most vital churches, asked the United Methodist Church to acknowledge the varying

[33] Albert C. Outler, ed. John Wesley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 99, 101.

interpretations of scripture related to gays and lesbians within our denomination.[34] This amendment to the Discipline was not accepted, even as it received significant support in the 2012 General Conference. At the time I was the clergy leader in one of the delegations, and my sense was that it was a true statement of our present reality. Given the low degree of trust, the polarization across the global church, and the ongoing and dramatic disruptions at General Conferences (by delegates, United Methodist observers, and advocates from outside the church), we were simply unable to speak the truth with each other.

I have also sensed, in the debate on homosexuality over several General Conferences, an incoherent understanding of the way of salvation: one argument is based upon prevenient grace and social holiness, the other on repentance and justifying grace; there is little or no common ground, and thus the two groups are talking past each other. At a denominational level, there is deep suspicion on each side about the other: some of the theological arguments for full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church have been less than orthodox;[35] at the same time, many gay and lesbian Christians have responded to the grace of God, but have sensed a limited access to the means of grace. Ironically, many local churches have discovered ways to live graciously and faithfully, moving beyond the debate of abstract issues to the practices of support and accountability, or "watching over one another in love".

So where do we go from here, as a denomination? Our increasingly global church will certainly continue to shape our polity, even as sexual practices in other regions of the world that are not affirmed by our Discipline go unexplored. At each successive General Conference since 2004 we have witnessed an increase in voting membership among our brothers and sisters beyond the United States. Gathering as a global church, which is a gift, has had the unintended consequence of masking the decline of United Methodism in the United States. If we cannot rediscover the priority of making disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world (120) and learn from teaching churches that are doing just this, we will not have the capacity to fulfill God's mission, and the culture will cease to care about our positions on issues that are important to us.

8. Politics and Polity

In our denominational discernment around issues related to human sexuality, we would do well not to replicate the recent experience of the mainline churches of the United States. In each

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[34] Proposed Amendment by Substitution for Calendar Item 513 (Daily Christian Advocate page number 2367), Petition Number 21032 (Advanced Daily Christian Advocate page number 270) of the 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. For a later reflection by Adam Hamilton, see "On Homosexuality, Many Christians Get the Bible Wrong", Washington Post, February 13, 2013.

[35] For example, the conversation about Christology between Bishop Timothy Whitaker and Bishop Joseph Sprague on this topic: http://www.flumc.org/bishop_whitaker/Response%20to%20Bishop%20Sprague.pdf and Affirmations of a Dissenter (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

case, the result has been schism, with devastating legal and financial consequences and diminished resources for mission. It also seems clear that movement toward a more liberal political stance regarding human sexuality will not necessarily strengthen our denomination. Over the past ten years, evangelical, conservative, non-denominational and progressive churches in the United States have all experienced decline in worship attendance.[36]

I do not fear disagreement on the issue of human sexuality. Divisions have been present in Christianity since the writings of the apostle Paul to the churches in Corinth, Galatia and Philippi in the first century. I do believe that there are resources inherent in the Methodist tradition--our deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of grace, our practice of open communion, our connectionalism, and our way of seeing issues missionally rather than ideologically--that can help us to navigate the future, if we allow these strengths to shape our thinking, praying and living. In our silence, we are not bearing witness to the gifts that God has given to the people called Methodist.

Some of the change, in terms of polity, will happen generationally. And yet polity will not be our salvation. Repentance, confession, forgiveness, and the journey to holiness happen in congregations and campus ministries, in small groups, Sunday school classes and circles of trust, in the sacraments that reveal God's unmerited grace in our most ordinary experience, and in sermons that remind us that sexual orientation is not our fundamental identity: deeper still, we are created in the image of a God who loves us, who seeks to restore the image of love in each of us, an image that is disfigured by sin--and, we could name these as the sins of intolerance and sexual immorality, both of which can be expressed by the political left and right, and by gay and straight persons.

9. Good News for Gays and Lesbians

For the sake of the mission of God, I hope we will hear more clearly, and practice more faithfully, and in risk-taking ways, the statement in our Discipline: we implore our members not to condemn our gay and lesbian members and friends (161f), but to be in ministry with and for all persons. My hope is grounded not only in the Discipline I have promised to uphold, but in the gospels, where, again and again, Jesus crosses boundaries to share table fellowship with outcasts.

I believe many gay and lesbian Christians perceive themselves to be cast out by the very churches that have formed them spiritually. The "incompatibility" sentence in the Discipline (161f), as it is singles out one behavior to the exclusion of many others, contributes to this distancing, and many United Methodists simply do not know how to articulate the sentence's meaning or purpose. The result of this sentence's inclusion in our Discipline is an erosion in the

[36] Lovett Weems, "No Shows", Christian Century, September 22, 2010. Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion (San Francisco: Harper One, 2012), pp. 52-57.

church's teaching authority, not unlike the Roman Catholic Church's statements on contraception. Upon self-examination, we all live in ways that are "incompatible with Christian teaching"(Romans 3). This is our universal human condition, not the designation of one particular group of people, and is the occasion for the gift of God's grace. A generous orthodoxy would not single out a particular group for condemnation, nor would it omit a path toward restoration and reconciliation. At present, our resulting silence and impasse is not being used by God to convey the fullness of grace and truth.

A generous orthodoxy will rediscover the practices of Jesus in the gospels, calling all people into communion with him. Is that call a tacit approval of who we are, in our humanity? No, and this is true for gay and straight people. Again, the ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross, and this is the common ground of grace, which is a deep, inclusive and lifelong reality. This grace inspired a movement in 18th century England and 19th century America that made disciples who in turn transformed the world.[37] But more fundamentally, this grace was invitational and evangelical.[38]

I am convinced that God is calling us, in the 21st century, to share the gospel, in less harmful words and through more gracious actions, with all people, and surely among them are our gay and lesbian neighbors. I am also convinced that welcoming gays and lesbians will open us more fully to their gifts, among them testimonies of courage and patience, faith and grace. And I am equally persuaded that these callings flow from a clear and generously orthodox Christian faith, grounded in scripture and our tradition.

We are saved by the grace of God; this is true for straight and gay people, for individuals and for a denomination. Our future mission is not one of condemnation...

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine.[39]

but of invitation:

Come, sinners to the gospel feast, let every soul be Jesus' guest.
You need not one be left behind, for God hath bid all humankind. [40]

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[37] For an extended historical and theological reflection on this subject, see Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church", http://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/faculty-maddox/22_Wesleys_Prescription_Duke.pdf

[38] I think also of the words of the invitational hymn of my childhood, which remain deeply imprinted in my heart, mind and experience: "Just as I am, without one plea..." (United Methodist Hymnal, p. 357.[38]

[39] Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be That I Should Gain", p. 363.

[40] Charles Wesley, "Come, Sinners, To the Gospel Feast", The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 616.