

## References

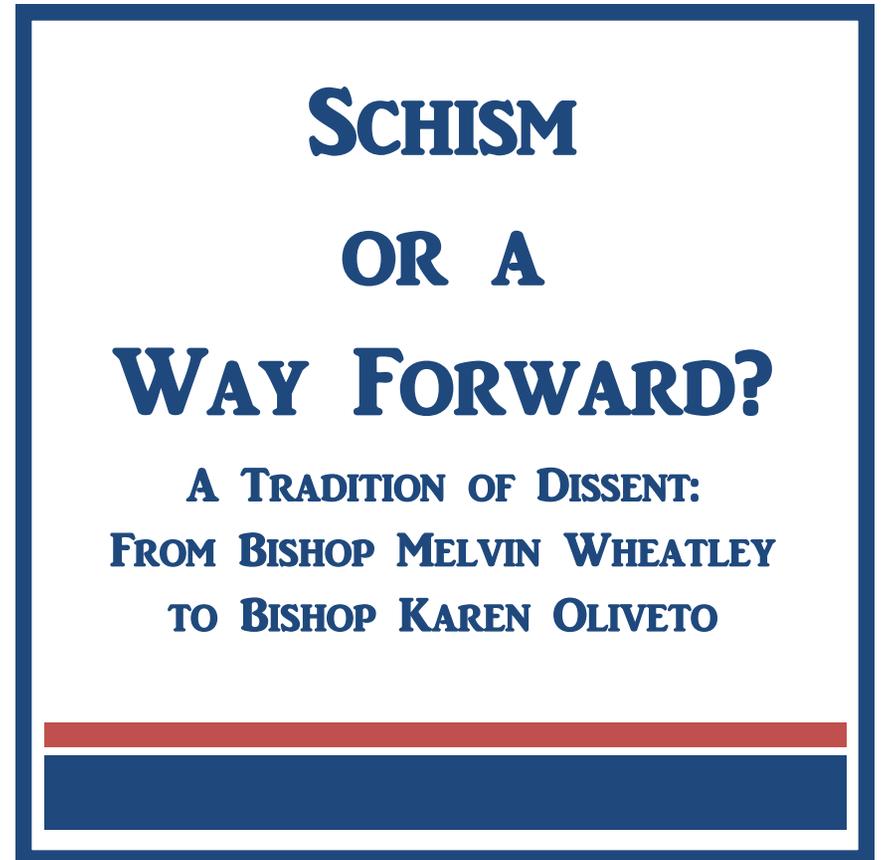
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<sup>2</sup>John Wesley, "On Schism," B 3:64: J VI; 405-6, II,11. See Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, editors, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, B 3:69; JVI;410;II,21.

<sup>4</sup>Donald E. Messer cited in "Journal of the Sixteenth Session of the Western Jurisdictional Conference of The United Methodist Church," Casper, Wyoming, July 12-16, 2000, p. 44. See also Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer, *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Donald E. Messer, "**Homosexuality and Ecclesiology**," Address to the UM Council of Bishops, May 2, 2002, *Vision and Supervision; A Sourcebook of Significant Documents of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, 1968-2002*, edited by James K. Mathews and William B. Oden (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 168.



**Mountain Sky Area Breakfast**

**Donald E. Messer<sup>1</sup>**

**June 9, 2018 - Ogden, Utah**

Fifty years after its founding, the United Methodist Church stands at a perilous crossroads, uncertain whether it can find a way forward or will wander into the forests of schism and disunity.

The national and international scene of United Methodism contrasts sharply with the conversation and debate circulating around this conference. Here in Utah we are focused on the question of whether and how to unite the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain Conferences. Globally the church is struggling to decide whether it can live together despite differences—whether we can love one another despite our disagreements.

### **Schism, John Wesley, and United Methodism**

Schism is not new to Christianity as is evident by the incredible number of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches the faith has spawned and the endless number of denominations that exist in the United States and the world. What grieved John Wesley was not so much the existing divisions but schisms that occurred among people that once loved each other and once broke bread together. He thought their internal breaking apart was downright “evil” and demonstrated a failure to express Christian love.<sup>2</sup> In Wesley’s words, “it is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren . . . . Want of love is always the real cause” of schism.” Therefore, Wesley calls us to be peacemakers in the church, saying “Indeed it is far easier to prevent the flame from breaking out than to quench it afterwards.”<sup>3</sup>

This morning let me speak briefly about the current predicament the church faces and the limited choices that appear on the horizon. Most of you are well aware of the dilemmas, but to ensure we are on all the same page, let me restate some basic church history.

United Methodism was created in 1968 with the merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church. Four years later just as a new set of Social Principles were to be adopted by the General Conference, a motion was made on the floor that asserted that “the practice of homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching.” It passed after limited debate. But far from ending discussion, it began an endless debate within the church that now has caused the church to consider either a new way forward or a schismatic way out.

Methodism a very conservative, evangelical, if not fundamentalist, denomination. How open these same delegates will be to this compromise is unknown.

### **Towards An Inclusive Christian Methodist Church**

Personally I want to be hopeful that the Holy Spirit is moving to create a truly inclusive church reflective of God’s inclusive love in Jesus Christ for all of us. However, I must acknowledge that I am skeptical and fear that our church will plunge into schism and LGBTQ persons and their allies around the world will discover anew what it means to be part of a church whose theology and polity reflect closed doors, closed minds, and closed spirits.

If perchance the “One Church” model passes, those of us who embrace inclusiveness will continue to pray, preach, protest, and politic until the day genuine inclusiveness becomes a part of every United Methodist Church world-wide. We will not forsake our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, be they in in our own area of Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah, or whether they are in the Dakotas, the Carolinas, Liberia, the Congo, Russia, Burundi, or the Philippines.

If the traditionalists prevail, then another belief and teaching of Bishop Melvin Wheatley will be tested. He used to remind us that this is our church and we should resist ever being forced out of it. Some of us will never depart from being a United Methodist, even if United Methodism departs from us. We will stand and witness to our dying day that God loves all people and that Jesus death on the cross was reflective of God’s inclusive love for all people. We will resist, persist and assist all those who affirm the equality and dignity of all God’s children. Others of us may decide the nobler path is “Methexit” and the creation of a new truly Christian Methodist Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What will be your choice?

“The very being (esse) of the church of Jesus Christ requires the inclusion of all God’s people at every level of the life of the church. . . . Inclusiveness is not an optional ‘extra’ or ‘political correctness’ for United Methodists. Inclusiveness is not simply discretionary, useful or theologically beneficial (*bene esse*). Inclusiveness is a way of being, living, working, and worshipping together in mission. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Traditionalists will see these steps as being the proverbial camel’s nose undermining the tent of Scripture and progressives will denounce the action as leaving many faithful LGBTBQ Christians around the world unwelcome outside the United Methodist tent.

### Judicial Council Ruling

The recent Judicial Council ruling has made the probability of the “One Church Plan” being passed more unlikely. Instead of only the recommendation of the Council of Bishops being considered by the upcoming special General Conference, any petition determined to be in “harmony” with the “purpose” of the special session call of the bishops can be considered by a 2/3 vote of the General Conference.

At this point I personally am confused by parliamentary procedure. I am told by Lonnie Brooks of Alaska that “a decision as to whether a petition is or is not in harmony requires only a majority vote, and if a petition is determined by that process to be ‘in harmony,’ then no further action is required for it to be subject to debate and the normal process of adoption or rejection. If a petition, by majority vote, is determined NOT to be ‘in harmony,’ then a 2/3rds super majority will be required to put it on the agenda for debate and decision on its merits.” If every petition is debated before a vote, then the three days will end up in endless wrangling.

Therefore, the potential for deadlock in 2019 appears high. But no one knows what will happen at the three-day special General Conference of 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri. The delegates who will gather are essentially the same who met in Portland, Oregon, in 2016. The voting membership will be about 30% from Africa, 58.3% from USA, 4.6% Europe, and 5.8% from the Philippines. Their inclination in Portland was to reaffirm and tighten all prohibitions against LGBTQ persons and to make United

### A Tradition of Dissent: From Bishop Melvin Wheatley to Bishop Karen Oliveto

Younger or newer people in the Mountain Sky Area might think this debate began with the election, consecration, and appointment of Bishop Karen P. Oliveto in 2016, the first openly lesbian episcopal leader in the denomination. A more accurate historical understanding would be to pinpoint the beginning of dissent and debate with the election, consecration, and appointment of Melvin W. Wheatley as the United Methodist Bishop of our Area in 1972—a few months after the anti-gay resolution was adopted at General Conference.

Wheatley, the father of a gay son and with several professional gay friends, never believed that homosexuality was “incompatible with Christian teaching.” In fact, he and his wife, Lucile, believed the opposite—that exclusion of LGBTQ persons was contrary to the Christian Gospel. During their 12 years of service in this Area, they welcomed persons of every sexual orientation and never demonstrated discrimination or stigmatization.

In 1980—38 years ago—Bishop Wheatley defied the entire United Methodist Council of Bishops by refusing to sign the Episcopal Address because it reaffirmed that “homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching.” It was the first time all the bishops had not signed and Wheatley was considered a prophetic pariah by many in the denomination. However, never again would an Episcopal Address before General Conference claim to speak with one voice for all the bishops.

Two years later, when Rev. Julian Rush at First United Methodist Church in Boulder, Colorado, was “outed,” Wheatley appointed him to another United Methodist Church. This caused such great consternation that Wheatley was charged with heresy by persons from the Southeast Jurisdiction, and Wheatley faced a trial. He was acquitted by the Western Jurisdiction.

Efforts to defrock Rev. Julian Rush were unsuccessful because the Rocky Mountain clergy in general stood in solidarity with him, affirming his excellent Christian character and extraordinary ministry. Since that time, the overwhelming majority of pastors

and people in the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain Conferences have sought to change the general church's teachings so that all people would be included in all the church's levels of leadership, rituals, and service.

Every succeeding bishop since Wheatley that has served our Area—Bishops Roy I. Sano, Mary Ann Swenson, Warner H. Brown, Jr., and Elaine J. W. Stanovsky—has opposed the church's discriminatory teaching and affirmed the equality and dignity of LGBTQ persons. Years ago in 2000, I sponsored an amendment to a resolution announcing that "We Will Not Be Silent" at our Western Jurisdictional church conference. It declared that "we cannot accept discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, and will therefore work toward their full participation at all levels in the life of the church and society."<sup>4</sup> Bishop Karen P. Oliveto's election in 2016 as a bishop was a fitting fulfillment of that public pledge by the lay and clergy delegates in Casper, Wyoming, sixteen years earlier.

### **Majority of Bishops Now Concur With Bishop Wheatley & Western Jurisdiction**

The recent majority vote last month of the worldwide Council of Bishops represents a triumph for that persistent witness first sparked by Bishop Melvin Wheatley and faithfully proclaimed by decades of church leaders from our region. Never before has the United Methodist Council of Bishops voted to remove the discriminatory language from the *Discipline*, acknowledging for the first time that LGBTQ people could be ordained and married in our churches.

It is historic that the Bishops have recommended the "**One Church Plan**" advanced by the special Way Forward Commission. From one lonely voice and vote—Bishop Melvin Wheatley—to the overwhelming voice and vote of today's worldwide Council of Bishops. For the first time a minority of the bishops favored the so-called "**Traditionalist Plan**" approach of keeping the current regulations and seeking to enforce church laws more vigorously. Presumably those bishops and supporters think more church trials, more invasions of privacy, more persons suspended and thrown out of ministry, more families rebuffed from having their children married in church, and more condemnations and abominations uttered by church leaders—

are consistent with proclaiming a loving Christ Jesus.

We don't know how many bishops favored the third way called the "**Connectional-Conference Plan**." Probably more wanted to vote for it than actually did vote for it, because to implement this plan would have required innumerable changes in the *Discipline* and the United Methodist Constitution, any of which would be difficult, if not impossible to pass in a coherent manner. If implemented, it would have created three connectional conferences based on theology and would have abolished the five existing jurisdictions in the United States.

### **Understanding the "One Church Plan"**

So what is the positive and what is the negative of the "One Church Plan"? Clearly it is a compromise and some of us find compromises morally and spiritually unacceptable. Others of us find them a necessary step as we find a way forward. Making some gains, but at a cost. An ugly reminder of compromise hovers over the church as we remember how in 1939 when three branches of Methodism merged, they did so by creating a segregated church, a geographical jurisdiction based solely on race. It took 29 years before that racist scar was removed from the church.

Based on the limited amount of information we know at this point, the "One Church Plan" would remove the offensive language from the *Discipline* about homosexuality being incompatible with Christianity. It would permit the marriages and ordination of qualified LGBTQ persons. However, it also would allow United Methodist pastors to refuse to marry same-sex couples and permit conferences and bishops to forbid the ordination of qualified LGBTQ persons. So United Methodists would be united but not uniform in its teaching and practices regarding LGBTQ persons. Just as you cannot be a little bit pregnant, likewise you cannot be a little bit exclusive, if you claim to represent the inclusive Body of Christ in the world.

Details of the legislation have not yet been revealed, so how this will work out across the world is yet unknown. What we do know is that the "One Church Plan," if adopted, will be upsetting to conservatives as well as liberals. We will be one in name only—claiming to be united in mission and ministry, but actually divided at our very heart. I believe: