

Homosexuality and Ecclesiology

Donald E. Messer

*President Emeritus and Warren Professor of Practical Theology
The Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado*

The paper originally was prepared at the invitation of the United Methodist Council of Bishops and presented at their meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 2, 2002.

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. The church as "koinonia" is violated when some Christian believers are excluded, stigmatized, and discriminated against because of the church's teachings and actions. The very essence of the church is at stake when United Methodist polity persists in excluding homosexual persons from the ordained ministry and denying same-sex persons liturgical rites of holy union.

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: a basic element of our faith in Jesus Christ and our Christian identity. To paraphrase Emil Brunner, "Inclusiveness is to the church as fire is to burning."

I. One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church

Inclusiveness is a precondition for the church's distinguishing marks as set forth in the Nicene Creed: "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." The unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity of the church flow from Christ's inclusive gospel. These marks or goals of the church have rarely, if ever, been realized. As theologian Peter C. Hodgson has noted:

Is it not self-evident, today as always, that the Christian church has been not only united but divided; not only catholic (in the double sense of universal and orthodox) but also partisan, particular, and in continual need of renewal; not only holy but also profane and sinful; not only in possession of apostolic authority but also committed to serve the world and enhance human freedom?¹

Historically, the basis of the *unity* of the church sometimes has been lodged in the papacy, episcopacy, or some other juridical body. St. Augustine, however, identified a spiritual basis, namely in the love poured out by Christ and the Holy Spirit. Church unity comes not from Scripture, doctrine, or denominational polity but from God's redemptive action in Christ, "which is intrinsically nonprovincial in character, with no divisions or exclusions legitimated on the basis of race, nationality, location, sex, creed, language, or the like."² Inclusive love that tolerates and embraces diversity and difference is the

precondition of unity. Or as John Wesley declared, "If we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike."³

Likewise, if the church is truly to be *catholic*, universal, or ecumenical, it cannot exclude other Christian persons of faith and goodwill. The early church was radically egalitarian and inclusive, a subversive threat to prevailing Jewish and Hellenistic religious and cultural patterns. The new *basileia* vision of Jesus ("Kingdom" or "Realm of God") provided a new way of relating to people in the world: the inclusion of people without conditions, namely, women, the poor, the sick, and "sinners" of all sorts.⁴ Epitomizing this vision is Galatians 3:28: ". . . neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, all are one in Christ Jesus."

The *holiness* of the church, wrote Thomas Aquinas in his *Exposition on the Apostle's Creed*, is due to "the indwelling of the blessed Trinity." Holiness does not depend on the moral worthiness of any of its members, clergy or laity, heterosexual or homosexual. We are, in Martin Luther's words, *simul justus et peccator* (at once justified and sinful), both a communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*) and a community of sinners (*communio peccatorum*).⁵

For United Methodists, the apostolic nature of the church has never depended upon the theory of apostolic succession, which has historically been exclusively hierarchical and male. Rather, our tradition has emphasized the liberating inclusive paradigm of Jesus' ministry, which reached out to all people, especially those most marginalized and stigmatized by their cultures and religions. This remains our mission as United Methodists in the twenty-first century.

II. Biblical Perspectives: Homosexuality and Ecclesiology

Once a topic rarely discussed in biblical literature, homosexuality now is addressed in many volumes and articles. The literature and arguments are readily available and hardly need repetition in this paper. Illustrative are the two contrasting approaches offered by biblical scholars teaching at two United Methodist seminaries: Richard B. Hays at Duke Divinity School and Luke Timothy Johnson at Candler School of Theology.⁶ Distinguished scholars and teachers, they understand the Bible quite differently.

Exclusion. The scholarship and writing of Richard B. Hays at Duke Divinity School is often cited to justify the exclusion of gays and lesbians from all levels of the life of the church. He insists, however, "We all stand without excuse under God's judgment. Self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself."⁷

Hays notes that the Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior, a minor point compared to economic injustice. But Hays asserts that "though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval."⁸

He provides in-depth exegetical analysis of Genesis 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, I Corinthians 6:9, I Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:18-32. He tends to de-emphasize the

value or importance of some of these texts⁹ but places great emphasis on Romans 1:18-32 as a "crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality."¹⁰ Regarding the only text that refers to women having sex with women, Hays suggests that "Paul is offering a *diagnosis* of the disordered human condition: He adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their creator." But Hays cautions, "Homosexual acts are not, however, specially reprehensible sins; they are no worse than any of the other manifestations of human unrighteousness listed in the passage (verses 29-31), no worse in principle than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents."¹¹

Hays believes the New Testament witness is that "marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose."¹² Hays advocates "disciplined abstinence" and argues that "sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death."¹³ Yet he says, "If homosexual persons are not welcome in the church, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone."¹⁴

Inclusion. Timothy Luke Johnson looks quite differently at the biblical texts and human experience. He emphasizes that Scripture does not speak with a single voice. Various voices have to be negotiated in order to understand the "mind of Christ" (I Cor. 2:16) that is our "authentic form of Christian identity."¹⁵ He notes the paucity of passages but suggests we not ignore biblical texts condemning homosexuality or pretend they are something different. Instead he argues that Scripture allows us to "exercise the freedom of the children of God in our interpretation of such passages."¹⁶

Rather than label self-proclaimed practicing Christian homosexuals as tragic, redeemable persons, as Hays does, Johnson suggests these persons may reflect the ongoing revelation of God, calling the church to respond with Christ-like grace and justice. He notes that God does act in "surprising and unanticipated ways" to "upset human perceptions of God's scriptural precedents." He cites three examples: (1) a crucified and resurrected Messiah contrary to expectations and teachings in the Hebrew Bible, (2) the spread of the gospel to gentiles without their being circumcised or following the Torah, and (3) more recently, the church allowing divorce although Jesus forbade it.¹⁷ God's ongoing revelation at first may be perceived as "dissonant with the symbols of Scripture," but by God's grace, eventually homosexuality will be understood by the church as "consonant with those symbols and God's own fidelity."¹⁸

Speaking of ecclesiology, Johnson notes that homosexual Christians impact the internal life of the church, posing "a fundamental challenge not only to moral discernment and pastoral care . . . but to the self-understanding of the church as at once inclusive ('catholic') and separate ('holy')."¹⁹ Johnson asks, what if the church were to consider homosexual persons a social class akin to gentiles, accepting them as full members of the Body of Christ in all respects, similar to what happened in Acts 15?

Johnson contends that affirming gays and lesbians at all levels of the church and providing services recognizing "the possibility of homosexual committed and covenantal love"²⁰ is analogous to the challenge faced by early Christianity regarding the gentiles. Even if converts were touched by the Holy Spirit, should they not first become Jews, being circumcised and obeying ritual demands? Gentiles by tradition and Scripture were viewed as "unclean" and "by practice" polluted by idolatry. Welcoming them fully at the table of the Lord and at all levels of the church seemed impossible. Yet a breakthrough to revolutionary inclusiveness occurred, despite the conflicts and controversy it caused within the church (see Galatians). Just as the gentiles demonstrated that their lives could reflect "holiness," so we see in the witness of countless committed Christian gays and lesbians "holiness" and "faithfulness" in their life and covenantal love. How can they not be included in the Body of Christ at all levels?

Divorce and Remarriage. The debate over divorce and remarriage is an appropriate analogy to the current controversy regarding homosexuality. Trace the history of Methodist teaching on divorce via the Social Principles and it is abundantly clear that the church's mind and heart have changed. From the 1930s to the 1960s the great sexual issue of the church was not homosexuality but divorce.

Clearly divorce and remarriage are repeatedly condemned in the Bible (Matthew 5:32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). Can Scripture be more specific than Jesus' teaching that "whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12)? Most mainline Protestants, including United Methodists, have adjusted scriptural interpretations and moved away from literalism toward acceptance and inclusiveness. Previous condemnations about the practice of divorce and remarriage were discarded, and a more pastoral approach allowing exceptions to previous rules was adopted. The continued revelation of God prompted these changes. The church,

led by the Holy Spirit through the pain of its members, changed the lens by which it understood Scripture. Scripture did not change, but the Church changed its interpretative framework, its "authoritative interpretation" of the Bible on the question of divorce.²¹

Jack Rogers notes that although biblical literalism is back in vogue, the irony is that many "traditionalist leaders are divorced and remarried men and women, and some are women clergy, none of who[m] would be ordained now if the same literalist hermeneutic had prevailed in earlier conflicts over divorce and remarriage and the ordination of women."²²

By what criteria do we justify nullifying some of Jesus' specific sanctions but show complete inflexibility when it comes to homosexuality, especially in light of relatively scarce New Testament texts, none of which cite Jesus?

III. Unity Based on Faith and Fellowship in Jesus Christ

The basis for unity of the United Methodist Church is ultimately not our creeds or our polity but our "koinonia" confession of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is a unity that believes Jesus embraced human diversity and differences, and lived and died for all God's children. The global Christ we worship embraced especially those who were excluded at the religious tables of others: women, tax collectors, Samaritans, lepers, and "sinners."

The unity we seek in United Methodism is not uniformity but unity in diversity. Unity, like love, embraces and preserves human diversity, believing it is a divine gift of a loving creator God. It is a unity that affirms a risen Christ who breaks from the tombs of tradition that imprison the Holy Spirit and seek to curtail God's continuing revelation. It is a vision of unity that embraces total inclusiveness-children, youth, women, men, gay people, straight people, persons with disabilities, and those of all races and nationalities-and yearns for the reconciliation and well-being of all God's people.

United Methodists fundamentally understand themselves as a "koinonia" fellowship, identifying with the early church communities. We embrace the definitions of the global ecumenical community that "koinonia" is both God's gift and calling.²³ Our people are converted and transformed by the love of Christ in Jesus, are connected in "koinonia" not only in their local congregations but through a global ecumenical fellowship, and are compassionate and concerned not only for fellow members but for all of God's family and creation.²⁴

St. Paul made a bold theological move when he built a bridge between the Jews and the gentiles. He envisioned a "koinonia" that went beyond ethnicity and family to a new vision of community based on the gospel. Over the centuries, the church made other moves that were considered "bold" in their day and context, namely, the moves to include free and slave, men and women, other nationalities and cultures, and persons with disabilities. When will United Methodism make the bold move to include gays and lesbians?

Christian ethical reflection and action are intrinsic to the nature and life of the church. Avoidance of issues raised by the exclusion of homosexual persons from various dimensions of the life of the church is to deny the inseparability of ecclesiological and ethical reflection. A World Council of Churches document on "Costly Unity" notes that

Christian ethical engagement is an expression of our deepest ecclesiological convictions, and our ecclesiology must be informed by our experience of ethical engagement, by our living out of the gospel in the complex situations of the world. For what we do follows from who we understand ourselves to be . . .²⁵

The church of Jesus Christ suffers damage as long as it is unable to bring discussions concerning homosexuality into fruitful interaction with discussions on Christian unity. Unity entails addressing, not avoiding, broken relationships. United Methodists are not of

one mind and one spirit. If we are to model to the world what it means to be a spiritual community where persons can disagree in love, we must not fear to speak the truth in love to one another in dialogue. The truth is not in us when we legislate and administrate outright discrimination against homosexual persons, and yet simultaneously engage in a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign declaring we are a church of "open hearts, open minds, and open doors."

Quite clearly, as demonstrated during the "In Search of Unity" dialogues last quadrennium, United Methodists have different understandings of the authority of Scripture and divine revelation.²⁶ The purpose and value of these dialogues, among the Council of Bishops and throughout the denomination, is fundamentally bridge-building, ensuring that alienation does not triumph, encouraging inclusiveness, and emphasizing loving reconciliation. The divisions among us are deep, and the schismatic currents are dangerous, but with God's providential grace and in God's good time a bridge of inclusive reconciliation will be built. The unity we seek is "a costly unity" that . . . requires a *costly commitment* to one another as Christians and as churches; to admitting that it is, finally, . . . a costly *obedience* to our calling to be one and, as one body of Christ, to serve all humanity and creation.²⁷

Historically and theologically, bishops are called to be bridge-builders, to find ways to lead the church to the shores of new visions, creating a unity that is not uniformity but encompasses diversity. United Methodist bishops are called to provide dialogical leadership, not refraining from sharing their own convictions but ensuring a safe place for others to express their own deepest-held beliefs, fears, hopes, and dreams. Brad J. Kallenberg notes that

[i]n many conservative churches and seminaries, gay and lesbian voices simply cannot be heard, producing a cultural orthodoxy that requires an enforced silence. In more liberal church sectors and seminaries, gay and lesbian sexuality is affirmed and no challenging questions or concerns are tolerated by the prevailing political orthodoxy. Neither climate breeds good, helpful and ultimately healing dialogue. Neither homophobic fears nor politically correct ideologies will allow the open space for real conversation to occur.²⁸

Many persons within our denomination, and perhaps this council, wish that discussion about homosexuality would dissipate. We would rather not address the issue, due possibly to our discomfort about talking about human sexuality,²⁹ or because we dread the conflicts, controversy, and consequences engendered, or because we like to believe that the General Conference has spoken repeatedly and the matter is "settled." Controversies regarding human sexuality and homosexuality, in particular, are not new to United Methodism. John Wesley himself faced criticism in the 1730s when he championed the cause of a young man named Blair who had been imprisoned because he was found guilty of homosexual sodomy in England. Wesley was accused of "lack of discretion in taking up so eagerly the cause of young Blair." How scandalous for the young Methodist movement to countenance such a man, whether he was guilty or not. As one critic wrote in his diary, "Whatever good they pretend it was highly imprudent and has given the occasion of terrible reflections."³⁰ No doubt some people in the Council of

Bishops and the contemporary church think a dialogue and study on homosexuality is likewise "imprudent" and will be "the occasion of terrible reflections." Yet there is no choice but to be open and honest about our theological convictions, learning to live together in love despite our disagreements.

IV. The Inclusive Heart of United Methodism

Historically, United Methodism and its predecessor bodies have tried the ways of exclusion, suggesting some persons in the community were not worthy of membership, ministry, and leadership because of race, gender, nationality, or other status. Through painful struggles of segregation and disunity, we have come as a missional people called United Methodists to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ to have an inclusive heart.

The very nature and function of the United Methodist Church insists on inclusiveness, since discrimination and stigmatization of any persons are contrary to the gospel of Christ. Imbedded in "The Constitution" of United Methodism in Article IV are these words:

The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. Therefore all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and, when they take the appropriate vows, to be admitted into its membership in any local church in the connection. In the United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.

Does the constitution really mean "all persons" without condition?³¹ Missing from our stated understanding of inclusiveness is a clear acceptance of gays and lesbians, though we declare in the Social Principles (paragraph 161G) that

[h]omosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationship with God, with others, and with self.

The exclusion of homosexual persons from the life, leadership, and rites of the church threatens the very nature of the church itself.³² It not only causes irreparable harm to the children of God but also to the Body of Christ itself. Each time a person is rejected or ejected from the "koinonia" fellowship of United Methodism, a new wound is inflicted and the Body of Christ is broken once again.

V. United Methodist Ecclesiology: A "Church in the Making"

In the days of Aristotle, the common good was decided in the *ekklesia*, literally the calling out or calling together in assembly. Participants were free, male, property-owning

citizens of Greece. The early Christians adopted the term *ekklesia* for their own meetings. They broadened the vision of the common good by including within the church both women and men, slave and free, property owners and non-property owners who composed "a community of shared life anticipating the Reign of God."³³

United Methodist ecclesiology has never been fixed once and for all but includes a "church-in-the-making" quality. As Thomas Edward Frank at Candler School of Theology notes:

Many contemporary theologians view ecclesiology as a praxis, a continuous practice of action, reflection, and new action seeking faithful witness and service of God's Reign. They conceive of ecclesiology as a form of practical theology, which may be defined as critical and transformative reflection on the practices of Christian ecclesia.³⁴

A distinctive theological and practical contribution of United Methodism to the ecumenical church has been its insistence on inclusiveness. This quest to overcome exclusion has not come easily or automatically but has been a costly historical journey for the denomination. Our "church-in-the-making," United Methodism's predecessor bodies, struggled through decades of controversy, conflict, and disunity over issues such as the inclusion of laity, women clergy, and persons of color. Resistance was encountered at every point, unity challenged and shattered, and schism threatened and experienced. United Methodist history is replete with dire warnings at each courageous step the denomination took toward a more inclusive community and perspective.

Take, for example, the battle within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for curbs on episcopal powers, increased lay authority in decision making, and the creation of the first Judicial Council. Opponents tended to see existing church patterns of polity and nineteenth-century polity as being ethically normative and divinely ordained. They feared change would bring God's disapproval and denominational decline. Robert Watson Sledge notes that "in the lexicon of the day, any attempt to change the hallowed structures and attitudes was to lay unclean hands upon the sacred ark of God, upon the vessel of salvation." In 1918, Theo F. Brewer warned the General Conference: "Hands off, brethren! Don't touch the ark, or try to turn over the cart. Remember Uzziah [sic], O'Kelley, and many others whose bones lie bleaching along the way."³⁵ Fortunately, progressive Southern Methodists prevailed, and the church became far more inclusive. What was once unthinkable among many Southern bishops-strong lay representation plus the formation of a judicial system-is now viewed as normative.

The struggle to overcome segregation and racism within United Methodism has been even more painful and divisive. Bishop James S. Thomas has chronicled clearly the history of the Central Jurisdiction, pointing out how the very being (*esse*) of the church of Jesus Christ requires inclusiveness of all God's people at all levels of the life of the church. He quotes a young African-American pastor in 1936 as saying:

The plan violates the principle of brotherhood dominant in the life and teachings of Jesus and embodied in the organized fellowship of Christian believers in the Church.

He further includes the haunting words of James P. Brawley, who explained why African-Americans refused to vote for the 1939 Plan of Union:

"It was the hope of the Negro membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church that his [sic] status would be improved in the new United Church and that no structural organization would set him apart and give him less dignity and recognition than he already had . . . He therefore rejected the Plan of Union . . . *This was a stigma too humiliating to accept.*" Bishop Thomas noted that when the General Conference of 1939 enthusiastically rose and sang "We Are Marching to Zion," the African American "delegates remained seated and some of them wept."³⁶

The situation of African-Americans and their struggle for justice, equality, and opportunity within United Methodism cannot and should not be equated with the current conversation and controversy. Yet I hear in their voices and witness the experience that many of us felt at the 2000 General Conference. The exclusion of gays and lesbians was "a stigma too humiliating to accept" by Christian persons of goodwill. It is why many of us stood in protest, or sat and wept, when the forces of exclusion triumphed over the voices of inclusion or claimed the church had reached a "settled" position not worthy of reconsideration.

Biblically sanctioned prejudice has been used over the years to justify exclusion and sometimes even violence against women, Jews, and persons of color. Fortunately, the authority of Scripture has not been undermined even though the church has revised its positions over the decades. Narrow biblical proof texts have been rejected in favor of broader biblical principles that emphasize Jesus Christ as the Word of God rather than specific "words" embedded in the Bible as the Word of God.

VI. Discrimination and Stigmatization

Discrimination and stigmatization of persons are immoral actions and attitudes, according to the teachings of Jesus. Whenever and wherever it occurs, it causes personal and social harm. Clearly, the church's historic exclusion and stigmatization of gays and lesbians has contributed significantly to many personal and societal crises.

Gay bashing and harassment are widespread; attempts at suicide are not uncommon among young people due to discrimination and stigmatization. Bette Greene, in writing her novel, *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, interviewed more than 400 young men in jail for various gay-bashing crimes. Very few showed any remorse for their crimes because they felt they were justified by the church's teaching that the Bible condemned the practice of homosexuality. As Peter Gomes, Harvard University pastor, has noted:

The legitimization of violence against homosexuals and Jews and women and blacks, as we have seen, comes from the view that the Bible stigmatizes these people, thereby making them fair game. If the Bible expresses such a prejudice, then it certainly cannot be wrong to act on that prejudice.³⁷

Another primary example has been the church's failure to address the global HIV/AIDS emergency. Though the global crisis clearly now is primarily a heterosexual phenomenon, discriminatory and stigmatizing attitudes and actions toward gay persons by heterosexual Christians has shaped our general lack of response and compassion. African bishops and other church leaders declared at a World Council of Churches consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 2001 that the global pandemic of 40 million persons infected with HIV/AIDS has

[e]xposed fault lines that reach to the heart of our theology, our ethics, our liturgy and our practice of ministry. Today, churches are being obliged to acknowledge that we have—however unwittingly—contributed both actively and passively to the spread of the virus. Our difficulty in addressing issues of sex and sexuality has often made it painful for us to engage, in any honest and realistic way, with issues of sex education and HIV prevention.

Further, it was noted that

[o]ur tendency to exclude others, our interpretation of the scriptures and our theology of sin have all combined to promote the stigmatization, exclusion, and suffering of people with HIV or AIDS. This has undermined the effectiveness of care, education and prevention efforts and inflicted additional suffering on those already affected by HIV. Given the extreme urgency of the situation, and the conviction that the churches do have a distinctive role to play in the response to the pandemic, what is needed is a rethinking of our mission, and the transformation of our structures and ways of working."³⁸

VII. Boundaries or Limits of Inclusiveness

Affirming inclusiveness should not be equated with accepting relativism. Boundaries and limits exist, as certain behaviors or actions are contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the nature and purpose of the church. Pledging allegiance to a Nazi state, embracing apartheid, or practicing racism are examples of what Visser't Hooft described as "moral heresy" that threaten the being or essence (*esse*) of the church.

Likewise, *porneia* (sexual immorality) cannot be accepted by the church. Timothy Luke Johnson defines sexual virtue and vice from a covenantal rather than a biological perspective, suggesting that

[c]ertainly, the church must reject the *porneia* that glorifies sex for its own sake, indulges in promiscuity, destroys the bonds of commitment, and seduces the innocent. Insofar as a "gay lifestyle" has these connotations, the church must emphatically and always say "no" to it. But the church must say "no" with equal emphasis to the heterosexual "*Playboy/Cosmo* lifestyle" version. In both cases, also, the church can acknowledge that human sexual activity, while of real and great significance, is not wholly determinative of human existence or worth, and can perhaps begin to ask whether the church's concentration on sexual behavior corresponds proportionally to the modest emphasis placed by Scripture.³⁹

Inclusiveness must never be at the price of immorality: Sexual misbehavior and abuse are never condoned. Heterosexual and homosexual pedophiles can never be trusted for leadership in the church. Inclusiveness, however, cannot be denied by imposing double standards for heterosexuals and homosexuals, laity and clergy. The foot of the Cross is level, and all of us are sinners in need of God's redemptive forgiveness. Fortunately, the church is neither constituted nor dependent "for its ongoing existence upon the moral activities of its members. Its origins and ongoing life rest in the lavish grace and patience of God."⁴⁰

VIII. In Conclusion: *Not Divided by Doctrine*

Fundamental questions of doctrinal faith—such as the Trinity, Christology, and justification by faith, salvation, and sanctification—do not divide United Methodists in the debate over homosexuality. Gay Christians include a wide range of theological perspectives from orthodox and evangelical to the more liberal and liberationist. Homosexual United Methodists can affirm with as much integrity as heterosexual United Methodists the theological teachings in the *Discipline* like "The Articles of Religion," "The Confession of Faith," "The General Rules of The Methodist Church," and "Our Theological Task" that draws upon tradition, reason, experience, and the primacy of Scripture. Together, gay and straight, we can affirm contemporary creeds like the "World Methodist Social Affirmation" and "A Statement of Faith of the Korean Methodist Church,"⁴¹ as well as the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed. Together, not divided, we epitomize our belief in "the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."⁴² In the words of Mark Ellingsen, "since faith issues are not ultimately at stake in the dispute, the ordination of practicing homosexuals and related disputes are not issues worthy of dividing the church."⁴³

Sharp Differences on Causation

However, United Methodists differ sharply on their judgment as to whether being gay or lesbian is a matter of choice or a mode of creation. The specific scientific causes of homosexual orientation remain unclear, and no single theory of homosexual orientation or behavior can be scientifically substantiated.⁴⁴

Those who speak of homosexuality as "unnatural" or "contrary to God's intended plan" are convinced that God did not create persons with the expectation that they would lovingly fulfill or "practice" a same-sex orientation. As a sinful result of "the Fall," gays and lesbians need to repent and receive compassion (if not sympathy) from judgmental, heterosexual Christians. The "practice" of homosexuality is labeled a sin, and United Methodists are encouraged to "hate the sin and love the sinner." A basic belief is that persons can choose a heterosexual lifestyle—or at least refrain in lifetime celibacy from expressing their homosexual inclinations or identity.⁴⁵ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, however, asks:

What sort of God are we commending, when we say God has made you as you are, and then clobbers you because you behave as God makes you? I've always said that that

doesn't seem to make sense to me, if you say that sexuality involves all that you are. Being human means, in many instances, being able to express your sexuality in acts of love.

Those who accept a more accepting, inclusive Christian stance toward gay and lesbian persons are more inclined to believe that God in creation intended sexual orientation diversity. They are more likely to embrace scientific studies that seem to suggest persons are born predisposed to a particular sexual life. Regardless, whether homosexuality is due to genetics and/or due to socialization remains basically immaterial. Rather, sexuality-be it homosexual or heterosexual-is perceived as more of a gift of God than a matter of personal choice.⁴⁶

Homosexuality: A Gift of God's Grace

In 1980, Melvin E. Wheatley Jr. became the first United Methodist bishop to refuse to sign the Episcopal Address to a General Conference because of its exclusionary stance against homosexual persons. Shortly thereafter, he summarized his perspective, noting that

“Homosexuality, quite like heterosexuality, is neither a virtue nor an accomplishment. It is a mysterious gift of God's grace communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors totally outside my homosexual friend's control. His or her homosexuality is a gift-neither a virtue nor a sin. What [people do] with their homosexuality, however, is their personal, moral, and spiritual responsibility. Their behavior as homosexual[s] may therefore be very sinful-brutal, exploitative, selfish, promiscuous, superficial. Their behavior, on the other hand, may be beautiful-tender, considerate, loyal, other-centered, profound.”⁴⁷

His statement continues to stand the test of time and reflects the stance of United Methodists who today continue to dissent from official policy and polity.

We Love Our Church Too Much

Those of us who are "conscientious objectors" to our church's teachings on homosexuality will never be silent. We love our church too much to allow it to remain an exclusive, discriminatory body when it has the potential of truly being the inclusive Body of Christ in the world. We truly believe, with H. Richard Niebuhr, that the purpose of the church is to "increase the love of God and neighbor," and we will never abandon our sisters and brothers who are gay and lesbian. We have friends and family with whom we want to share Christ, and we do not want the United Methodist Church to be a stumbling stone in the path of their salvation and sanctification. We are evangelical in our belief that Jesus Christ lived and died for all, not just privileged heterosexuals, and in faithful obedience to God we are called to teach and preach this message.

The issues raised by our dialogue on homosexuality pose not so much a problem for the United Methodist Church as an opportunity for our denomination to rediscover its

heritage and its hopes, its scriptural bearings and theological moorings, its nature and mission as the inclusive Body of Christ in the world. "For such a time as this," United Methodism has been called to provide a winsome evangelical witness to the world and to model inclusive Christian relationships and reconciliation for a world ever eager to marginalize and stigmatize those who do not conform exactly to what the majority affirm as normative.

1 Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 38.

2 Hodgson, 39.

3 Cited from John Wesley's 1749 "Letter to a Roman Catholic," in Brian E. Beck, "Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley's Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal," in Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 140.

4 Hodgson, on page 83, claims that "on the basis of the inclusion of women, the inclusion of marginalized groups who were not present or visible in the time of Jesus, such as racial minorities or homosexuals, must also be affirmed."

5 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 86, 146-147.

6 Richard B. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," 206-214, and Luke Timothy Johnson, "Debate and Discernment, Scripture and the Spirit," 215-220. Printed together in Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., Chapter 9, *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition, Christian Ethics After MacIntyre* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

7 Hays, 211.

8 Ibid.

9 Hays writes on page 208 that Genesis 19:1-29, about Sodom and Gomorrah, is irrelevant to the topic. Nothing is said about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. This is gang rape. The sin of Sodom is expressed in Ezekiel 16:49: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy." He notes that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 express the Holiness Code, which prohibits male homosexual intercourse, punishable by death. He asks if this is a ritual purity law or a moral law. Did the early church retain these norms? In regard to I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10, Hays on page 209 contends that the early church adopted Old Testament teaching on sexual morality and homosexual acts in particular: "Thus, Paul's use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the Holiness Code's condemnation of homosexual acts."

10 Hays, 210.

11 Ibid.

12 Hays, 214.

13 Hays, 211-212.

14 Hays, 214.

15 Johnson, 216.

16 Johnson, 217.

17 Ibid.

18 Johnson, 215.

19 Ibid.

20 Johnson, 218.

21 Fred W. Beuttler, "Making Theology Matter: Power, Polity and the Theological Debate Over Homosexual Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," *Review of Religious Research*, 1999, Vol. 41, 244. See also James K. Wellman Jr., "Introduction: The Debate Over Homosexual Ordination: Subcultural Identity Theory in American Religious Organizations," *Review of Religious Research*, 1999, Vol. 41, and Jack Rogers, "Biblical Interpretation Regarding Homosexuality in the Recent History of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 41, 1999.

22 Rogers, 235.

23 See "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling," World Council of Churches, Canberra Statement of 1991. Note Brian E. Beck's "Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley's Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal," 129 ff, in Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998).

24 See James J. Stamoolis, "An Evangelical Position on Ecclesiology and Mission," *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XC, No. 358, 33-315. Stamoolis is the executive director of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship.

25 World Council of Churches, "Costly Unity," ix.

26 "In Search of Unity: A Conversation with Recommendations for the Unity of the United Methodist Church," Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, New York City, March 9, 1998.

27 "Costly Unity," ix.

28 Brad J. Kallenberg, in the editor's introduction to Chapter 9, "Character and Conversation in the Homosexuality Debate," in *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, 204.

29 "To reflect on one's sexuality is to plumb the mystery of one's very existence. People encounter longings and desires that can seem overwhelming at one moment, yet trivial, even humorous, at another. When they are honest with themselves, they have to admit that a person understands too little about his or her own sexuality, let alone the way in which others experience theirs." Cited from John P. Burgess, "Framing the Homosexuality Debate Theologically: Lessons from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," *Review of Religious Research*, 1999, Vol. 41, 272.

30 Thomas Wilson's diary, cited in V. H. H. Green, *John Wesley* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 32.

31 The Judicial Council in Decision 702 noted that "status" in Article IV of "The Constitution" was never defined by the General Conference, and its meaning remains unclear.

32 The United Methodist Judicial Council on October 29, 1999, affirmed the ruling of Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, "which states that a resolution is in order that calls for the conference to be in ministry for, and with, all persons regardless of race, age, gender, marital status, ability, sexual orientation, social or economic condition, ethnicity, or any other real or perceived separating condition."

33 Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 40.

34 Frank, 41. "Leonardo Boff's term 'ecclesio-genesis' captured this 'church-in-the-making' power of basic Christian communities in Latin America." See Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesio-genesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986). See also Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 80, 108; Fenton John Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1914), 4-7, 13-14; and Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 24-28. Additionally, see James W. Fowler, "Practical Theology and the Shaping of Christian Lives," in Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 148-66. Contemporary voices in ecclesiology include Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

35 Robert Watson Sledge, *Hands on the Ark: The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal, South, 1914-1939* (Lake Junaluska, NC: United Methodist Commission on Archives and History, 1975), 7.

36 See James S. Thomas, *Methodism's Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 43. Italics added.

37 Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (William Morrow & Co., 1996), 146.

38 "Plan of Action: The Ecumenical Response to HIV/AIDS in Africa," Global Consultation on the Ecumenical Response to the Challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, November 25-28, 2001, 2.

39 Johnson, 218.

40 "Costly Unity," 5.

41 See *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), numbers 884-886.

42 See "The Nicene Creed" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, number 880.

43 Mark Ellingsen, "Homosexuality and the Churches: A Quest for the Nicene Vision," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 30:3-4, Summer/Fall, 1993, 369.

44 See "Things the Church Can and Cannot Responsibly Teach," United Methodist Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The United Methodist Newscope*, Vol. 20, No. 49, December 11, 1992.

45 See Bishop Richard C. Looney, "Should Gays and Lesbians Be Ordained?" in Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer, eds., *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 110-120. For similar perspectives in the same volume, also see Richard and Catherine Clark

Kroeger, "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?" and Riley B. Case, "How Should the Church Minister to Homosexual Persons and Their Families?"

46 See in Geis and Messer, essays by Victor Paul Furnish, "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?" and Tex Sample, "Should Gays and Lesbians Be Ordained?"

47 Excerpt from statement made by United Methodist Bishop Melvin E. Wheatley, October 12, 1981, Denver, Colorado.

Donald E. Messer is Henry White Warren Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology, and president emeritus at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. Messer is co-editor with Sally B. Geis of Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality. He can be reached at dmesser@iliff.edu