

Mountains are there to be Climbed: The Next United Methodism¹

William J. Abraham
Southern Methodist University

A Stunning Remark

In 2016 I travelled to Portland to attend the second week of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. When I got there on the Sunday I ran into old friend from the other side of the aisle, theologically speaking. We had worked together on various projects, know each other relatively well, and genuinely enjoy each other's company. I had not known what had happened during the week but it quickly became clear that my friend was deeply distressed at the degree of success that conservatives had achieved in the controversial decisions that had been taken. I quickly learned that the conservatives were winning every significant vote that would further their agenda in the church as a whole. The anticipation was that their train was barreling down the tracks and headed for the station unless someone pulled the emergency brake. At the outset of the conversation my friend said something that left me stunned: "Your folk are winning; now you will have to take charge of the church." I immediately declined the new job description; I have no illusions about the properly modest role of academics in the life of the church as a whole; yet there is here a grain of painful truth that traditionalists need to heed as we face the future.

As we all now know, the emergency brake was indeed pulled when a Commission on the Way Forward was appointed to tackle the crisis that had at long last come to a head. No one really knew how things would fall out in February, 2019, when the General Conference met in St. Louis. However, there was a real possibility that the traditionalists would indeed win and that their train would make it all the way into the station. Even so, I have become aware that some of the traditionalists are profoundly ambiguous about the prospect of taking responsibility for the future of The United Methodist Church. Unlike secular politicians who revel in their victories – even their marginal victories – there is a sobriety that deserves attention at this stage in the debate. There is also the perennial temptation of conservatives, after winning the vote, of failing to follow through on their success. We need to think through, however provisionally, the challenges that lie ahead now that a modest version of the Traditionalist Plan has been adopted. We must avoid failure in the aftermath of success.

Measuring Success

By success I refer initially to the fact that most of the current elements in the Traditional Plan have been passed. Even if the Plan in toto is thrown out by the Judicial Council, the situation is by no means negative. Happily this is a very unlikely scenario.² The United Methodist Church has stood firm on the biblical and classical teaching of the church on marriage and its own internal standards for ordination. Others will add the potential strengthening of canon law and the possibility of a generous exit for those who cannot accept the pertinent teaching and practice of The United Methodist Church. A further level of success would be the successful implementation of the new legislation in the life of the church.

However, all of this would constitute a mere nominal if not pyrrhic victory. We surely need to think of success in much more constructive terms, that is, in terms of a new vision of

¹ The paper that follows, as with all my papers related to United Methodism, represent entirely my own reflections; I speak for no group or constituency within The United Methodist Church.

² It would take a paper all to itself to chart exactly the actual legislative changes and options that are now in place.

United Methodism that in broad terms would be orthodox in doctrine, robust in its ethics and practice, global in its reach across space, intellectually and theologically vibrant, Spirit-energized from top to bottom, and socially engaged. We need a new instantiation of United Methodism rather than a mere defense of the status quo. Maintaining the church's faithful moral witness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of success. Success means climbing the mountain that has now emerged on the horizon of our history.

Our lack of assurance on this critical point means that conservatives should continue to pursue every possible avenue open to us; and we should not hesitate to engage in extensive conversation with all sides in the current debate. As the French proverb notes: "*Reculer pour sauter mieux.*" One steps back in order to jump better. Prudence demands that we are diligent in these messy and even exhausting operations. A hearty sense of potential surprise and reliance on divine providence are essential as we move forward. There has been a real measure of success and we should be grateful to all who have made this possible.

An Initial Sign of Success

One sign of that success is the immediate avalanche of criticism launched against traditionalists. We are portrayed as wolves in wolves clothing. Our current political culture of incivility, ignorant criticism, and moralistic shaming has erupted, not least on social media. We also know that a sense of sorrow, disappointment and anger has already gripped whole sections of the church. Centrists and progressives have been hurt, deeply hurt; the pain in some cases has been expressed in terms of scapegoating, resentment, and vilification.³ Because of these developments, it is initially crucial to step back, absorb the wave of attacks, and keep our nerve. Speaking pastorally, the stance should be one of non-anxious presence. The temptation to rush in and seek to make peace where there cannot be peace must be resisted. By this stage, to use a phrase John Wesley used at the failure of his marriage, the water has been spilt and it cannot be gathered up again. To be sure, we can keep the lines of communication open and remain friends where that is possible; but we should have no illusions about the trauma that has been experienced. As we all know in cases of acute grief, trauma leads to the overwhelming of our cognitive faculties and it will take time to heal and come to terms with reality. In time trauma can bring truth to light, but sorting this out is a delicate business.

It is extremely important to grasp the deeper logic that is in play here. Things become so complicated that there is no neutral way of sorting out what is at stake; I make no claim to being neutral in my ruminations. As is already visible, I write as a conservative and for the most part for conservatives.

Our critics have effectively framed the debate in terms of inclusion and exclusion.⁴ This is a godsend because it allows them to run a narrative about slavery and women in ministry that puts us on the defensive. It allows them to exploit the natural opposition to any idea of exclusion, for the default position will always initially be in favor of inclusion. It also allows a virtuous narrative about the moral arc of history which requires that we be identified as obsolete and out of step with the times. Add to these considerations that the default position in explaining the

³ I shall in time seek to unravel how we might articulate the hurt involved; but early on it needs recording that some of the hurt is simply a matter of not succeeding in securing the necessary votes for one's desired outcome. When the stakes are high, losing is no laughing matter; it can really hurt.

⁴ I leave aside at this point the extent to which the language of inclusion has become a covert form of exclusion, in that there are implicit restrictions on who is or is not included. The same observation applies to the language of diversity. Frankly, these are now so laden with prejudgments that they operate as tiresome slogans that have outlived their usefulness.

Traditional Plan will be to latch on to the ‘punitive’ provisions and the picture of the traditionalist makes everyone cringe. Add a further element, namely, the idea that the very discourse of exclusion is a source of pain, hurt, and even trauma, and we are dragged deeper into a black hole from which there appears to be no escape.

Taking Control of the Narrative

This whole way of thinking needs initially to be seen for what it is, namely, a toxic combination of persuasive definition, virtue-signaling story-telling, and fallacious reasoning. The ultimate issue for the conservative is none of these moves, much less a combination of them. The crucial issue at the end of the day is one of faithfulness to our Lord and to the tested tradition of the church. The failure to recognize this is an egregious error. It is the old game of *Sein and Schein*, much practiced by the mode of thought beloved of the Frankfurt School of philosophy, so that what seems to be true is not true. Of course, what counts as faithfulness is contested. And, of course, it would be wonderful if we could find a neutral ground on which this contested issue could be publicly resolved. However, the disagreement goes all the way to the bottom so that appeals to the Gospel, notions of justice and equality, scripture, tradition, experience, reason, inclusion, and the like, have been exhausted. To speak technically, ‘faithfulness’ is an essentially contested concept. However, to ignore that faithfulness is the real issue for conservatives is to poison the wells at the outset. Moreover, to frame the Traditional Plan as being essentially punitive is to miss the point at issue. The real issue is accountability to church teaching and practice. Failure to frame this issue initially in this way constitutes an elementary blunder in the interpretation of what is at stake. To put it simply, conservatives are not for sale precisely because they believe for better or worse that they cannot among other things walk away from our Lord’s teaching on marriage. So generally, we need to repudiate aggressively the persistent practice of describing our position in ways that we find utterly fallacious and unconvincing.

A couple of further points stand in the neighborhood. The whole effort to present our position as one of causing harm is also a toxic way to proceed. Thus we are constantly scolded and reprimanded because our discourse and speech is intrinsically harmful; merely to take the stance that we do and to speak as we do is the cause of pain and trauma. It is small wonder that in these circumstances we simply stay quiet and say nothing. Here we face an unavoidable dilemma. We speak, and we are accused of causing harm; we stay silent, and we are accused of collusion with oppression. At one level, the best policy is simply to stay silent, for this way we avoid causing pain; we simply take a hit on being accused of collusion. What is happening here is that we are forced to fight a blindfold battle because the terms of the dispute are never clarified.⁵

Sorting Through the Thickets of Identity

Perhaps we can make progress on this front by means of several distinctions. In this respect I intend to operate at a more neutral level.

⁵ I leave aside the critical epistemological issues that are in play. The relevant epistemic claim is that the appropriate norm for the evaluation of our discourse is that of causing harm to our interlocutors. Frankly, this is so thin and underdeveloped that one scarcely knows where to begin in order to render it intelligible and then to assess its epistemic worth, if any. Yet this mantra is repeated ad nauseam in the discussion. To speak of harm is to make a very serious charge. However, it goes beyond the claim to cause pain or to cause offense because it implies deeper metaphysical claims about human flourishing that are by no means theologically or philosophically neutral. The other mantra, of course, is that we are called to love all; but then loving is understood to include endorsing the moral and theological agenda that is in play in the shaming of those who disagree.

What is at issue here is the complex nature of identity. At one level, it is perfectly obvious that gender identity cuts deeply into the experience and conception of ourselves as persons.⁶ Thus, the identity of a cis-gender male or female, that is, one whose biological sex and gender identity coincide, runs so deep that to call that into question is a profoundly disturbing experience. In this respect, calling into question the gender identity of those in the LGBTQIA communities is indeed a disturbing if not traumatic experience. I think conservatives can get this point conceptually and with effort can go a long way to feeling in a deep way what is at stake. Just think and feel your way into being challenged on your naturally formed conception of your identity as male or female.

At a second level, what is at stake is one's moral stance on gender expression, that is, the extent to which one expresses one's gender identity in terms of behavior. This is the case most especially for those gays and lesbians for whom gender expression as it relates to the concept and practice of marriage is a moral and legal mandate. Thus, the rejection of gay marriage is seen as a radical rejection of one's moral and theological identity. Witness the aggressive repudiation of any distinction at this stage between one's person and one's behavior. Failure to accept the behavior, in this case, gay marriage, is interpreted and experienced as a rejection of one's gender expression and one's moral identity and thus as a deep act of hostility to the deep identity of the persons involved. Unless one fully accepts the gender expression represented by gay marriage (and ordination), then one is in effect rejecting the personhood of gays and lesbians. One is automatically pronounced guilty of causing harm. Again, I think that conservatives can both understand and sympathize with their critics and opponents; they also hope that their alternative position can be understood conceptually and emotionally. There is little evidence that their hopes are likely to be fulfilled.

There is a simple way to state what is at stake in this arena. Ask this question: what is required of a conservative to avoid causing harm? The answer, of course, is that the conservative has to endorse the moral and theological position of those committed to full inclusion. Progressives want full endorsement; centrists want limited endorsement or tolerance within the church as a whole. However, this is precisely to ask conservatives to give up their moral and theological convictions. Until we see this we do not grasp what is at stake.

At a third level, what is at issue is one's ecclesial identity, that is, one's identity as a United Methodist. In this instance, identity is a matter of one's identification with the church to which one belongs. This kind of identity also runs very deep, but generally it is not as deep as one's gender identity and one's moral stance on gender expression; thus one could cease to be a United Methodist and still retain one's gender identity, one's moral stance, and one's Christian identity. To be sure, changing one's ecclesial identity is a very serious matter; how serious depends on a host of factors from family genealogy to the level of participation in the life of one's church. What often happens, however, is that the various identities (gender, moral, and ecclesial) are so intertwined or correlated that change in ecclesial identity is treated on a par with gender and moral identity.⁷ Unless one's gender and moral identity is endorsed by the church to which one belongs, then failure on this front is seen as a radical rejection of one's gender and moral identity. So, if conservatives are not prepared to accept full inclusion at the level of gender expression, it is virtually impossible to interpret their refusal as anything other than an act of

⁶ I accept at this point the crucial distinctions between biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression.

⁷ There is an analogue here to what has happened in North American jurisprudence: the state has chosen to endorse rather than simply permit the self-constituting, self-chosen, identity of its citizens with respect to the law governing the concept of marriage.

hostility and even bigotry. However, conservatives are much more prepared to abandon their ecclesial identity if their views are rejected; they make a clear distinction between issues of gender identity, moral identity, and ecclesial identity and have thus been much more prepared to walk away from their ecclesial identity as United Methodists than their opponents.⁸

There is a fourth issue in play, namely, the content of what constitutes unity within The United Methodist Church. This time around, we can speak of rival forms of ecclesial identity as it applies to The United Methodist Church. The relevant distinction at this stage is between those who are compatibilists and those who are incompatibilists. The issue is simple. Compatibilists, who generally identify as moderates or centrists, hold that United Methodism can hold together those who differ radically on the moral status of gender expression. The differences on gay marriage and ordination can be accommodated within the one church. The United Methodist Church can with good will on all sides accommodate both positions in the same way as it accommodates pacifists and non-pacifists. Incompatibilists, in this case both conservatives and progressives, hold that this is not the case. The differences, they believe, run too deep in terms of teaching and practice for both sides to be able to live together. So what is at stake here is rival conceptions of the ecclesial identity of The United Methodist Church.

I realize that I have gone deep into the weeds. Even so, there are other dimensions that I can only touch on by way of telegrams.⁹ So, philosophically, we are faced with technical problems that cannot be addressed here; thus folk are confusing the illocutionary meaning of our discourse with its perlocutionary effects. Imagine the yawns that this will evoke.¹⁰ Psychologically, we are dealing in some instances with an adult form of adolescence. Of course, there is pain when we run into folk who disagree with us at the various levels of identity that I have just charted; yet in the current debate, all this is forgotten. The only way conservatives can avoid causing pain is to agree with the moral and ecclesial agenda of our critics. However, to insist on this is intellectual madness; it is a case of cooking the books by means of moral and emotional blackmail. Frankly, we have had enough of this verbal bullying; it is time to confront this form of intellectual malpractice and refuse its assumptions.

The Change in Canonical Identity

For the moment, let me now change the subject and make a very different assumption. Put differently, let me continue to sing to the conservative section of the choir. Let's suppose that the results of the General Conference mean that The United Methodist Church is now canonically identified as a global orthodox Christian denomination rather than one more version of Liberal or Progressive Protestantism in North America. As one friend (who is not a traditionalist) expressed the matter abruptly and brutally, The United Methodist Church is now owned by the conservatives and evangelicals. Interestingly, after the initial shock, this is exactly what much of the secular reporting has reluctantly come to acknowledge. If we make this assumption, then there can be no illusions about the responsibility that has now descended on the current network of conservative leaders who will need to stand firm and seize the future with confidence. I refer to those who will have to lead us into a wholly different future than that envisaged by the current network of bishops, superintendents, agency executives, some big-

⁸ There are clear analogies between ecclesial identity and national identity. In England friendships were destroyed and families split apart over the Brexit vote, something I discovered in talking to friends in Oxford.

⁹ I have not touched on issues of cultural, ethnic, and national identity or issues of cultural intelligence.

¹⁰ For my own take on the relevant distinction see my *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 164-165.

steeple pastors, and the like. By the future, let me repeat again, I mean here the development of an orthodox, global, intellectually vibrant, Spirit-energized, socially engaged version of Methodism. Owning the responsibility laid upon these new leaders will not be easy. This is especially the case given the prospects of division up ahead but let me not get ahead of myself; let me keep singing.

The Failure of Episcopal Leadership

Frankly, the current network of leaders, not least the majority in The Council of Bishops, have failed. The majority of bishops are not fools; they are, in many respects, highly intelligent, theologically trained, and richly experienced church leaders who have spent years in the trenches. Yet despite all this, they have failed. Caught between a vision where they are called to executive functions rather than to advocacy, they have failed on both fronts. Their posture as advocates has undermined their skill as presiding officers of the church as a whole. This became patently obvious in their efforts to impose their judgment on the church (and not without deception, given their attempt to mis-describe what happened in their submission to the Judicial Council) and in their all-too-visible incompetence in sending the report of the Commission on the Way Forward to the General Conference. What I find most striking is their lack of social and cultural intelligence, that is, the iterated assumption of their arguments that the One Church Plan would somehow secure the unity of the church. It is absolutely astonishing that they failed to anticipate defeat and to prepare the potential losers in such a way that they would be spared some of the trauma that emerged afterwards. Their role as advocates simply blinded them to their role as presiders and as pastoral leaders. They then compounded the error by scapegoating those who could not but stand by their moral and theological conscience and who had made this abundantly clear across the years.

This Plan (which says: let's agree to disagree on the contentious moral issue and make appropriate institutional changes) was a recipe for division from the beginning. It never really took seriously the more conservative, more orthodox, more traditionalist side of the church. Insofar as there was a dialogue it was a dialogue of the deaf where one side was never truly heard. To be sure, its advocates believed that they were accommodating both sides of the aisle. However, there were no visible signs that its architects ever really took seriously the moral and theological conscience of its detractors. On the contrary, the public attitude generally was one of condescension, trivialization, moral superiority, and even outright hostility. It was enough in the roll-out for General Conference to cite the difficulties in the Traditional Plan that were voiced by the Judicial Council and move back to the repetition of the virtues of the One Church Plan. There was also a false assurance within the episcopate that somehow the church would respect the advice of the episcopal office, even though it was clear that trust had already broken down given the terms of reference they managed to secure in the original mandate given to them in Portland in 2016. I know of one distinguished theologian (who differs from me on the material issues at stake) who thinks that the One Church Plan was in fact an effort to rid the church of conservatives once and for all by creating conditions in which as a matter of conscience they could not remain within The United Methodist Church. I find it difficult to believe that some in the leadership of the church were entirely innocent on this score. Even so, I understand the positive motivation behind the actions of our bishops over the last generation. No bishop wants to show up in the history books as a bishop who oversaw the division of The United Methodist

Church. Moreover, we are not privy to their deliberations, so it is best to give the benefit of the doubt and move on.¹¹

No Quick Fix

This failure in episcopal leadership makes visible a further obstacle to any quick resolution of the challenges. Transitioning into the future will be beset with all sorts of unforeseen challenges. History cannot be rushed; the laws of social and institutional gravity cannot be broken. It will take time for current leaders, whether informal or formal, to get their bearings. Which is all to the good, because the church as a whole is badly damaged given the internal divisions and turmoil that have been in place from the beginning of its creation in 1968. Putting the issue succinctly, we now inherit a church which has been severely wounded spiritually, morally, and theologically. Securing the health of the church will be the work of a whole generation and more.

To be sure, there is much to celebrate on the conservative side in terms of the solid work of the church across the years. Even though few if any bishops have recognized this, the continued harvesting of the network of renewal groups not only led to the prospects of success in The General Conference, it has provided pivotal resources that are vital to the healing of the church's wounds and the creation of a new day. The fresh emphasis on scripture, the retrieval of the doctrinal treasures of the patristic era, the wonderful new work on John and Charles Wesley and on the history of Methodism, the intentional tapping into the energies of the Holy Spirit, the reversal of the appalling decisions made earlier on abortion, the experiments in making disciples, the marked emphasis on reaching effectively to help the poor and the needy, all these and more are already installed in the hard-drive of the church. Hence there is much cause for celebration. Yet the painful truth is that we inhabit a severely wounded church that is overburdened with bureaucratic agencies, divided along various axes (and not just the push-button ones that are familiar), short on trust, and in some quarters deeply alienated from its connectional sensibility.

The Temptation to Withdraw

It should be no surprise in these circumstances that some conservative leaders (often found in large churches) are wary of success. This is entirely understandable given their herculean efforts in growing their local churches and in establishing very effective ministries of discipleship and outreach. They find the current situation intolerable, operating, as they see it, as a drain on financial resources and as a brake on work in evangelism. We can also add the predicament of those who are lodged in progressive conferences who feel deeply alienated from their leaders in United Methodism. It is small wonder that they would prefer to pull out and go independent or join a more informal connection of former United Methodist congregations. One can understand why they want to be done with United Methodism and start all over again free from the bondage of the recent past. Where there is a will there is a way. So, it would be strange if some clergy and their congregations were not to choose this option.

However, let's pause and take stock of the situation.

First, we all need to face the fact that there is no way of avoiding the cross of pain and suffering that is up ahead. Cross-bearing is unavoidable for all Christians; it is doubly assured for those who would lead the church into a better future. In the grace of God, we can look to a day when we find rest for our weary souls; however, that day lies beyond the grave; the future as

¹¹ One of the perennial problems we face on this front is the lack of transparency as regards the deliberations of the Council of Bishops.

leaders will be one of great pain and suffering. Two additional comments are in order at this point. To begin, adversity has always been the lot of those who engage in ministry. As one of my esteemed teachers once put it: There are no problem-free situations. Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians amply illustrate how exasperating Christian ministry often is; it is foolish to think that everything will go as well as we see in Paul's correspondence with the Philippians.

Furthermore, the turmoil we currently face is now a turmoil that shows up right across the board within Christian denominations. There are rumblings within the Orthodox tradition; and the euphoria that greeted the papacy of Pope Francis has evaporated.¹² There is no place to run and hide. To take a very different but relevant example, consider the case of Watchman Nee, the remarkable Chinese Christian leader who left Methodism because he was fed up with the problems of denominationalism; in the short-term he birthed a fascinating network of local churches.¹³ Now, however, the third-generation leaders are showing up in graduate schools because they face exactly the same kind of problems that all Christian groups have to face across the generations.

Second, consider what the relevant alternative entails. At best, a local independent church will isolate its leaders and members from the problems of the wider church; but its outreach will be circumscribed unless it teams up with other local churches. At best, a new North American Wesleyan denomination would become one more interesting experiment that is likely to follow in the footsteps of other denominations that have been birthed over the centuries. Within two generations it could well go the way of these other experiments: insular, embarrassed by its minority status, all too ready to take on board the most recent moral and theological fads developed in the bigger battalions of Christendom, subject to the standard processes of fatigue, and the like. The extraordinary opportunity to follow through on the comprehensive renewal of a global Methodist denomination will have been passed over in favor of a local option that abandons connection as a hallmark of Methodist identity and practice. This is not the development of a new future for Methodism; it is the inadvertent destruction of Methodist witness and practice as it was adopted and has evolved in the providence of God as a global expression of the Christian faith.

Third, walking away from success is an extraordinary act in which the magnificent assets of The United Methodist Church will be handed on a plate to those who will in time be defeated by a post-Christian culture that will seek to undermine it from within. We do not at this point have any kind of taxonomy or metrics of The United Methodist Church. I have been told on good authority that there are millions of dollars languishing in banks that were collected for work in China. Think of the missionary work this could make possible. I have no idea how to confirm this testimony. However, if we were to do a serious audit of our resources, they would be staggering in their range and depth. Think, for example, of the medical and educational institutions and endowments. It may sound radical and grandly pious to say that we are prepared to surrender these assets in order to remain faithful and true to the faith of the church; in truth we run the risk of serious irresponsibility in stewarding the assets of the church.

Fourth, and closely related to this point, there is the need to stand by and with our brothers and sisters across the globe in United Methodism. I think of the situation in Russia where, after a very wobbly start, not least in theological education, the church is poised to act as

¹² See the fine overview in Ross Douthat, *To Change the Church, Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

¹³ For a useful overview of Watchman Nee see *Witness Lee, Watchman Nee, A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, Ca.: Living Stream Ministry, 1991).

a critical leaven at the very heart of Eastern Orthodoxy. The church is not likely to grow exponentially in Russia, as is happening elsewhere, but it would be an act of betrayal to abandon this tender plant which faces such daunting challenges and desperately needs help to flourish.¹⁴ It would not be difficult to give other examples, like Africa University; readers can readily fill out the catalogue of particulars. It will be a spiritual tragedy of the highest order if we abandon our brothers and sisters across the globe; put differently, it will be morally disastrous if we selfishly walk away on the grounds that we are alienated and exhausted due to our painful experiences over the last generation.

Fifth, and finally, there is a critical issue that underlies both the sense of danger and the positive prospect of an extraordinary future for United Methodism. I have long come to believe that United Methodism represents an expression of biblical and classical Christianity that has its own unique charisms that need to be preserved with flair and carried to the ends of the earth. It is no accident that the history texts books do not quite know what to do with Methodism and the Wesleyan tradition more generally. We do not fit the standard paradigms represented by Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Magisterial Protestantism. Least of all should United Methodism be seen as a branch of Mainline, Liberal Protestantism. We represent a remarkable embodiment of the Christian faith that has indeed its own vices and failures but it also has a crucial role to play in the future of Christianity on the global horizon. That role means that we need a global, orthodox, Spirit-led, Wesleyan church, committed to making robust disciples of Jesus Christ across the face of the earth.¹⁵ It is this kind of future that we need to embrace with enthusiasm and flair now that the Traditional Plan has succeeded at General Conference in 2019. There will be a host of messy and complex decisions to be made; but we can leave all that to be worked out on the hoof; moreover, I am confident there are bishops and other leaders waiting in the wings to lead the way.

Keeping our Nerve

What matters at this point is that we be crystal clear about the opportunity that lies ahead of us given even the minimal success of the Traditional Plan. This is not easy. Critics are piling on with a host of stereotypes and narratives that undermine precisely the sense of identity I enumerated. Prescient observers can recognize the relevant litany. The litany is laid out in terms of lack of love, bigotry, rigidity, inconsistency, legalism, bribery of African delegates, Trumpism, colonialism, and the like. Sadly, it is not difficult to name the vices that we have had to face over the last couple of years. To invoke a different metaphor, folk have gone on a prolonged shopping spree in the political underworld. We have witnessed the physical take-over of meetings, the intentional misrepresentation of the due diligence undertaken for General Conference, the demonization of the various renewal groups, the deployment of false piety, the fear-mongering, the shameful use of parliamentary obfuscation and delaying tactics, and the carefully orchestrated interventions of agencies, seminary leaders, and youth petitions. The Arcus Foundation has poured close to two million dollars, beginning in 2011, into the campaign to undo the canonical teaching and practice of The United Methodist Church. The most pressing vices on display have been the incessant use of non-rational means to achieve the relevant ecclesiastical results and the constant resort to emotion and narratives of victimhood (replete

¹⁴ Even so, what if the church in Russia were to experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that became a limited but national revival.

¹⁵ I develop this vision of Methodism briefly and succinctly in *A Very Short Introduction to Methodism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

with charges of oppression and hatred) carefully placed to inhibit serious engagement with the painful and complex issues involved. It is patently obvious that for the most part all this represents the public practices of the progressive elites of North American parochial culture. It is also, to be sure, the normal hasty effort to unhorse the detested enemy who stands in the way of progress and pious enlightenment. Rising above this avalanche of criticism is a daunting task. It can and must be done by avoiding falling into a mentality of victimhood and by seizing and sustaining a whole new identity of ourselves and of our future.

The End of the Line

It is time now to drop my aforementioned assumption and face reality afresh. The stark truth can be expressed in a simple proposition: The United Methodist Church is now ungovernable. Hence it is illusory to think that a network of conservatives can govern the church with any kind of coherent vision. We must now prepare for division without apology and with persistent resolution. To use the vulgar language of the streets, there is not a snowball's chance in hell that they will be allowed to implement even the minimal success achieved at General Conference. Aside from the usual motley crew of ecclesiastical anarchists and wreckers, we already know that centrist and progressive leaders have run up flags in a bid to find ways to create their own version of United Methodism.¹⁶ The Executive Committee to the congregations to The United Church in Germany have publicly announced that they will not abide by the decisions of General Conference. The divorce lawyers have been called in and the only question is what kind of settlement can be arranged, whether amicable or angry. As one leading centrist pastor in Dallas expressed it in a letter to his congregation, the house of United Methodism has been burned down and the job and the task now is to take the foundations and build a new 'inclusive' version of Methodism.

Best Wishes to Centrists and Progressives

I genuinely wish centrists and progressive leaders well in their endeavors. There will be a place for them in the astonishing diversity of Christian faith and practice in the United States and in a few select sites outside North America. It may well be that the humiliation of defeat at General Conference will inspire them to develop less polemical and more constructive visions of their current interpretations of United Methodism. However, they face several challenges as they move forward.

First, they are by no means united and will have trouble separating their sheep from the goats. The well-known tensions that accompany intersectionality are already visible. (How can a cis-gender white male in Kansas lead a truly inclusive church?) The best way forward would be to have one new expression of United Methodism on the non-traditional side of the aisle in that centrists only differ from progressives in hoping to make room for conservatives in their midst. The centrists are now becoming radicalized and are thus showing their true colors. However, this is not for me to judge. I have no interest in writing the script or roadmap for those who lost the vote and are now desperately trying to come to terms with reality and find a way forward. It is enough to note that the threat and not just embarrassment from allies is all too real. It is not easy to turn in your grave while you are still alive.

¹⁶ One of the challenges we face at this stage is that it is not easy to identify those who can speak for centrists and progressives. Successful negotiations depend on leaders who represent the relevant stake-holders in the church as a whole. Hopefully, this will be resolved so that all sides can informally begin to put together a realistic plan for the future where the crucial issues are in place for the General Conference in 2020.

Second, the track record of mainline denominations that pursued policies and practices of radical inclusion has not been rosy. Some United Methodists think that the One Church Plan was and is a recipe for growth up ahead. (As one distinguished academic and retired bishop asked: How can we hope to include new members when we are excluding those who self-identify as LBGTQIA Christians?) Time alone will tell. But I suspect that the same cheerful illusions that prompted the predictions of success at General Conference ever since the late nineteen-eighties lie at the back of this empirically insecure prediction. In any case it is silly to make decisions about the future hinge on what the current youth in North America consider normative.

Third, centrists in particular are naïve in thinking that they can hold the line in securing adjusted heterosexual norms for the LGBTQIA communities. This is already a major problem in their failure to address the challenge of bisexuality. However, this is simply the tip of an iceberg. Centrists and progressives are either willfully ignorant or are carefully duplicitous in coming to terms with the most recent version of liberation theology that has already overtaken the standard conventions to which centrists are committed.¹⁷ I have in mind the “Indecent Theology” of the remarkable Argentinian theologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid, who began life as a Methodist before finding a home in the Quaker tradition during her tenure as the first women theologian appointed at the University of Edinburgh. Frankly, what is at stake is the open embrace of obscenity, the playful dalliance with the moral sewage of the Marquis de Sade, and now the effort to find emancipatory activity of God at those margins that include the BDSM communities scattered across the world.¹⁸ Hume once quipped that reason is and always should be the slave of the passion. One wonders what this great lapsed Presbyterian would make of such a development. There is no need to wonder what Albert Outler would have made of it. He warned that the embrace of permissiveness would simply lead to more permissiveness; hence he used all his political savvy and guile to help craft the language which became the explicit canonical teaching of United Methodism in 1972; and he fought with ruthless ingenuity to make sure that those who worked for the alternative vision of sexual morality would fail to achieve their goals in the relevant Commission of the day. The old danger of sowing in the wind and reaping the whirlwind is a real one.

Getting Ready for a Better Future

My ultimate interest here, however, is to begin the difficult task of identifying some initial principles and insights that should guide the work of conservatives in the immediate future. Happily, there is a quiet host of gifted leaders who are also working on this agenda; happier still, there is a wise and patient network of leaders gifted at thinking through the logistics involved. I offer a laundry list of items for consideration.

First, by way of yet one more reiteration: what is at issue is the creation over time of a whole new version of United Methodism that will fit the description given earlier. I have deliberately made the list of relevant adjectives broad and numerous: orthodox, global, ecumenical, Spirit-energized, intellectually vibrant, evangelistic, socially engaged, Wesleyan,

¹⁷ I am not claiming here that centrists are liberation theologians; many of them prefer to think of themselves as committed to a ‘generous orthodoxy’. However, they are naïve if they think that United Methodism is not deeply influenced by forms of liberation theology. As they become more radicalized, they will have to deal with the loudest voices in the room; and these are certainly the voices of liberation theology.

¹⁸ See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology, Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000); *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM 2004); and Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan, eds., *Dancing Theologically in Fetish Boots, Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid* (London: SCM, 2010).

robustly holy, sacramentally realistic, episcopal in structure, and so on. We need a new big tent United Methodism that will include evangelicals, charismatics, High-Church, traditionalists, and the like; and we need a new United Methodism that will make no apology for racial and ethnic diversity and for the long-standing ministry of women.

To be sure, there is still much work to be done in addressing the challenges of racial and ethnic identities; we can expect that the prevailing narrative of white privilege and patriarchy will be weaponized afresh in order to undermine our future catholic and United Methodist identity. This development is simply one more reason to embrace the identity as we ourselves name and implement it rather than pay attention to the alternative which is so readily imposed upon us. We cannot repeat often enough that the General Conference and the General Conference alone names and represents the identity of The United Methodist Church. We should push back aggressively against the claims that its processes are flawed, or that it has become the voice of the demonic in our midst, or that it has no real agency beyond its captivity to patriarchy and to late-modern or neo-liberal capitalism. Imagine how current dissidents would have jumped to identify with its decisions if the One Church Plan had passed; they concede the crucial point even as they seek to legitimize their dissident identity.

Second, it is crucial that we follow through on the necessary legislative and political action that expresses and strengthens the improved position of the *Book of Discipline*. There should be no promises at this point that we are going to back off or back down. Of course, this will be described as an effort to double-down on our position. Moreover, we can expect the standard objections and shaming to be repeated and even intensified. However, the danger is that any sign of stepping back or slowing down will be taken as weakness; the sharks will smell blood in the water and act accordingly. We cannot do other than act from within our own lights at this point; integrity and consistency require staying the course and seeing this through to the end. Thus we should not be intimidated by charges of doubling-down on our position; to accept this description is to be enrolled in a tendentious narrative that should be aggressively resisted. To be sure, if there is a concerted effort to have a serious conversation across the current divides that can take us to a better place, well and good. We can and should reach out to those who want to secure a realistic and consensus as we move towards the next General Conference; we should be open to any serious olive branch that is offered. However, such efforts require trust, a disposition that is in short supply given the language that has been used in public to attack us and our convictions. It also requires an honest assessment of the standing of our interlocutors, and that too is in short supply given that centrists and progressives cannot always identify their constituencies and thus cannot always be relied upon to deliver on their promise and agreements. In short, this is not a time to wobble; it is a time to stand firm and move forward.

Third, every effort should be taken to prevent the current turmoil spilling over into our local churches. Think of the scenarios of General Conference spreading across the face of the church. Unfortunately, this is already taking place in some congregations as local clergy openly and publicly defy the ruling of General Conference. At one level we are witnessing the ugly face of clericalism, as pastors speak as if they can ignore the sentiments and judgment of laity. At another level, it is an astonishing display of hubris in that clergy claim that the local church to which they are appointed is ‘their’ church rather than a local congregation of The United Methodist Church. The default disposition and position should be simple: no decision should be taken at the local level unless it is absolutely essential. In the meantime, avoid introducing unnecessary turbulence in local churches.

Fourth, it is imperative that we do what we can to repair the damage done to the African leadership of United Methodism. The treatment of our African colleagues has been nothing less than appalling. I noted one observer who proposed that they were captive to the legal dictates of their governments, as if they were not standing with centuries of perceived biblical and ecclesial teaching. In another case, they were identified as captive to the colonial mindset of the missionaries who brought the Gospel to them. The critical point is that their agency has been demeaned if not demonized by those who on other occasions wax eloquent about the need to listen to the Other, to the marginalized, and to those from the non-western world. The long-standing sense of western superiority has caused incalculable damage. The repair must begin immediately in the council of bishops; but all of us need to bear in mind the deep breach that has now appeared.

Fifth, given the success at the General Conference, there can be no compromise on the retention of the United Methodist name, a point that has surfaced with pleasing emphasis by the delegates from Africa. Just as secular elections have consequences, so do decisions of General Conference, the only body that can speak for The United Methodist Church as a whole. Continuity with the recent expression of global Methodism matters at this juncture; those who have systematically rejected the practice and teaching of the church (and those now rushing to join the queue), and who have failed across two generations to convince the church at large to adopt their revisionary agenda, have forfeited their right to the name. Many, of course, have already expressed shame at the name. Many have also quite naturally proclaimed their version of continuity with the tradition. However, the latter have lost the war to win the mind of the church as represented by its highest courts and should come to terms with the new normal. Perhaps we can find a way for all sides to keep the vestiges of the name; however, we cannot repress the fact that decisions of General Conference really do matter.

Sixth, in the allocation of resources there needs to be a resolute stance that secures a fair allocation of current assets. These belong as of moral and legal right to The United Methodist Church. They should not be handed over merely to secure some kind of sentimental vision of a manageable future. Of course, there needs to be significant reform of a host of institutional assets; however, ownership implies obligations and responsibility. Speaking in terms of future negotiations, the default position should be one of retention and of reasonable accommodation that avoids costly legal battles. We need a balance of strong realism and just compassion.¹⁹

One immediate and obvious point of contention will surely be the future of our seminaries. There is no need to rush to judgment. What is pivotal is to secure a much stronger and more welcoming place within faculties and student bodies for future conservative clergy and leaders. This is non-negotiable with respect to those schools of theology that are located in university settings. We can anticipate much fear-mongering, sincere but ignorant references to fundamentalism, threats of disaffiliation, and predictions about the loss of academic freedom on this front. However, we should ignore these and insist on real intellectual diversity, genuine academic freedom, and on such changes as will make possible a fresh and invigorating engagement with the full range of theological disciplines and resources. It is absolutely crucial that there be the institutional sites in which all future United Methodist scholars can play their full place in the academy at large and in which the research and development arm of the future

¹⁹ We can also expect and accept that there will be various bodies and institutions that will move towards disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church. We should eschew invidious comparisons with what happened in the Southern Baptist tradition at this point. United Methodism has its own unique way of relating to its educational institutions and there is no need for fear-mongering at this point.

teaching and practice of all United Methodist bodies can be cultivated to the highest intellectual standards possible. I know first-hand how difficult this can be.²⁰ More relevant to the current crisis, we will need the best intellectual and pastoral resources we can muster to tackle the challenge posed by the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. There is massive unfinished business in this domain both within and without the church.²¹

Seventh, we need to prepare to launch a massive effort to revitalize the host of rural and small town churches that have suffered spiritually because of the distractions and infighting of the last sixty years. Maybe we should look again at the use of updated revival services; add to this the possibility of a new order of itinerant evangelists and musicians that would spearhead a season of exuberance and hope; add to this the implementing of effective ministries of catechesis and disciple-making. The point is clear: we need to tackle the spiritual and doctrinal challenges right across the board, but most especially the challenges faced by those smaller churches that still wistfully yearn for a new day in the history of United Methodism.

Eighth, we need to make it abundantly clear to Methodists across the world that we are open to fresh overtures of unity and cooperation that will enrich and implement the vision that we are ready to embrace. This is not one more effort at Western paternalism or colonizing; it is, at one level, a recognition of the genuinely global nature of our enterprise; at another level, it is a friendly invitation to join in the movement of gift-sharing that has become the hallmark of more recent ecumenical endeavors. Starting within our own family, we can then continue to reach out to other Christian churches as we seek to receive all that the Holy Spirit seeks to give us as we humble ourselves in submission to the journey provided by providence.

Ninth, while it is prudent to let the dust settle and allow the relevant dissident groups to figure out what they want to do, it is important that we be prepared with our own account of the best way forward in the crisis that we must now endure. Given the failure of the bishops, we simply seize the opportunity that has opened up before us and do the work that should have been done in preparation for the General Conference of 2019. I am morally certain not just that conservatives can retain the remarkable unity already in place; they already have buried in their conversations the blueprint that we need for the future. We need to proceed from a position of strength and not from a position of spurious kindness or unrecognized victimhood.

Onward and Upward

So the marching order is clear: onward and upward to a new day in United Methodism. What then is to be done? This paper is written as an insider intent on upholding and strengthening the conservative results of the General Conference. I have already indicated that we now face is division. What should we do now?

Perhaps we can make progress on finding common ground. On this front consider the following laundry list. We can agree that the best way to frame the issue on all sides is in terms of faithfulness to our Lord. Every other category has to be subordinate to this central feature of Christian discipleship. We can agree that we have inflicted sufficient harm on each other (leave the proportions aside for the moment) that the pain of staying together is now greater than the pain of living apart. We can agree that it would be a good thing for all sides to be set free to

²⁰ One way to ensure a healthy home for conservative students would be to set up Houses of Study that would address their intellectual and spiritual needs. At the moment, many of them lie low, given the treatment they receive at the hands of hostile faculty.

²¹ On this front it is crucial that we not become preoccupied with the theological, moral, and pastoral issues related to sexuality; moreover, we need to set our own agenda and priorities.

follow their conscience and their contrasting forms of identity and thus not be a roadblock to the relevant forms of discipleship and witness which are embraced by the different groups that now exist within United Methodism. We can agree, hard as this will be, that we will try and keep some kind of loose connection and co-operation as we move into a new future. We can agree that empirically the votes are not there for one more effort to adopt some kind of one church plan. This means that we will need to recalibrate how we handle the reflective equilibrium between the unity, catholicity, holiness, and apostolicity of the church.²² We can agree that we will avoid costly litigation in the courts and find a way to differ and disagree that represents a unique gift of our tradition to the church as a whole. We can agree that we will do all we can to form friendships across our difference and thus strengthen the bonds of affection that are already in place behind the scenes.²³

With these in place, let's imagine a whole new future. Let there be now at least two branches of United Methodism: The [orthodox] Global United Methodist Church and The [centrist] Intercontinental United Methodist Church. If a third is needed, let's consider The Progressive United Methodist Church. Let there then be an Association of United Methodist Institutions which can house a variety of United Methodist bodies (including colleges, universities, and medical institutions) and where we can find ways to work together in UMCOR, in publishing, in theological education, missionary endeavor, and in other ways that are mutually agreed. This secures two critical goals. First, folk are free to follow their calling as they perceive it; second, we keep in place a pre-conciliar form of connection that recognizes that we own a common heritage and a common history of sin, affection, anger, and misery. This is the big picture; I leave the legislative details to those who are expert on these matters.

If this olive branch is summarily dismissed, so be it. We will not make the dreams for a better vision of what is now a global, orthodox United Methodism dependent on a positive response from those who prefer to ignore our overtures. We need to move forward with a robust vision of where we want to be in fifty years rather than wait and react defensively to either the status quo or the vague fantasies of our critics.²⁴ Of course, if anyone else has a better suggestion, let's hear it out. Perhaps we need to set up a trampoline where folk who have given up on high wire acts can bounce back into a truly realistic conversation about the future. Deep down, I believe that there is enough honesty and even good will across the church to hope for a constructive conversation about the way forward. We can, if we really desire, make the transition as economical and efficient as possible. The mountain is there to be climbed; and the future view from the top will be terrific when we get there. In the meantime, as all sides now agree, let's stay in the business of mission and ministry.

²² This will mean a reframing of the concept of a denomination in theological and not merely sociological terms. On this see the seminal work of Barry Ensign-George, *Between Congregation and Church: Denomination and Christian Life Together* (London: T & T Clark, 2019).

²³ For a splendid but brief treatment of friendship see Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (London: Adam and James Clark, 1967), 53-55.

²⁴ It is surely a disaster to build a future around heady slogans about inclusion and diversity, or around the current lists of gender identity, or even some kind of futile effort to stay together in one church come what may. These theologically starved horses cannot make it to the finishing line. However we describe the differences in the conservative tradition, the one great advantage is that we possess a sturdy sense of the essentials that are needed, that is, the ethos, doctrines, mission, and practices of a renewed version of Methodism. This work has already been done within the Wesleyan Covenant Association and the sooner it is explored, amended where necessary, and adopted the better.

