

WE ARE ON THE WAY TO A BETTER CHURCH

Thoughts on the upcoming 2024 United Methodist General Conference

We approach the 2024 General Conference, postponed from 2020 amidst the global pandemic that killed an untold number of persons and prevented international travel and large public gatherings. In the General Conference, The UMC gathers to plan its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Racism and Exclusion

In Unrelenting Grace, I noted two facets of discipleship about which we have been challenged the most.

The first is our historical racism, which has plagued Methodism from the beginning and which took institutional form in our separation and segregation. Our work of discipleship now is to create the beloved community in each local church, and in our public witness to unjust laws, and in our systems that are becoming more equitable—all of this rooted in the recognition that racism is a sin and an obstacle to our sanctification and health as a church.

The second is our recognition that persons in the LGBTQ community, not issues but real people in our own churches and families, are blessed by the same grace, saved by the same cross, and on the same journey to holiness, and that singling them out for discrimination has been a fifty-year costly human error.

The harm we have done to these two groups of persons is staggering. It calls us, me, to confession, to repentance, and to a new life.

These are two unfinished facets of our discipleship. I have no arrogance about precisely how we do this work. But I am convicted that in some of our churches there is a foretaste of it and that God is blessing it. Because **God has created us all in the divine image** (Genesis 1). As the apostle Peter declared, God shows no partiality (Acts 10).


If this is to be meaningful, it will happen at the local level. We will do all of this as we reemerge from a pandemic where many died, many more became extremely ill, and all were disrupted. It will be complex. We will need to be people of peace, and people immersed in the Scriptures, and people who remain connected in a world whose default is to divide us. That is precisely what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world in this present moment (*Book of Discipline*, ¶121). It is the rediscovery of a United Methodist way of life. It can be the gift God gives to us and the gift we offer to the world.

At the level of polity, which is the purpose of a General Conference, one matter rises to the level of importance that has prevented us from being the church, local and global, that God is calling us to be.

The Removal of Discriminatory Language

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This matter of utmost importance is the **removal of language** inserted 52 years ago into our Book of Discipline that discriminates against LGBTQ persons. When this language was voted on in the 1972 General Conference, homosexuality was defined as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association. Biblical scholarship has since affirmed a more robust relationship of LGBTQ persons with the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and



witnesses (see especially the writings of Luke Timothy Johnson and, forthcoming, Richard and Christopher Hays). Local churches understand and are blessed by the presence of LGBTQ persons in their fellowship; steadily and surely there is increased acceptance of all persons who are called by God to set apart licensed and ordained ministry.

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This is change through removal of **a few critical sentences** among several hundred pages. I noted publicly eleven years ago that the inclusion of the “incompatibility sentence” had the effect of undermining the teaching office of the church, in a similar way to the critique of birth control in our sister church, Roman Catholicism. My hope is that just as we have historically removed prohibitions against women in ministry and divorce among members and clergy, we will remove these prohibitions.

Through removal of this language, we will be in alignment with our full-communion partners in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our three Pan-Methodist partners (whose Disciplines are silent on this question), the Moravian Church in America—and further, with the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Christ, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.


The removal of this language will also bring us into greater alignment with our core values—the grace of God, an open Communion table, outreach to all, especially marginalized people, and a willingness to read Scripture in light of reason, experience, and tradition. As I said before our church’s Judicial Council, we lived without this language in our Discipline for 150 years. Most of the leaders who worked so hard to insert and amplify the language were simultaneously planning to depart to form a new expression of Methodism. This they have done, and we have said goodbye with a blessing and with the conviction that it is inappropriate that they should seek to shape the polity of a church to which they are not committed in the future.

A simple removal of the language singling out gay and lesbian persons for exclusion—and these are our friends and neighbors, our children and grandchildren, our Sunday school teachers and choir directors, our missionaries beyond our buildings and servants within them—is **the next faithful step** for The United Methodist Church.

The Process Leading to the Present Moment

I have been a part of this work over the past ten years, as a bishop with diverse annual conferences; as one of the moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward that advocated the One Church Plan, which made space for both unity and inclusion; as the president of our Council of Bishops and the opening preacher during the called 2019 Session; and as one of the signatories of the Protocol of Grace and Reconciliation through Separation, and thus an advocate for the abeyance. Now I am one of the host pastors of the upcoming General Conference, which will take place in my home city of Charlotte, North Carolina.





I have also been the subject of public lawsuits by churches and complaints by clergy and laity. I regret that most of the persons who pursued their disagreement through these paths (which were all dismissed or resolved) were simultaneously planning to depart from our church.

Through this time I was also seeking to minister to and alongside persons who remained with us, even as they were targeted for exclusion. The most public expression of this was an entire class of provisional clergy who were delayed for a full year by the vote of a clergy session. I am in awe of their faith and faithfulness.

My Own Intellectual Journey

In this extended season I wrote three books. If they share a common thread, it is a foundation of a theology that is shaped by Scripture and tradition (the creeds, the hymns, the received wisdom of the church) and that makes a clear argument for the full inclusion of all people in the full life of the church.

Given the injustice and the harm that has been done, this is not a time for silence.

The first book, *Embracing the Wideness* (Abingdon Press, 2018), is my image of **a church that was and is for all people and at the same time is deeply biblical and traditional**; the last chapter is an exposition of the Nicene Creed.

The second, *God Will Make a Way* (Abingdon Press, 2021), is a memoir of my life and leadership during these crucial years. It records relationships, conversations, and shared work with United Methodists across the theological and political spectrum, and I still

believe that we are not a narrow church—there is space for all of us.

The third, *Unrelenting Grace* (Abingdon Press, 2023), is a reflection on our three core values post-pandemic and post-disaffiliations—**grace, connection, holiness—and sees these values as our path to healing.**

Many, many people across the world have labored over the past years as disciples of Jesus because they love their local churches, because the mission is important, because sharing our faith is an essential task, and because they see a better church. In the words of our late friend Junius Dotson, who also served on the Protocol team, they “**see all the people,**” people created in God’s image, people of sacred worth.

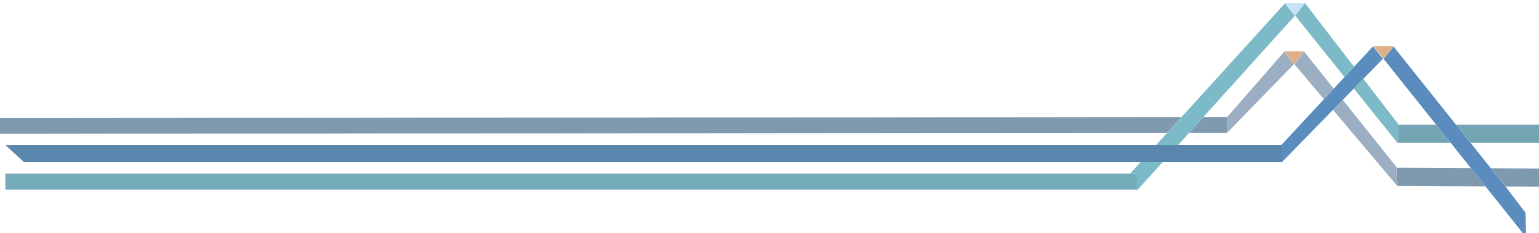
The Upcoming General Conference


We will do this work for all these people at General Conference.

I have taken some time to reflect on my own story. Thank you for taking the time to read this with an open mind. Your story is equally important. I hope you will take the time to reflect on your own story and that you will share it.

Given the injustice and the harm that has been done, this is not a time for silence.

I pray the work of the General Conference is not sabotaged by external forces. I pray it is not labeled in a binary way as liberal or conservative by religious, social, or public media. It is not. I pray that we will allow the Holy Spirit to set us free from these harmful constraints (see the parallels with Acts 15).





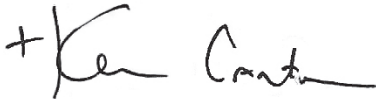
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I believe we can do this. I believe that **we are on the way to a better church**. Whatever the outcomes of the General Conference, of course, this is not an ending but another beginning. Change happens at every level of the church, some of that in local churches with courageous leadership, some of that in the structures of the denomination, all of it alongside cultural shifts. Our segregated denomination mirrored a secessionist nation. Our language of incompatibility mimicked society.

Learning, which is the calling of professional leadership in any sphere (including ministry), and empathy, which is pastoral and priestly work, lead to prophetic faith communities, deeply rooted in core values, doctrinal standards, and love for God and neighbor. **I came to the conclusion many years ago that we could not have unity at anyone's expense.** I do have a passion for the unity of the church. But within that unity is the mission to see God's image in every person and to encourage the recovery of the fullness of that image in every person. We call this salvation. Or we could name it as healing.

I pray for healing at this General Conference and in the season following it. I am hopeful. I do believe that we are on the way to a better church.

In Christ,



+Ken Carter
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Grace. Connection. Holiness.

