

## The WCA and REFORMING the CHURCH

Introduction of our President—pray

**“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people WILL NOT PUT UP WITH SOUND DOCTRINE. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. THEY WILL TURN THEIR EARS AWAY FROM THE TRUTH AND TURN ASIDE INTO MYTHS. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”**

2 Timothy 4:2-5

**“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the FORM of RELIGION WITHOUT the POWER. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”**

John Wesley in Thoughts on Methodism—August 4, 1786

I am grateful to be here this evening—to talk with you about the Wesleyan Covenant Association. We are partners with the other renewal groups—but different. The other renewal groups have been formed through the years to preserve orthodoxy in our church and to work for the renewal through the institution of the church. They have served us incredible well—and we owe them a debt of gratitude. The Wesleyan Covenant Association has been formed with a different focus—we are looking forward to what needs to be “next” for our movement—and at our heart—we are about REFORMING the CHURCH through doctrinal/theological renewal, focus and practice—much like Wesley did in his day. We are after having the FORM of religion—AND the POWER. Let me try to describe what we mean—and in the end—invite you to be a part of the WCA.

**We BELIEVE in the CHURCH.** However, the Church is NOT a building—a social club—a preaching center—or even a denomination. It is the embodiment of Jesus’ life and love in the world today. The CHURCH IS a group of people who KNOW JESUS and exist to LEAD other people to JESUS. We are NOT saved to

isolation and individualism—God intends for salvation to be a community-creating event. We NEED the CHURCH—it is in that community that we grow to our greatest potential.

**What “church” are we talking about?** When talking about the CHURCH, we need to distinguish between the “little c” church and the “BIG C” Church. The “BIG C” Church is the Church of Jesus Christ. It was born of the Spirit on Pentecost and is comprised of all the “little c” churches—past, present and future. The United Methodist Church is a “little c” church which is a small part of the “BIG C” church. “Little c” churches like ours are only significant to the extent we are contributing to the mission of the “BIG C” Church. The “BIG C” church transcends apparent dichotomies like Catholic and Protestant—Baptist and Methodist—traditional and contemporary—clergy and laity—priests and pastors—dunkers and sprinklers—ordained and licensed—and various theological camps. The “BIG C” Church reaches across time and space—and holds firm even as empires rise and fall. The “BIG C” Church is bigger than you—bigger than me—bigger than we.

It is a movement fueled and driven by the Holy Spirit. In John 16, as Jesus is about to leave his disciples, he says **“It is better for you that I GO AWAY, because if I don’t, the ADVOCATE (paraclete) WON’T COME.” (16:7)** The Greek word “paraclete”—means **called to one’s side to encourage, uphold, assist, and HELP.** The HOLY SPIRIT is a HELPER—sent to encourage, uphold and assist the Church—to HELP us LIFT UP the cause of the Kingdom of God.

Later that night, Jesus was arrested—beaten—and condemned. The next day, Jesus was crucified—dead—and buried—and on the third day Jesus rose from the dead. The Gospel of John ends with the risen and living Jesus appearing to his disciples.

On the next page, in Acts 1, **Jesus said, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he PROMISED. Remember I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days I will baptize you with the HOLY SPIRIT.” (1:4-5)** Jesus was leaving the earth so the HOLY SPIRIT would come. The disciples stayed in Jerusalem—they waited and prayed. Ten days later, their prayer meeting was interrupted by the “sound of a rushing wind” and the HOLY SPIRIT arrived in the form of tongues of fire settling upon the people in the room. In that moment, the “BIG C” Church was born.

As we read Acts, it becomes clear that the person of Jesus—limited by his physical body—is now gone—and he had sent the unlimited HOLY SPIRIT in his place. The HOLY SPIRIT was everywhere at once—and the era of the SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH began.

Acts 4 gives us a glimpse of what it was like, **“ALL the believers were of ONE heart and mind, they SHARED their possessions and the Apostles gave powerful WITNESS to the resurrection of the Lord. And God’s GREAT FAVOR was on them all.” (4:32)**

And they all lived happily ever after, right? WRONG! Acts 5 opens with the story of Ananias and Sapphira—who were struck dead because they LIED to the HOLY SPIRIT. Acts 6 shows factions of the Church fighting over the fair distribution of food to their widows. Isn’t it fascinating that the first two problems to hit the fledgling Church were HYPOCRISY and INJUSTICE? Glad we don’t have problems like that today!

The rest of the New Testament tells the dynamic story of the Church which most historians believe grew from 120 at Pentecost to hundreds of thousands in fifty years. Yet, despite great success in spreading the Gospel—an unsettling undercurrent runs throughout the New Testament: There are PROBLEMS in the Church—some come from the OUTSIDE—that’s expected—but the most serious are those that come from WITHIN. That’s troubling—but still happens today—which raises the question: If the Church is God’s PLAN to carry out the MINISTRY of JESUS—why is it so MESSED up? The short answer is because it’s filled with PEOPLE—like you and me!

**As we meet this evening, our “little c” church is in a time of open schism and crisis.** Many of us believe that parts of our “little c” church have “not put up with sound doctrine,” and been “turned away from the truth into all kinds of myths.” We also see signs that we have become what Wesley feared the Methodist movement would become—“a dead sect, having the form of religion, but lacking its power.”

However, we also believe in resurrection—that “the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us”—and THAT resurrecting power can REFORM our “little

c” church if we will repent, refocus our lives on Jesus, and reclaim our mission. We believe in the promise of resurrection power because we can see its evidence in a global movement of vibrant and vital Wesleyan Christianity in places like Africa, South Korea, South America, Vietnam and the Philippines. Our theology and message have powerful impact when expressed in its unfettered form—giving us CONFIDENCE for the FUTURE.

However, that is not the case everywhere. The United Methodist Church is less than fifty years old, and our membership in the United States has fallen every single year. The reasons for this can be chronicled by folks who are much smarter than me, but the reality is that many in our “little c” church have wandered far from what Wesley dreamed of when he told the early Methodists to “spread scriptural holiness across the land.”

Recent events have accentuated the growing schism in our church. Today, there are segments of our Church—clergy, laity, congregations—even Annual and Jurisdictional Conferences—who are openly practicing an expression of Christian faith that is contrary to and in rebellion against our doctrine, covenant and polity. These actions have exposed massive cracks in the foundation of our “little c” church.

Some would say that the cause of the schism is our growing differences on human sexuality. While this topic grabs the headlines, I believe human sexuality is the presenting symptom of much deeper theological fissures and systemic problems that are dividing The United Methodist Church.

The foundation for our theological crisis has been in place since the very beginning when we embraced **Theological Pluralism**—resulting in a sort of “big tent” Methodism where a variety of theological expressions were appreciated and valued. There was a sense of mutual appreciation and tolerance at that time. I can remember talking with some of my older, more liberal colleagues who would not agree with my more orthodox perspectives, but they would say there was room in their church for me. It was a generous pluralism whose limits had not yet been truly tested. Those limits are now being tested because we our theological pluralism has crumbled the biblical and theological foundations of our “little c” church.

Many have stopped believing Jesus is the way—the truth—and the life—the only way to the Father. Many have undermined the nature, diminished the role and gutted authority of Scripture in favor of personal experience. Many have decimated our doctrine of personal sin, and neglected what salvation means in the Wesleyan tradition. Many have worshipped our “small c” institutional church, and have forgotten that our church only has power and standing as we are faithful to the mission and message of the “BIG C” Church of Jesus Christ. We have also developed a denominational system with no means of holding those who lead or serve in it accountable.

While many in our “little c” church have held fast to our historic, evangelical, orthodox foundations—others have continually shifted further and further away from our historic moorings. The result is a deeply divided church where we often use the same words—cite the same Scriptures—quote the same Wesley Sermons—and pledge fidelity to the same Discipline—but we are talking about VERY DIFFERENT expressions of Christian faith. We are miles apart in basic beliefs and practices—with no real means of accountability—making our covenantal relationship untenable.

While I pray that our “little c” church will find a way to right itself and restore the order of our covenant, I believe we are likely at a Paul and Barnabas moment as a denomination. You remember the story. Paul’s partner on his first missionary journey was Barnabas, the “son of encouragement.” He had been the first person to embrace and support Paul when he returned to Jerusalem after his Damascus Road conversion. John Mark was a young companion on that first trip. However, John Mark became homesick and went home early to his mother.

Later, in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas have secured the blessing of the Jerusalem Council to take the Gospel to the Gentiles and are preparing to leave on their second missionary journey from Antioch. It was a pivotal moment in the Christian movement. **Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement over John Mark.** Barnabas, the “son of encouragement,” wants to give his cousin, John Mark, a second chance and take him along. Paul does not. He has had enough of that momma’s boy. This disagreement has the potential to derail the mission—stopping it dead in its tracks.

However, Paul and Barnabas do not allow their personal disagreement to derail the mission. Paul takes Silas and goes off to missionary fame. Barnabas takes John Mark, and we never hear about Barnabas again. However, he does what he did best—he pours his life into helping John Mark answer his call.

One of the most remarkable things about that story is what happened to John Mark. He became the travelling companion with Simon Peter, and eventually wrote the Gospel of Mark. Later, Paul would write Timothy and tell him to bring Mark with him because he was helpful to him. (2 Timothy 4:11) Paul also writes about Mark (the cousin of Barnabas) being with him while he is under house arrest awaiting trial in Rome. (Colossians 4:10)

Here is the point—**they went their separate ways instead of jeopardizing the MISSION.** I contend we are at a Paul and Barnabas moment—and we should not allow our inner squabbling to prevent us from pursuing the MISSION—which may be better served if we bless each other and separate—and see what God does when pursuing the mission once again becomes central.

I do not know what the “next” for United Methodist looks like, but I do believe that the “little c” church that has nurtured us to this point will look very different in the next three years. If that kind of change is coming, I want to encourage those who share the same heart for a renewed and vibrant expression of evangelical, orthodox Wesleyan Christianity to join together in the Wesleyan Covenant Association and begin thinking about and planning what we need to do to REFORM our “little c” church. This is not just about orthodoxy (“right beliefs”)—it is also about orthopraxy (“right actions.”) If we make this solely about human sexuality, it is entirely possible that evangelicals can win every vote in the process of the General Conference (which has been done for over forty-five years), and it will not fix what has us sick unto death. We need a deep movement of the Holy Spirit and a theological renewal.

**Let me suggest four actions that could help REFORM** our “little c” CHURCH and give us CONFIDENCE for the FUTURE: First, it is time to **REFOCUS on JESUS**—because there is no other name by which people can be saved. I have a friend who continually reminds me to focus on Jesus. At first, it was annoying, but then I began to think differently. I began to notice how little Jesus was mentioned at denominational gatherings—except at the end of a prayer. I began to notice how

my own preaching became much more effective when I lifted up the name of Jesus. I experienced how bewildering ministry can become when we take our focus off of Jesus. Ministry can be a grind, but often times we rely upon what we can do in our own strength, and we forget about the power that is available in Jesus. We need to REFOCUS on JESUS.

I remember a story about a young boy who went forward for the children's sermon one Easter Sunday. The pastor asked the children if anyone had visited their house that morning. One little boy in the back shouted, "Jesus!" The pastor ignored him and said, "You know—one with big floppy ears..." The same kid yelled, "Jesus!" The pastor looked in a different direction and said, "...and had a fuzzy tail..." Once gain the same boy shouted, "Jesus!" The flustered pastor continued, "...and brought you and Easter basket." The same kid jumped up and down and shouted, "Jesus!" The children's sermon finally came to an excruciating end, and when the boy went back to his seat, his Mom said, "Johnny, you know the pastor was talking about the Easter Bunny." And the boy replied, "Yes, but he should have been talking about Jesus!"

Sometimes, we forget to talk about Jesus, but there is no power in any other name than Jesus. Institutions do not save the world—Jesus does. Right theology will not reform church or save the world—Jesus does. Winning the right votes at General Conference will not reform the church or save the world—Jesus does. We need to reclaim the sure and certain belief that Jesus is who he said he is—and did everything he said he would do. Jesus lives. Jesus loves. Jesus names sin. Jesus announces grace. Jesus redeems. Jesus saves. Jesus forgives. Jesus sanctifies. Jesus calls. The future will be determined by whether we REFOCUS on JESUS—the way—the truth—and the life—no one comes to the Father—except through Him. Jesus. Will you join me and REFOCUS on JESUS?

Second, it is time to **RECLAIM the AUTHORITY of SCRIPTURE**. Either the Bible is the sufficient rule of faith and practice—or it is not. Albert Outler was one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Wesleyan movement. When he developed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, it was meant to be a framework to help Methodists learn how to work out their salvation and live faith in our world. It has helped to shape our theologizing for 50 years. However, toward the end of his life, he regretted what it had become.

Outler said that there were four sides to this theological decision making framework—Scripture—Tradition—Reason—and Experience. The challenge comes with where one places Scripture in the Quadrilateral. To Wesley, Scripture was always primary. When the Bible speaks clearly about a subject—it speaks. Tradition, Reason and Experience are all subject to Scripture. This is the view held by most evangelical, orthodox United Methodists.

While we bring who we are to the reading of the text, orthodox Methodists attempt to understand the original context while reading God’s truth out of the text (after all a text without a context is a pretext to a proof text). So, when I—as an orthodox follower of Jesus—read something in Scripture that does not agree with my lived experience—that is called sin—and through the power of the Holy Spirit—I can receive forgiveness and bring that area of my life under the leadership of Jesus.

However, for some United Methodists, Scripture is one of four opinions to consider, but is not necessarily primary in the decision making process. Many actually believe that God is still giving revelation today with the same authority as the canon of the Scriptures, and therefore, it can replace or supersede the Bible. So, if their lived experience does not match what the Bible has to say—then they can reimagine the Scriptures to fit their present context—reading their experience into the text—which can result in a very different interpretation and application of Scripture. It is time to RECLAIM a WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING of the AUTHORITY of SCRIPTURE. Will you join me?

Third, it’s time **REFINE our THEOLOGY**. The Theological Pluralism of “big tent” Methodism has watered down and gutted our robust heritage of evangelical theology and practice of our Wesleyan Movement. Our “little c” church no longer has a clear theological core and identity. Within limits, theological diversity can be a good thing and stretch us beyond ourselves. For example, in the WCA, we can welcome high-church, charismatics, and contemporary-worship-style evangelicals. We don't all have to be in lockstep, but throughout the history of our faith, the Church has established some essentials which we in the UMC have turned into non-essentials. Our problem is unchecked theological pluralism. We need to help each other think theologically and embrace a robust, vibrant Wesleyan theology the midst of a swirling culture—because we often no longer know what we are FOR.

As evangelical, orthodox Wesleyan United Methodists, we are FOR Jesus. We believe in a risen, living, grace-giving, sin-forgiving, life-changing Jesus who accepts us as we are and transforms us into who he created us to be. We are FOR the nature and authority of the Scripture as have been embraced by the majority of Christians around the world for 2,000 years. We are FOR a global movement of evangelical, orthodox, Wesleyan Jesus followers who are committed to take the life-changing message of the Gospel in the Wesleyan tradition to every people, tribe, clan and tongue. We are FOR the New Birth as described in the Scripture and taught by John Wesley. We believe that we can be saved “to the uttermost” from the condition and the practice of the sin that entangles us. We are FOR the sanctifying work the Holy Spirit does in our lives. We are FOR holiness of heart and life—and not just a moral code or rules and regulations that must be followed to be “Christian.” We are FOR a thoughtful faith that warms and changes the heart and works itself out in social justice that is connected to personal holiness. We are FOR the deep transformation that happens through the Holy Spirit which enables us to perfectly love God and neighbor as we are being renewed every day. What are you FOR?

Fourth, it’s time to **REFORM our SYSTEMS**. I know this is the least glamorous of the steps I have mentioned, but there is no need for much of our institutional bureaucracy. Other voices have called for this right sizing of systems and structures, and even the world of business has embraced the concept of going “lean.” The system and structure of our denomination was developed for a by-gone era, but it continues to be propped up rather than reformed and right-sized—and we have often organized the Spirit right out of our Movement.

I remember sitting at a denominational meeting twenty years ago, surrounded by bishops and other institutional bureaucrats as we listened to a young man from Africa who was responsible for evangelism in one of the fastest growing Conferences in United Methodism. They had no money—no resources—no institutional support to help them do what they were doing—but were growing exponentially. Finally, one of the bishops asked him how he did it, and he said, “We put a church in every village—and we do four things at every church: 1) We teach people to read because education is the key to their future. 2) We teach people to farm so that they can feed themselves. 3) We provide basic healthcare which is the only healthcare in the villages. And 4) we share Jesus with

everybody!” They were not encumbered with a top heavy institution that was draining the life out of its churches. They had a simply, laser-focused vision and system to meet the physical and spiritual needs of their mission field. We need to REFORM our SYSTEM for missional focus and flexibility. Will you join in REFORMING the SYSTEM?

If we can take these four actions, we may be graced by God to REFORM our “little c” CHURCH—just like Wesley did in the Church of England years ago. If we don’t—God help us—we will wither and die.

**If your heart is like our heart**—if you find yourself FOR the same kinds of things— if you are for more than just winning the right votes and maintaining the status quo—but rather want to be a part of a global movement of vibrant Christianity in the Wesleyan tradition—then we invite you to join with and work alongside of the Wesleyan Covenant Association as we seek to REFORM our “little c” church and provide CONFIDENCE for the FUTURE. Will you join us?