

**"God Hath Bid All Humankind": Generous Orthodoxy and our Mission with Gays and Lesbians
in the United Methodist Church***

A Pastoral and Missional Reflection given to St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida,
on July 25, 2013 by Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., Resident Bishop of the Florida Conference of the United
Methodist Church.

*Note: This reflection is written primarily for those who are seeking to understand their own participation in the Christian life, or in a local church, as gay and lesbian United Methodists, and for those in ministry with them. Sections 1, 3-6 and 9 are written especially for this audience. I am also speaking, secondarily, to a smaller group of United Methodists who have an additional interest in the denominational conversation around this subject. Sections 2, 7 and 8 are written particularly for these constituencies. Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in the 2012 Book of Discipline. Writing as a bishop of the church, my primary focus is pastoral, theological and missional, rather than legal and political.

Prayer: O God,
Your intention to give exceeds our readiness to receive.
Your boundless love is restricted by our small vessels.
Your generosity far exceeds our responding reception.
Your richness is restrained by our poverty of expectation.
Your expansiveness is channeled through our small hearts.
 Enlarge our capacity.
 Increase our receptivity.
 Open us to your full life.
Make us more able to receive your generous grace. Amen.

(Thomas Langford)

1. A Generous Orthodoxy

I was drawn to the United Methodist Church because of its deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of the grace of God. In this tradition I came to know, trust and worship the Triune God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--revealed in the scriptures. In my reading and re-reading of the Bible, I have come upon an affirmation about the nature of God: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103.8). The nature of God is not fully defined by grace--there is, to be sure, justice and judgment -- but these are attributes of God that we humans, at our best, approximate with humility. At our best, we err on the side of grace. This might even be understood as a positive expression of our first General Rule, to "do no harm."

As a bishop of the church, the promises I made in the service of consecration were in the areas of the unity, faith, discipline and mission of the church. Undergirding each of these realities is the grace of God, which we experience through Jesus Christ (Romans 5; Ephesians 2). Again, the church at its best is nourished and sustained by the grace of God. In our doctrine, we seek

to explain and give an account for the meaning and implications of this grace. It is important that we be orthodox (literally, that we believe truthfully or rightly), and yet John Wesley was clear that believing right doctrines was not sufficient; faith is also an inward disposition of trust (note the Aldersgate experience) and faith is demonstrated through acts of love (Galatians 5). This synergy of belief and trust, grace and faith is at the core of our tradition, as United Methodist Christians. It is best captured, for me, in a phrase: Generous Orthodoxy.

The Anglican preacher and theologian Fleming Rutledge defines generous orthodoxy as follows:

"We cannot do without orthodoxy, for everything else must be tested against it, but that orthodox (traditional, classical) Christian faith should by definition always be generous as our God is generous; lavish in his creation, binding himself in an unconditional covenant, revealing himself in the calling of a people, self-sacrificing in the death of his Son, prodigal in the gifts of the Spirit, justifying the ungodly, and, indeed, offending the "righteous" by the indiscriminate use of his favor. True Christian orthodoxy therefore cannot be narrow, pinched or defensive but always spacious, adventurous and unafraid."

She is drawing upon an initial statement by the Yale theologian Hans Frei, who commented, "We need a kind of generous orthodoxy which would have in it an element of liberalism--a voice like the Christian Century -- and an element of evangelicalism -- the voice of Christianity Today. I don't know if there is a voice between these two, as a matter of fact. If there is, I would like to pursue it."

This generous orthodoxy is made visible, in United Methodism, in our practice of open communion. In Luke 15, we are told that Jesus "eats with sinners," a phrase included in our liturgy of Holy Communion, and this is the impetus for his three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son (or, a "merciful father"). Holy Communion, like the meals that Jesus shared throughout the gospels, is not reserved for those who perceive themselves to be righteous. Holy Communion, as a sacrament, is an outward and visible sign of the grace, or unmerited favor, of God toward all people.

2. Beyond Culture Wars: Our Theological Task

I am a United Methodist because of our deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of the grace of God. And over the past few years I have had the growing sense that this doctrine is a neglected resource in our silence and impasse around mission with gay and lesbian persons. Further, I am convinced that the topic of gay and lesbian participation in the church is more a matter of grace than of justice or judgment. Those on the political left often frame the question as a matter of justice, and those on the political right as a matter of judgment. A generous orthodoxy begins with God, and more specifically with the grace of God.

One reason for our silence and impasse around mission with gays and lesbians is the pervasive context of the "culture wars." There are strong advocacy groups on both sides of this issue,

which has legal, political and cultural implications. In the culture wars there are winners and losers -- quite literally, there are casualties -- and there is at times a moral rationalization that the end (gaining political or legal advantage) justifies the means. The church often finds itself in alliances with advocacy groups on either side of the gay/lesbian question, and some congregations are identified with movements for more or less inclusion. Some want to be more open, others want to stand their ground; each senses that it is doing so out of deep Christian conviction, and each perceives itself to be counter-cultural.

In reflecting on this matter, my prayer is that I do not participate in or contribute to the escalation of the culture wars. Given the political landscape, I am not naive in believing that it will not be heard in such a way. The polarization across the church is so pronounced that agendas are assumed. But this is not my intention. My calling is to frame the question of our mission with gay and lesbian Christians from a generously orthodox perspective, which will help us in our pastoral relationships and mission.

This reflection is, I believe, an expression of the teaching role of a resident bishop in the United Methodist Church. I am not arguing a dogmatic position here; rather, I am seeking to fulfill the promise I made to guard the faith, maintain the unity and support the mission of the church. I receive a steady stream of requests to give more clarity to this topic, from clergy and laity in the annual conference that I serve. Not everything that can be said is included in this reflection, and I write not as an advocate, but as a bishop. The teaching office of a bishop holds together an exposition of scripture and tradition, a vision for the church and the fulfillment of its mission, and a prophetic commitment for the alleviation of human suffering (403). Taken together, these activities are directly related to a bishops' "passion for the unity of the church" (403.e). No topic is more relevant to the unity or disunity of the church than this one.

As a missional and pastoral statement, I do not take up here the matters of marriage (161f) or ordination (304) which are important subjects and are at present clearly articulated in courts of law and in the Discipline, respectively. A part of the ongoing confusion related to marriage and ordination is the distinction between the church's language of gifts (in its liturgies) and the civil society's definition of rights (in its legal codes). At the same time, I believe in the development of doctrine and discipline, or the living relationship between "Our Doctrinal Standards" (104) and "Our Theological Task" (105) and my hope is that these words will help the church to have a more constructive conversation, guided by the Holy Spirit. I have appreciated the insight of Thomas Langford here:

"Doctrine reflects the grasp of the church; theology reflects the reach of the church. To use another analogy: doctrine is the part of the cathedral already completed, exploratory theology is creative architectural vision and preliminary drawings for possible new construction."

I turn now to the basis and motivation for that constructive conversation.

3. Grace Will Lead Us Home

A generous orthodoxy reclaims a deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of grace, which is, for us, the way of salvation, both individually and as a church.

Prevenient grace is the presence of God in all people, prior to our acceptance of faith or response to divine revelation. We believe that every person is created in God's image, that all persons are of "sacred worth," and surely this is common ground, in the Wesleyan tradition for ministries with all people. Our doctrine of prevenient grace is the basis for the conviction that no one is outside of God's love and God's saving activity.

Justifying grace is the gift of salvation, which is ours through faith and apart from any merit. The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross. We are saved by grace, through faith, and this is a gift of God, not the result of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2). The assurance that we are justified by faith (Romans 5) was a strong emphasis in the Reformed tradition that flowed into our Wesleyan heritage.

Sanctifying grace is the journey toward holiness, and is our lifelong response to this grace. Here our divisions become evident. Many of those who emphasize personal holiness cannot embrace the practice of homosexuality as a behavior in the journey to becoming more Christ like. At the same time, there are others who value an intentional personal relationship with Christ and regard committed same-sex relationships as expressions of faithfulness. While there is no positive warrant for same-sex relationships in scripture, many interpret them more generally and constructively within Jesus' commandments about love, or the prohibition against them as culturally-conditioned teachings, similar to those around issues of slavery or polygamy or the role of women in the church. As United Methodists, we have different interpretations of scripture, and this is related to the value we also place on reason and experience. Social holiness sees the desire for inclusion as a historical movement, wedded to the struggle for civil rights and the dignity of personhood. The traditions of social holiness are deeply embedded in Methodism, from our early opposition to slavery to present day efforts to eradicate malaria.

4. The Simplicity and Complexity of Holiness

As we approach matters of sanctification, perfection and holiness, our judgments should be measured by an appropriate humility, or, in biblical language, the "fear of the Lord." The closer we come in our approach to the throne of grace, the more we become aware of our imperfections. This is a word of caution for persons who may see this matter in diametrically opposing ways.

The pursuit of holiness can bring out the worst and the best in us. At our worst, the pursuit of holiness can breed judgmentalism toward our brother or sister: "He does not believe in the authority of scripture" or "she is intolerant." The gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) are clear in cautioning us about our judgments of others. At our best, the pursuit of holiness immerses us in the love of God, which by intention flows into a love for our

neighbor (1 John 4). In the Wesleyan tradition, sanctification has always been understood, at the level of practice, as love of God and love of neighbor, the two great commandments of Jesus (Mark 12).

It is also true that the division of personal and social holiness is an artificial construct that expresses the political captivity of the church, and this division reveals the brokenness of Christ's body. To move beyond this polarization is to hear the command of the apostle Paul: "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12).

5. Exclusion as an Obstacle to Mission

Setting aside the dramatic interruptions at each of the last several United Methodist General Conferences, which have served only to harden the divisions in an increasingly global church, there is a steady and persistent change occurring, accompanied by prayer, conversations within families and in congregations, and reverse mentoring across generations.

This change is happening at the grassroots level, as local churches in the United States acknowledge the gifts of their own members and the mission field of gays and lesbians, and their families and friends, who feel excluded by the institutional church. Some of this sense of exclusion resides in the present language of the Book of Discipline (161f); some of it arises from negative experiences with religion; and some is the relentless stereotyping of American Christianity by a popular and secular media that cannot comprehend or communicate complexity around human sexuality and the church.

Many gay and lesbian Christians find fulfillment in their journeys as disciples of Jesus Christ in evangelical and mainline churches. At the same time, they often wonder why one particular lifestyle or issue or orientation is singled out for judgment; this present reality is surely not justified by the biblical attention given to homosexuality (in comparison, for example, to divorce and remarriage, or economic justice and poverty). This singular judgment is especially problematic for younger generations, and has been documented in recent research by evangelical and mainline scholars.

6. Patience as an Expression of a Catholic Spirit

I would encourage Christians who cannot accept gays and lesbians, in orientation or practice, to place the judgment of them (and all of us) in God's hands. As the Apostle Paul asks, "Who is in a position to condemn?" (Romans 8) And I would encourage gays and lesbians to be patient with their brothers and sisters in the church who have not walked their journey. This is not a justification for continued injustice. And yet it is also true that sexuality itself is a mysterious, complicated and emotionally-charged subject, and rational conversation and dialogue will emerge only if those who disagree come to the table hearing the admonition of James: "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (James 1).

Patience is here understood not as a false tolerance of difference. I am speaking of the patience of God toward us, and the calling we have, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to more fully reveal the image of God to each other. Such patience is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) in families and in congregations across our denomination. This patience is an essential mark of our mission with gays and lesbians, which itself is grounded in generous orthodoxy. Patience resides in our participation in the lifelong experience of grace, which is the power of God to transform us.

In the gospels, a vivid portrait of patience is found in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13). We are sometimes tempted to see the vineyard as more holy or just if those with whom we have conflict are no longer present. In the beautiful image of Jesus' parable, we grow together, wheat and tares, in the church. In this way, the church is a kind of "greenhouse" where we are planted, pruned (John 15) and thus transformed. To live together (even in our differences) is a gift of grace, and is essential in our maturing as disciples (218) until the harvest where God is judge.

In "The Character of a Methodist," John Wesley commented that "as to all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." And in "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," he insists that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is at best a slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part at all." His sermon on the "Catholic Spirit" is focused around a question and an answer taken from 2 Kings 10:15: "Is your heart right with my heart? If it is, then give me your hand." His interpretation of this verse of scripture is worthy of our reflection:

"If it is, give me your hand." I do not mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." I cannot; it does not depend on my choice. I can no more think than I can see or hear as I will. Keep you your opinion; I mine, and that as steady as ever. You need not endeavour to come over to me or bring me over to you. I do not desire to dispute those points or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Let all opinions alone on one side and the other: only, "give me your hand."

He likens the catholic spirit to the universal spirit or universal love, and concludes: "lastly, love me not in word only but in deed and in truth. So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God, and let us go on hand in hand." In the language of the Wesleyan tradition, a generous orthodoxy toward God is expressed through a catholic spirit toward each other (103), for the sake of our common mission in the world.

7. The Future of the United Methodist Church

Movement on the subject of gays and lesbians in the United Methodist Church has been shaped by our polity, particularly our process of revising the Book of Discipline every four years. Our present statement includes affirmation of gay and lesbian persons, a challenge to be in ministry with them and not to condemn them, and a statement that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching (161f). These ambiguities reflect the sense of where our church is, at the moment, and in this regard the church reflects the culture. Indeed, it reflects the ambiguity within many individuals.

A very good statement by Adam Hamilton and Mike Slaughter, lead pastors of two of our largest and most vital churches, asked the United Methodist Church to acknowledge the varying interpretations of scripture related to gays and lesbians within our denomination. This amendment to the Discipline was not accepted, even as it received significant support in the 2012 General Conference. At the time I was the clergy leader in one of the delegations, and my sense was that it was a true statement of our present reality. Given the low degree of trust, the polarization across the global church, and the ongoing and dramatic disruptions at General Conferences (by delegates, United Methodist observers, and advocates from outside the church), we were simply unable to speak the truth with each other.

I have also sensed, in the debate on homosexuality over several General Conferences, an incoherent understanding of the way of salvation: one argument is based upon prevenient grace and social holiness, the other on repentance and justifying grace; there is little or no common ground, and thus the two groups are talking past each other. At a denominational level, there is deep suspicion on each side about the other: In the past, some of the theological arguments for full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church have been less than orthodox; at the same time, many gay and lesbian Christians have responded to the grace of God, but have sensed a limited access to the means of grace. Ironically, many local churches have discovered ways to live graciously and faithfully, moving beyond the debate of abstract issues to the practices of support and accountability, or "watching over one another in love."

So where do we go from here, as a denomination? Our increasingly global church will certainly continue to shape our polity, even as sexual practices in other regions of the world that are not affirmed by the Discipline go unexplored. At each successive General Conference since 2004 we have witnessed an increase in voting membership among our brothers and sisters beyond the United States. Gathering as a global church, which is a gift, has had the unintended consequence of masking the decline of United Methodism in the United States. If we cannot rediscover the priority of making disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world (120) and learn from teaching churches that are doing just this, we will not have the capacity to fulfill God's mission, and the culture will cease to care about our positions on issues that are important to us.

8. Politics and Polity

In our denominational discernment around issues related to human sexuality, we would do well not to replicate the recent experience of the mainline churches of the United States. In each case, the result has been schism, with devastating legal and financial consequences and diminished resources for mission. It also seems clear that movement toward a more liberal political stance regarding human sexuality will not necessarily strengthen our denomination. Over the past ten years, evangelical, conservative, non-denominational and progressive churches in the United States have all experienced decline in worship attendance.

I do not fear disagreement on the issue of human sexuality. Divisions have been present in Christianity since the writings of the apostle Paul to the churches in Corinth, Galatia and Philippi in the first century. I do believe that there are resources inherent in the Methodist tradition -- our deep, inclusive and lifelong doctrine of grace, our practice of open communion, our connectionalism, and our way of seeing issues missionally rather than ideologically -- that can help us to navigate the future, if we allow these strengths to shape our thinking, praying and living. In our silence, we are not bearing witness to the gifts that God has given to the people called Methodist.

Some of the change, in terms of polity, will happen generationally. And yet polity will not be our salvation. Repentance, confession, forgiveness, and the journey to holiness happen in congregations and campus ministries, in small groups, Sunday school classes and circles of trust, in the sacraments that reveal God's unmerited grace in our most ordinary experience, and in sermons that remind us that sexual orientation is not our fundamental identity. Richard Hays has noted that "never within the canonical perspective (of scripture) does sexuality become the basis for defining a person's identity or for finding meaning and fulfillment in life. The things that matter are justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23: 23)."

Deeper still, we are created in the image of a God who loves us, who seeks to restore the image of love in each of us, an image that is disfigured by sin -- and, we could name these as the sins of intolerance and sexual immorality, both of which can be expressed by the political left and right, and by gay and straight persons. The deep, inclusive and lifelong work of grace accomplishes more than our acceptance of each other, which is not an end in itself. We are on a journey toward maturity, holiness, perfect love, and nothing less than communion with God and therefore with each other.

9. Good News for Gays and Lesbians

For the sake of the mission of God, I hope we will hear more clearly, and practice more faithfully, and in risk-taking ways, the statement in our Book of Discipline: we implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends (161f), but to be in ministry for and with all persons. My hope is grounded not only in the Discipline I have promised to uphold, but in the gospels, where, again and again, Jesus crosses boundaries to share table fellowship with outcasts.

Many gay and lesbian Christians perceive themselves to be cast out by the very churches that have formed them spiritually. The "incompatibility" sentence in the Discipline (161f), as it singles out one behavior to the exclusion of many others, contributes to this distancing, and many United Methodists simply do not know how to articulate the sentence's meaning or purpose. The result of this sentence's inclusion in our Discipline is an erosion in the church's teaching authority, not unlike the Roman Catholic Church's statements on contraception. Upon self-examination, we all live in ways that are "incompatible with Christian teaching"(Romans 3). This is our human condition, not the designation of one particular group of people, and is the occasion for the gift of God's grace. A generous orthodoxy would not single out a particular group for condemnation, nor would it omit a path toward restoration and reconciliation. At present, our resulting silence and impasse is not being used by God to convey the fullness of grace and truth.

A generous orthodoxy will rediscover the practices of Jesus in the gospels, calling all people into communion with him. Is that call a tacit approval of who we are, in our humanity? No, and this is true for gay and straight people. Again, the ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross, and this is the common ground of grace. This grace inspired a movement in 18th century England and 19th century America that made disciples who in turn transformed the world. But more fundamentally, this grace was invitational and evangelical.

I am convinced that God is calling us, in the 21st century, to share the gospel, in less harmful words and through more gracious actions, with all people, and surely among them are our gay and lesbian neighbors. I am also convinced that welcoming gays and lesbians will open us more fully to their gifts, among them testimonies of courage and patience, faith and grace. And I am equally persuaded that these callings flow from a clear and generously orthodox Christian faith, grounded in scripture and our tradition.

We are saved by the grace of God; this is true for straight and gay people, for individuals and for a denomination. Our future mission is not one of condemnation, but of invitation:

Come, sinners to the gospel feast
Let every soul be Jesus' guest.
You need not one be left behind
For God hath bid all humankind. (Charles Wesley)

For further reading: Charles Wesley, "Come Sinners to the Gospel Feast"; John Wesley, "A Catholic Spirit"; Adam Hamilton and Mike Slaughter, Statement to the 2012 General Conference; Richard Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament; Fleming Rutledge, A Generous Orthodoxy: A Statement of Purpose. www.generousorthodoxy.org; The 2012 United Methodist Book of Discipline. Thomas Langford, "Grace upon Grace", Vision and Supervision. Mark Stamm, Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest. David Kinnaman, unChristian. Hans Frei, "Response to Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," Trinity Journal, Spring, 1987. Thomas Langford, "Doctrinal Affirmation and Theological Exploration," Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church.