Unafraid and Unashamed

Facing the Future of United Methodism

by Robert “Wil” Cantrell
# Table of Contents

Dedication ........................................................... III

Foreword ............................................................... V

Introduction - *Option: Fear or Faith* ....................... 1

Chapter 1 - *Removing the Rose Colored Glasses* ...... 17

Chapter 2 - *Paying the Cover Charge* ...................... 37

Chapter 3 - *Looking in the Mirror* ......................... 53

Chapter 4 - *Embracing Diversity* ......................... 71

Chapter 5 - *Getting Serious About Connectionalism* ... 85

Chapter 6 - *What’s Your Agenda* ......................... 107

Chapter 7 - *Becoming the Loyal Opposition* .......... 123

Chapter 8 - *Church Unity* ................................... 133

Conclusion - *My Prayer For You, Me, and the UMC* .... 143

Acknowledgments .................................................. 147
Chapter One

Removing the Rose Colored Glasses

Our emotional attachment to the status quo often causes us to look at our church through rose colored glasses.

To say I am emotionally attached to United Methodism is a little like saying Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt is fast.

My paternal grandfather (“Pop”) grew up in a Methodist Episcopal Church, South congregation in the small town of Alexandria, Tennessee. Shortly after he left home for college, his father passed away and he was forced to return home to take care of his mother. During the great depression, he took a job with the Civilian Conservation Corp to assist with his mother’s needs back home.

He didn’t get to go to college, but it seemed like everyone who knew him thought he would have ended up being a lawyer or a preacher, given the opportunity.

As it turned out, he married my grandmother and began working in the newly constructed nuclear plants of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. They soon began attending a new
Methodist church, meeting in a movie theater. During his career, he carefully hoarded vacation days for three of his paramount priorities: trips with family, World Series games, and annual conference in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Some years he was a delegate. Other times he went on his own. Either way, he always attended the Holston Annual Conference and followed the proceedings closely.

Whenever I visited my grandparents, the dinner table conversations were filled with Pop’s stories about the churches, pastors, and bishops he knew. His dramatic tone turned each story into a hysterical sequence of events, a shameful act of ignorance, or a profound example of faithful Christian living. When I spent evenings at his home, I would stare at a bookshelf full of all the Holston Annual Conference journals. He had them all, in order by year, going all the way back to the 1950s.

My father heard a call to ministry during his college years and eventually became an ordained elder - our official term for clergyperson - in the Holston Conference. I grew up moving from parsonage to parsonage in my early years.

Like my father, I attended college planning to be an engineer, but plans changed and I emerged from college with a call to ordained ministry. At seminary, I struggled to relate to classmates who enrolled without a clear sense of calling. I knew exactly why I was going to seminary several years before I arrived, to be a United Methodist Minister. Their confusion confused me.

When people ask me about my hometown, I take a
deep breath and tell them: “My home town begins in the Appalachian coalfields of Southwest Virginia where there is a river with three forks. The middle and the south fork merge just a few miles outside of Abingdon, Virginia, then flow toward Kingsport, Tennessee where they combine with the North Fork to form the Holston River. Flowing south toward Knoxville, the Holston River and French Broad River converge to create the Tennessee River. The Tennessee River runs south through Chattanooga and shortly thereafter leaves God’s country. That river marks my home. From Southwest Virginia through Chattanooga is where I call home.”

As you might have guessed, the area I have just described corresponds to the geographic boundaries of the Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Needless to say, I am very fond of our current United Methodist structure. I intellectually understand the world-wide Church is bigger than United Methodism, but United Methodism has always been my church world. I know there are many diverse brands of churches in East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, but the Holston Conference has always been my church home. As a result, any conversation which hints at a reconfiguring of our structure causes my stomach to churn.

You might have a strong emotional connection to our configuration as well. Perhaps you have been at the same church for decades and the thought of conflict within the congregation you love so dearly pains you deeply. Maybe you have worked in ministry with other churches in your district and you cannot imagine not being closely aligned
in ministry with nearby United Methodist churches. It is possible that you have worked through Volunteers in Mission with United Methodist churches in far-away lands. The last thing you want to do is put our global connections in peril.

There is a chance you are like me. Maybe you have moved around quite a bit. In each new place you have needed a church home and you always found a United Methodist church that was just the right place for you.

In each new setting, you found comfort in seeing the cross and flame on the sign and knowing inside you would most likely find strong theology and thoughtful compassionate ethics taught from the pulpit, warm fellowship, Sunday School classes that teach and practice loving our neighbors, and mission opportunities to help meet the greatest needs of the community.

It’s possible you have been in theologically conservative United Methodist churches and in liberal United Methodist churches. If you are like me, you have felt the unmistakable love of Christ in each.

You may have a different story. Maybe you have lived outside the church for many years. Perhaps you realized your life was missing something foundational and turned to a United Methodist church. In that congregation, you found faith, forgiveness, saving grace, acceptance, meaning, and purpose for the first time. For you, church is truly a sanctuary from a world in which people often mistreat each other and where the dominant cultural attitudes lead to narcissistic self-centered living.

When the preacher talks about living as citizens of the
Kingdom of Heaven while sojourning here on earth, you get it. For you this is what church is all about, so when you hear there are conflicts in your denomination threatening its unity, you worry. The idea of Christians speaking ill of one another makes you feel like throwing your hands in the air and crying.

Conflict, rivalry, and mistrust are the ways of the world. They are not supposed to be the ways of the church.

Our emotional attachment to the status quo or revulsion with church conflict often causes us to look at our church through rose colored glasses. The problem with rose colored glass, which country singer John Conlee reminded the world of in his classic song of the same title, is that rose colored glasses tend to show us what we want to see, rather than what is really there.

Most everyone has a tendency to look at things they love through rose colored glasses. When we look at our denomination or local church, it’s easy to see only what we want to see. Doing anything else reveals our bumps and bruises, not just its beauty.

This habit of looking through rose colored glasses is common in churches of every size and type. I have heard churches describe themselves as “strong and growing” while shedding members and money for years. I have visited churches who pride themselves in their children’s ministry, but don’t have a single baby in the nursery.

Even when churches recognize their challenges, it is tempting to jump immediately to quick solutions which gloss over the real issues, but rarely solve anything.
Many times, when confronted with a problem, the initial response is to put more resources towards an existing ministry which often had been quite successful ten or twenty years earlier.

There’s a reason programs and ministries come and go. While some decline due to poor oversight, most eventually fade when the needs of persons and families change. Perhaps the only way to make lasting positive change is to seek to understand how the cultural context of the church’s community has changed. With that understanding we have a better chance of finding or creating ministries to fit the new context.

It is frightening to take a wide-eyed look at reality when that reality threatens the cherished institutions and traditions that have shaped our character and our souls. Fear tells us to look away.

Fear tells us to keep doing what we have always done and hope the outside world will go back to the way it used to be.

Faith tells a different story.

Faith tells us Jesus is the solid rock when we reach rock bottom. Faith tells us that God’s best work occurs in a graveyard.

Faith tells us it is only when we look at reality with wide eyes that we see the depth of our problems. Faith tells us our challenges pale in comparison to the depth of the love and power of our God.

In the following chapters, I invite you to look with me at the depth of division within United Methodism. Much of our division is centered around LGBTQ inclusion and
our tendency to forget God is ready and able to lead us to a faithful future.

**Unlikely converts**

The more I read the Bible, the more I learn to look for hope and inspiration in unlikely places. Of all places, I find a lot of hope in the story surrounding the people of Nineveh.

Jonah’s story is short, action-packed, and children love it. Let’s face it. What’s not to love about the story of man who is called by God to preach to people he hates, runs from God, gets on a boat, encounters a storm on the open seas and gets thrown overboard?

How could anyone not love a story which ends with Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, living in its stomach for three days, praying to God for deliverance, and is subsequently regurgitated onto dry land?

No wonder he captures our attention when he preaches to the people he hates and leads them to repentance, becoming so enraged by God’s mercy toward them he becomes depressed and contemplates taking his own life. Ultimately he hears God’s own voice describe God’s love for people who seemingly do not deserve it.

The character of Jonah is so fascinating, we immediately see this story from his point of view. I would like to challenge you to take out your Bibles and read the book of Jonah again. It won’t take long. Jonah takes up only two pages in most Bibles. This time when you read Jonah, don’t think of it as the story of Jonah. Think of it as the story of Nineveh. Imagine it from the perspective of a
resident of Nineveh.

In Jonah 1:2 God tells Jonah, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (NIV)

There is good reason for God to call Nineveh great. Nineveh had been an influential city in the Assyrian empire since 2600BCE. In Jonah’s days in the 8th Century BCE, Nineveh was on its way to becoming the largest city in the known world.

We learn in Jonah 4:11 Nineveh had more than 120,000 people in it. Historical investigation estimates this number to be fairly accurate which makes Nineveh much larger than Babylon or any other city in the region at the time. This is where Jonah goes to preach.

“Nineveh is an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.” (Jonah 3:3, NIV)

Jonah probably could have walked straight through Nineveh in one day, but if he wanted to stop and preach in each borough, it very likely would have taken three days to do so.

We think of Nineveh as a backward evil place as a result of Jonah’s disdain for it. No city becomes the largest city in the world, however, without a community of industrious leaders dedicated to planning, protecting, enhancing, and maintaining the city’s culture and infrastructure. Most likely, some of the greatest artists, thinkers, and craftsmen in the ancient world resided in Nineveh during this time.

What could be so wrong with the people of Nineveh to cause Jonah to hate them and God to feel an urgent need
to call them to repentance, describing them as “people who cannot tell their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11, NIV)?

Nineveh’s greatest crime may have been its position as the religious base for worship of Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Or it could be that Nineveh was hated because of the power of the Assyrian empire and the atrocities committed by its conquering soldiers. Regardless, the situation in Nineveh had gotten bad enough God decided the Ninevites must repent or their city would be no more.

From the perspective of the citizens of Nineveh, I imagine things looked pretty nice prior to Jonah’s unannounced preaching tour. They were the largest city in the world with the nicest architecture. The wealth and power of the Assyrian empire was growing and their wealth increased exponentially as the spoils of war flowed into the city gates.

It is difficult to imagine the Ninevites felt they had anything to learn from an unknown prophet from Israel, their weak neighbor to the South.

Yet, when the people of Nineveh heard Jonah preaching repentance, they did the strangest thing. They repented. From the king to the lowliest servant, they all repented and prayed for God to have mercy on them.

I have no idea why the Ninevites responded with repentance rather than revulsion to Jonah’s message. But I find a lot of hope in their response. Here they were, the residents of the most powerful city on earth, hearing a foreign message. They were warned. If they kept living like they had been, their lifestyles would lead to destruc-
tion. Amazingly, they set aside their pride and prayerfully began changing their lives.

Going further, if you read the book of Nahum you will learn Nineveh eventually went back to its old ways and ultimately faced destruction a little more than a hundred years later. Still, for more than a century after Jonah, Nineveh continued as a center of power, commerce, and art due to their sincere repentance.

If the people of Nineveh, who did not know their right hand from their left, can take an unflinching look at their lives and ask God how they need to be different, can we as United Methodist do less?

For many of us, General Conference 2016 was our Jonah moment. In Portland, we realized we could not keep on going down the same path and expect everything to be okay.

**A brief history of a long struggle**

The debate surrounding LGBTQ inclusion formally began in the United Methodist Church in 1972. After the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren merged to form the United Methodist Church in 1968, a committee was assigned to bring back suggested changes to The Social Principles contained in The Book of Discipline to the next General Conference to be held in Atlanta, Georgia.

Considering the social upheaval in the United States during the 1960s and the reality of a newly merged, increasingly diverse denomination, 1972 was a logical time for the United Methodist Church to ensure The
Social Principles expressed the most current sentiments within United Methodism. One of the changes presented to the General Conference in 1972 stated:

“Homosexuals, no less than heterosexuals, are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others and with self. Further, we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.”

After substantial debate, the phrase “We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching” was added to this section of The Social Principles. A statement on homosexual unions was also adopted which said, “We do not recommend marriage between two persons of the same sex.”

At this beginning of the United Methodist debate on homosexuality, two themes emerge that have been a part of the official United Methodist position on homosexuality ever since. First, the belief gay and lesbian people are persons of sacred worth who need their human and civil rights protected. Second, homosexuality was viewed as “incompatible with Christian teaching”.

Interestingly, though in today’s verbiage we often group issues concerning LGBTQ persons together, United Methodist polity has not followed this format. You may have noticed the 1972 General Conference did not officially address transsexuality. United Methodist polity clearly lays out several positions relating to homosexuality, however issues concerning transsexuality are left up
to the annual conferences in regards to ordination and to local churches and their pastors in regards to marriage.

If you would like a more detailed account of the legislative debates of each General Conference since 1972 surrounding homosexuality, I would instruct you to view the excellent slide show put together by Kathy Gilbert of the United Methodist News Service which can be found on umc.org. For the purposes of this book, I would like to focus on some of the major momentum shifts within the General Conference debates.

During the 1980 General Conference in Indianapolis, language opposing same sex unions was removed from The Discipline and an effort to ban “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being ordained was defeated. However, at the 1984 Baltimore General Conference, “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” were banned from being ordained or appointed to serve in any clergy role within the UMC.

While those with a progressive mindset likely hoped the votes at the 1980 General Conference were a sign greater degrees of inclusion would be adopted in the years to come, the 1984 General Conference clearly demonstrated the denomination was moving in a more conservative direction.

Another resounding defeat for progressive views occurred in the 1992 Louisville General Conference. Following statements which affirmed God’s grace is available to all and directing the United Methodist Church to be in ministry with all persons, a study

---

1 umc.org/news-and-media/gc2016-tackling-44-year-stance-on-homosexuality
commission was set up to bring recommendations to the 1992 General Conference pertaining to how to be in ministry with homosexual persons.

Once again, progressives hoped the study commission would lead the denomination to move towards full inclusion of homosexual persons. However, in Louisville, delegates voted 710-238 (75%-25%) to retain the statement describing homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teaching.

While some might have seen the Louisville vote as definitive, again there was a swing back toward the progressive direction at the 1996 Denver General Conference. Another attempt was made to repeal the language of incompatibility, but once again it was defeated.

This time, though, the vote was 577-378. Moving from a 75-25 vote to a 60-40 vote in just four years seemed to many like a harbinger of more progressive policies in the future.

The 2000 General Conference in Cleveland and the 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh produced some of the most painful moments in our denominational struggle. In Cleveland, progressive protests occurred which resulted in the arrests of more than 200 people including two United Methodist Bishops.

In Pittsburgh, as part of the protests, a communion chalice was broken. The image of the broken chalice became an emotional touchstone within United Methodism. To some, it poignantly symbolized the brokenness of a denomination that deems each person to be of sacred worth, yet denies some people the sacred chance to share
their gifts fully in ministry.

To others, it is seen as a sacrilegious image, producing suspicion of groups within the progressive movement. They feel these groups have made LGBTQ inclusion a greater priority than the church’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Somehow, even during these painful conferences, United Methodists of varying perspectives worked together to produce two of the more important statements to come out of the decades long debate.

In Cleveland, the sentence, “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends,” was added to The Social Principles during an era when increasing openness among LGBTQ persons was leading to increasing persecution within the United States.

Four years later in Pittsburgh in the aftermath of the arrests and the broken chalice, there was talk of a split in the denomination.

In response, delegates passed a Unity Resolution with an overwhelming vote of 869-41. It read:

“As United Methodists, we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of our disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for the common mission of making disciples throughout the world.”

During the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, a telling trend emerged in General Conference debates. General Conference is divided into two weeks. Any legislation that makes it to the floor of the General Conference for debate during the second week must first be brought to
the floor by the legislative committee assigned to consider it during the first week.

In these years, progressive legislation related to LGBTQ inclusion often came to the floor with support from its legislative committee. Once it reached the floor, however, it was defeated or replaced with more conservative language while being debated by the full General Conference.

The legislative committee votes caused many within United Methodism to believe more LGBTQ inclusion was inevitable, which produced optimism among progressive voices and caused more conservative United Methodists to wonder how long they could remain in the denomination.

This trend continued until the **2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida.** At the Tampa conference, legislation came to the floor through a minority report of the legislative committee to change the language stating that homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity and replace it with a statement recognizing the differences of opinion within United Methodism regarding LGBTQ inclusion.

As part of the debate, Rev. Adam Hamilton and Rev. Mike Slaughter, two widely respected pastors in the denomination, with deep connections to progressive, moderate, and conservative constituencies, spoke in favor of language that recognized the genuine disagreement over LGBTQ inclusion. For many people, this seemed like the watershed moment when the historic opposition to homosexuality in The Discipline would be changed.

Once more, no such change occurred. Following the
narrow defeat (47% for and 51% against) of the legislation put forward by Rev. Hamilton and Rev. Slaughter, other similar legislative proposals were soundly defeated. After these votes, protests immediately shut down the work of the General Conference and all remaining legislation relating to human sexuality was tabled indefinitely in an effort to restore order to the General Conference.

After 2012, some saw United Methodism beginning to move back toward a more conservative direction. Others, buoyed by the narrow defeat of the Hamilton/Slaughter proposal and historic civil right gains for the LGBTQ community in the United States, believed the 2016 General Conference would move the UMC in a more progressive direction. These progressive hopes were further stoked in 2015 by recommendations coming from the Connectional Table, the highest ranking body charged with guiding the denomination between General Conferences. The Connectional Table called for allowing pastors and churches to decide whether to perform same-sex weddings and to allow annual conferences to decide the standards for ordination in regards to human sexuality.

By the time the 2016 General Conference began in Portland, Oregon, concern for the unity of the United Methodist Church ran high as plans coming from conservative constituencies calling for an “amicable separation” were gaining traction with a much broader audience. During the first week of the conference, a series of procedural votes as well as votes within legislative committees confirmed that a growing majority of delegates held conservative positions on issues of LGBTQ inclusion.
Leaders recognized a floor debate could lead to protests, resulting in a complete shutdown of the General Conference. In addition, facing the possibility of a poorly orchestrated split within United Methodism occurring during the final week of General Conference, delegates took the unprecedented step of asking the Council of Bishops to propose a way forward for the denomination.

The Bishops responded by recommending a special commission be set up to study the issue with the possibility of calling a special session of General Conference to be convened in 2018 or 2019 for the sole purpose of dealing with the conflict surrounding LGBTQ inclusion. The Bishops’ plan was narrowly adopted (428 – 405). In the fall of 2016, the special commission was formed and began its work with hopes for a special session of General Conference to be held in February or March of 2019 dealing solely with these issues.

At this point, you might be wondering how so many people of various perspectives, believing more progressive policies within United Methodism were inevitable, could have miscalculated so dramatically. How could the United Methodist Church move in a conservative direction while the broader society moved in a more progressive direction? What happened? What changed?

What changed were the demographics of our denomination. As the culture of the United States has become more inclusive of LGBTQ persons, so has a growing percentage of United Methodists within the United States. However, the United Methodist Church has seen a significant decline in the membership in the United States
which is especially pronounced in geographical areas which tend to be most progressive. At the same time, United Methodism has experienced tremendous growth in Africa where social standards for human sexuality are much more conservative.

In 2008, the United Methodist Church welcomed the former Protestant Methodist Church of Côte d’Ivoire and its 700,000 members into the UMC. This merger accelerated the changing demographics of General Conference delegates who are selected from the annual conferences based on the membership of their annual conferences.

In 2016, 58% of delegates came from the United States and 30% came from Africa. As recently as 1995, 88% of all United Methodists resided in the United States. As our demographics have changed so too have our voting trends.

Is the UMC still United Methodist?

In the time since the 2016 General Conference, much has happened. The Western Jurisdiction, elected and consecrated Rev. Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian woman, to the office of Bishop. Many progressive voices hailed Bishop Oliveto’s election as an act of “Biblical obedience,” even if it meant being disobedient to The Discipline which contains the policies and church laws of the denomination.

Others saw Bishop Oliveto’s election as exhibiting blatant disregard for the shared covenant of the United Methodist Church and wondered how to stay in covenant with those who openly and joyfully break the agreement.

Meanwhile conservative groups of United Methodists
formed the Wesleyan Covenant Association. Its founders celebrated the Wesleyan Covenant Association as, “an alliance to advance vibrant, scriptural Christianity within Methodism,” where evangelical, orthodox United Methodists could come together to encourage and support one another in their shared ministry.²

On the other hand, substantial numbers of moderate and progressive United Methodists viewed the Wesleyan Covenant Association as working to create the infrastructure necessary to separate from the United Methodist Church and form a new more conservative Methodist denomination.

The glorious dream of United Methodism is to be a denomination of diverse voices united by shared beliefs in basic Christian tenets, Wesleyan views of grace, and the shared covenant established by Methodist church polity.

With progressive groups openly violating our methods for church organization and conservative groups calling for “amicable separation,” United Methodists now must confront a fateful question:

Is the United Methodist Church, as it is currently constituted, still “United” or “Methodist?”

---

²  www.wesleyancovenant.org