Defining and Growing an Inclusive, Gracious and Evangelical Center: The Future(s) of The United Methodist Church

By Bishop Ken Carter

Featuring a foreword from Gil Rendle

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It often seems that we are never far from our origins. And so, the angst about what is to divide us and what is it that unites us in Christian community has come to visit us again. In St. Paul’s day it was the primary difference between Jew and non-Jew, but also the divides such as free and slave, male and female. In our own day the conversation is most volatile in the divide driven by sexual orientation, but secondarily by differences in theological orientation as well. To whom is Christ’s new freedom to be given; on whom are limits to be placed?

Paul’s vocation, deeply felt as his life’s work, was to bridge the divide in “a ministry of reconciliation.” Regularly speaking and writing to people beset by their differences, Paul encouraged them to be what NT Wright calls “a working model of the new creation,” reflecting God’s curious wisdom and order into the world. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” wrote Paul in his centerpiece statement of the new way of being for both Jews and non-Jews alike. (Philippians 2:5)

To be a working model of God’s new creation is indeed difficult work for the church, both then and now. Differences are often more easily uncovered than sameness and people move toward their differences with some ease. Clarity is given to the differences as people talk – language is developed, evidence collected, images and metaphors shaped, positions taken. The talking has been going on now for decades and differences are now in sharp relief.

That which is shared, that which rests at the center, that which holds us together in Christ, is not found in talking, but in deep listening. This is the far harder task. It is not a search for agreement where there is no agreement. It is a search for understanding. How can people who have each been formed in faith by the same denomination come to such different expressions in their faith? How do children, told the same Gospel stories in Sunday School, mature into adults who stand against one another’s understanding of faith?

It is not now to persuade one another about who is right and who is wrong. The talking is now more than sufficient. What is needed now is to listen deeply to one another to understand the real, but partial, truths held by the different voices talking so loudly to be heard. We need now the discipline of listening deeply enough to others, and to ourselves, to also hear the temptations that would limit us from real Christian community. Paul did not ask the people in those first fledgling communities to agree with one another. He asked them to find a commonness in sharing “the mind of Christ” that would provide a new way to see and to be in the world.

In the following monograph, Bishop Ken Carter invites us into the difficult work of listening that comes from emptying ourselves of our own conclusions long enough to hear the portion of truth that others hold, and to see the partial limitations of our own hardened positions. Agreement is not the issue. Most of us do believe that our United Methodist denomination will necessarily move ahead only through some form of organizational differentiation. But, is there not some Wesleyan / Methodist / Christian center that connects us sufficiently to allow enough relationship so that we can recognize each other as one in faith, and that can enable us to instruct one another in the mind of Christ that over centuries has proven sufficiently difficult for any of us to reflect on our own?
By position Ken has served as bishop of the Florida Conference and as President of the Council of Bishops of our global denomination. By invitation he served as one of the three moderating bishops of the Commission on a Way Forward that brought its report to the Special Session of General Conference, 2019.

As both Christian leader and as disciple, Ken has done his own work, intentionally seeking out the people and groups with different voices without constraining his attention by whether he agreed or disagreed with what he was hearing. In all these ways he has done his deep listening. One product is the following monograph that comes from that practiced discipline of listening. It is a theological treatise. As such, it invites and deserves slow, patient, thoughtful, prayerful reading. The instruction I have found in it has been, in fact, uncovered by multiple such readings.

Ken has been an on-going conversation partner with me, sharing his discoveries and thinking over time. I am privileged to provide this monograph to readers with the invitation to join a conversation that is being driven by deep listening.

-Gil Rendle
Convergence and Divergence

My great-grandfather was born in Sanford, Florida. He was a Congregationalist. My grandfather was born in Winter Park, Florida. He was a Quaker. My mother, who died this year, was a Baptist. I am a Methodist by choice. In my lifetime we became the United Methodist Church, in 1968. I was 11. Several traditions flowed into it. That is a complex and important story, and (spoiler alert!), we may be in a time when streams that have converged will now diverge.

We are in a divergent time. We have left behind a convergent time. We united as a church during that convergent time, the 1960s. Gil Rendle writes that in a convergent time “the questions and answers are the same for everyone.” In a convergent culture, the person who is different hides or conforms. In a convergent culture, immigrants arrive and they blend in.

In a divergent culture, we are not asking the same questions and the answers are multiple. In a divergent culture, we lead with our differences. This is not about one of us or another. This is the air we breathe.

A connectional church, an annual conference, even a denomination is an exercise in convergence, at the precise time when we place a higher value on divergence. Each is important.

Divergence lifts up voices and convictions that are suppressed or oppressed. There are likely alternative strategies within our smaller groups. Different people have different hoped for outcomes.

Convergence is mutual support, sharing of resources, the strong and the weak together and what they have to teach each other. It is connection.

I am attempting to describe what is happening all around us, in the United Methodist Church, and in the cultures of the United States. At times you will likely want to be with more like-minded friends (divergence). And at times you will see the strength of what we do together (convergence).

My interest is in the whole, in defining and growing the center. Many of you continually tell me two things. You want to be divergent in some way. You want to be the exception. Or somehow you are the exception. And you need what the conference or denomination can give you. A pathway to serve, a protection, a basic provision of a need.

This is why we are a connection. It is my interest, and what the church has asked me to do, to keep us in connection.

We are in an in-between time and the work is both-and. We are in-between St. Louis (the Special Session in February, 2019) and the annual conferences which took place in the summer of 2019, and whatever comes next. We are both-and in that we are resolving difference and we are focused on the mission. All of this is confusing, and there is little certainty to it. And we are simply going to be there for some time.

An in-between, both-and time is challenging and even chaotic. It can create anxiety in us, and we are sometimes tempted to either retreat to the past (nostalgia) or blame someone else (scapegoating). I invite us simply to name the reality that we are living here, in this season, together as God’s people. What can God teach us?
Honesty About How We Differ

In my sermon at the beginning of the Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis, I mentioned the Ted Talk of Chimamanda Adichie entitled “The Danger of a Single Story.” We are a people with many stories and testimonies that derive from many different experiences.

As I have listened across our conference and across our church, and more specifically this fall as I listened to a gathering of conservative/evangelical leaders and center/progressive leaders, and forgive me for the labels, these are some of the experiences, testimonies and stories:

**Harm**—The testimony of many LGBTQ persons and their allies that the words of our church have done and continue to do harm to them and to those on the periphery of our church who feel excluded from God’s welcome.

**Conscience**—The struggles of many of our members about how to remain in a church that is identified with our present language about homosexuality.

**Silence**—The conviction among many conservatives that they have not been heard, are not understood and are mischaracterized in the aftermath of the Special Session.

**Fatigue**—The sense of many conservatives and progressives that this is a recurring experience which in their minds is an unnecessary expenditure of time, energy and resources.

**Anxiety**—The experience of some leaders in central conferences who see this as a primarily U.S. and Western European matter, and whose concern is about disruption of mission partnerships.

**Differentiation**—The strategy of many local churches that are re-branding themselves with a counter-narrative to the General Conference, through banners or full-page newspaper ads and sermons.

**Resistance**—The actions of many that are in direct contrast to the polity of the church, for the purpose of social change, and the responses of those who monitor them.

**Reorientation**—The hope of many that the church will now give its attention to other matters of concern, among them poverty, local church vitality, climate change and racism.

Some wondered, after St. Louis, if they had a future in this church.

Others wondered, after their Annual Conference sessions, if they had a future in this church.

So, what is the future?
A Calling To Grow The Center

My calling has been to grow the center and to include as many as possible in that. I genuinely move towards all kinds of people and listen to and include every possible voice along the spectrum. The attention in social media and media is to the extremes, what I have called the convictional edges.

We are most often scattered. And my itinerant role is to move toward you. When we come together it is to do the work of conferencing. I am serving in my eighth year in the Florida Conference. At the end of my first year, Chuck Weaver, who was serving as assistant to the bishop, and I were in conversation and he said to me, “You might know more about the Florida Conference than any other person.”

I share that not to boast in any way. If it is true, it is simply because no one else has specific responsibilities that take them to churches across a vast state like Florida, from Sparr and Avon Park to Inverness and Pahokee, from Miami and Tallahassee to Jacksonville and Fort Myers to Orlando and Tampa.

In my roles in the denomination over the past three years, I have met with bishops from every part of the world, leaders of renewal and caucus groups, emerging leaders, seminarians, pastors of large churches, constituents representing streams of our tradition that have been excluded, and those on the outside of our church seeking to understand us.

You have welcomed me to meals, to your churches, into your lives. As challenging and divergent as this work is, I am blessed to do it. And I do it with you.

For my work, there are basic tasks that must be carried out—making appointments, presiding at annual conference, presiding at the COB, preaching in local churches, responding to conflict, which sometimes takes the form of complaints.

Underneath these basic tasks is always the subterfuge of uncertainty and anxiety, fatigue and fear. We are simply going to be there for some time. A question I would ask of you is this. What kind of annual conference are we going to be this year? What kind of denomination are we going to be? I want to call upon your maturity. I want to ask us not to do harm to one another. I want to ask us not to exaggerate our differences. I want to ask us to see the good in each other.

• Can a progressive see the covenantal beauty in a conservative person?
• Can a conservative see the passion for the marginalized in a progressive person?

My core values are to keep us in connection with each other, to try to do what is best for the local church, to do what is in the long term interest of the annual conference and the denomination, to seek the unity of the church but not at anyone’s expense, and to appreciate and focus on our strengths.

At the moment, these strengths are...

• Development of new churches and fresh expressions of church
• An exceptional pipeline of younger clergy across our church
• A number of dynamic larger churches
• In many places, the right pastors in the right settings and more diverse leadership
• Innovation and design thinking for sustainability
• A more open and critical reflection about colonialism
• A more open and critical reflection about our segregated past and our legacy of institutional racism
• Faithful and better conversations about the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in our life together
There are at least three forms of behavior and rhetoric in U.S. United Methodism at present. These expressions are easy to see and differentiate.

Each has a particular temptation, and yet across them is a common need for divine grace.

Of course each of these three forms presents a positive case for who they are—justice, covenant, unity.

Across them is our common need for grace. We overcome temptation through humility, confession, attention to small things, awareness that we need a teachable spirit, dependence on God.

The spiritual challenge for a church that includes these mindsets—and we do and always have—is that apart from facing our temptations, we simply replicate them in new forms of community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called these the churches of our “wish dream.” And yet:

- A conservative church will soon differentiate into a more and less pure form of church. Can divorced clergy lead? Can divorced laity serve?
- A progressive church will devour itself in competing claims for righteousness and justice.
- And a centrist church will suppress the very real matters of conscience among the left and right that for these persons is the heart of the gospel.

Both conservative and progressive leaders have spoken to me privately of the problems of continuing division (conservative) and devouring (progressive) in their communities. Centrists simply feel pulled in both directions!

To face our temptations is to see the limitations of our own perspective. It is to refrain from demonizing the other as a form of work avoidance, which is the neglect of our own spiritual work. The One Church Plan, which was unacceptable to many progressives and conservatives, was and is an attempt to provide a home where mature leaders can do this spiritual work, where they can work out their own salvation amidst the implications for their relationships with each other.

At the heart of this spiritual work is our common need for grace. We need this grace from each other and from God. This is by definition the space of a growing center that is inclusive, that seeks unity and yet honors difference and conscience. It is the space where diverse people gather to praise God, to confess their sins, to pray for each other, to hear the word, to receive the sacrament, to respond to a call to discipleship and to go into the world as transformed people.

It is what most of our local churches look like on Sunday mornings when they gather to worship God.
The Diverse Narratives within Scripture

As you might imagine, I get a few letters asking me about what the Bible says, or reminding me of what the Bible says.

In the scriptures there are narratives and counter-narratives; for example, Isaac and Ishmael, or Sarah and Hagar. Our narratives shape our identities and our identities are also formed in the groups of which we are a part, groups that tell us their stories and how to interpret them.

So what if covenant and love are potential narratives and counter-narratives in scripture. Is the cross covenant or love, or both?

And what if liberation and orthodoxy are potential narratives and counter-narratives in scripture. Is the cross liberation or orthodoxy, or both?

What if narratives are the stories we are most likely to tell about ourselves, given our life experience and place in the world? And what if counter-narratives are the stories that we are less likely to see, or more likely to miss?

What if we have blindspots in reading scripture?

Again...

Can a progressive see the covenantal beauty in a conservative person?
Can a conservative see the passion for the marginalized in a progressive person?

If we belong to a group that is formed by one narrative, we may move toward seeing the truth in the other group’s narrative. But, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, “In situations of stress, sympathy for the other side can be seen as betrayal.” And we are in season of anxiety and stress.

And, thus, we revert to our tribes. I heard the columnist David Brooks define a tribe recently as a form of community organized around shared hatred of the other.

How do we struggle and wrestle with the scriptures that have narratives and counter-narratives within them? We can say that our identities are shaped by the scriptures, but they are also shaped by the groups to which we belong.

The challenge comes when our interests—our well-being, even our salvation—are clear, but this conflicts with our identities. An even greater challenge emerges when we grasp that our salvation is bound with the salvation of others. And so we find ourselves doing things against our own interests because of our (group) identity. This is self-destructive, but it does avoid the pain of risking the disappointment or rejection of our own group.

The alternative is to strengthen or to re-weave the connection.
**Convergence, Divergence and a Redefined Connectionism**

As United Methodists, we need to redefine connectionalism. This was noted in the *Mission, Vision and Scope* of the Way Forward (2016). It is more true today, after the Special Session in St. Louis. Words like “resistance,” “space,” “gracious exit” and “division” have become the common language of our vocabulary.

The connection is strained and some have come to the conclusion that separation is a given. “Isn’t it obvious?,” a letter will begin.

- The scripture prohibits homosexuality.
- Or Jesus commands us to love all people.

And then, let those who disagree depart. It’s a Paul and Barnabas moment. Our differences are irreconcilable. Let them go in peace.

I want to say clearly that my diagnosis of what is going on is not a privileged one in contrast to those of passionate progressives or ardent conservatives. But I have found myself closer to some kind of center. As I have written, this is not the mushy middle. It is something else. It is an attempt to hold together the tension of the opposites.

I love being in relationship with vastly different people. I do not want to give up on them. I hope they will not give up on me. I hold a traditional and biblical faith, rooted in the radical grace of Jesus Christ, stretching the church toward a much greater inclusion. To hold such a perspective crosses neatly defined boundaries. It is messy. But it is present throughout the New Testament, from the parables of Jesus to the decisions of the early church in Acts, to the apostolic definitions of sin and grace. This was at the heart of my book *Embracing the Wideness of God’s Mercy* (Abingdon, 2018).

We are a global church, a democratic church, an evangelical church, an episcopal church, a local church, a missional church and a protestant church. We hold all of this in tension. And we struggle here with unity and uniformity. A unity distinct from uniformity looks for something beneath the surface. Shared values. The great commission. The great commandment. Our common need for grace. Sacred worth. The heart.

**A Table of Faithfulness, Unity and Fruitfulness**

As an elder and bishop, I have stood many times at a table and raised my hands to God and said the words of the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit present in the bread and cup that we receive, and then repeated the aspiration that we will actually be the body of Christ for the world. And then the powerful appeal to God:

*Make us one with Christ—this is faithfulness,*  
*make us one with each other—this is unity,*  
*and make us one in ministry to all the world—this is fruitfulness.*

The Holy Spirit does sustain leaders through a complex season. There remains for all of us a charge to keep, a God to glorify. I pray that we remain in communion with each other. Since my installation as president of the Council of Bishops, I have often found myself in churches, kneeling at altars, praying for the faithfulness, unity and fruitfulness of the church. These are linked together and form a whole. We cannot be one without abiding in Jesus; we cannot be spirit-filled without loving our neighbor; we cannot experience revival as we sow divisions in the body.

And so we continue to pray: Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.
So, What is the Way Forward from here?

I was blessed to serve as a moderator with the Commission on a Way Forward, that led to the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019.

I do wonder what is that way forward now? I share the sense with many leaders that we are not in the same place we were before the called Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis, or the U.S. annual conferences last summer. We are in a new space. And this is my sense of our purpose and calling.

It is to redefine our connection (which was the Mission, Vision and Scope of the Way Forward) as an inclusive, gracious and evangelical center, which is an expression of the love of God and neighbor, which is the way we practice holiness.

This will include removing the incompatibility language, blessing and not disparaging those who dissent from this and giving each other the space and distance we are seeking.

A number of plans being prepared for the next General Conference (May, 2020), from all sides of the church, seek to accomplish this. It is important in the process that we seek the reform of the church and the renewal of the church. It is important in the process that we do not seek the destabilization of the church or the dissolution of the church.

In the meantime, we seek a way through the current impasse that avoids as much damage to our spirits and relationships as possible (Anatomy of Peace).

This will preserve as much capacity as possible while reforming our governance and infrastructure to free us up for a bold and loving witness. This is negotiation for the sake of sustainability.

This will increasingly bring to the center voices of next generation leaders and the importance of the public mission (Robert Quinn), those who have not yet said yes to Jesus Christ, in addition to the private mission of listening to those already inside the walls of our churches.

Any plan or model for the future must take place with the annual conference clearly in mind. This is where our greatest strength and trust resides. This is where decisions related to clergy and property are lodged. I commend the insightful article by Lovett Weems, Jr. entitled “General Conference is Broken, Annual Conferences Are Not.”

The dialogue with Africa can be framed by the missional partnerships between African and U.S. annual conferences. This is where the center’s greatest strength and trust resides. These partnerships should be documented, stories of mutual blessing told, financial resources acknowledged, long-term relationships celebrated. Add to this Africa University and Imagine No Malaria.

In conversations about resources, the elected delegates will make the final decisions about the negotiation of the denomination’s assets. The elected delegates are the stakeholders or the board of directors in our polity, to use a corporate image. However, conversations are the currency of change (Margaret Wheatley), mediation is ongoing, and it is needed. We should not use a framework of winning and losing, but of preserving resources for next generations, and blessing each other in new expressions of Methodism.
The conversations should focus on **inflicting as little harm as possible** to each other and continuing to ask for a moratorium on punitive measures related to LGBTQ actions. We need a peace process—how we can live together with our differences, in the spirit of Ephesians 2—but we also need a cease-fire, which is seeking restorative justice when we have done harm to one another.

A growing center is possible. I am in the tradition of the shepherd who does not want even one sheep to leave the fold (Luke 15). I have profound gratitude for those who participate in the United Methodist Church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. In so doing, they are becoming disciples of Jesus Christ who are transforming the world. I have a corresponding appreciation for the ways we are unique—there is a diversity of gifts—and for the ways we are in mission together as the United Methodist Church—we are one in Christ Jesus.

I invite us to conclude with a shared spiritual practice, that is rooted in our tradition as followers of Jesus in the Wesleyan tradition.

Let us be in prayer.

**An Examen in the Wesleyan Tradition**

**Grace**

I begin today by claiming my identity as one who is created in the image of God.

I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

I am of sacred worth and am uniquely gifted.

When I come to myself—the truth of who I am—I experience blessing.

I reflect on those persons who have been a part of my life today, who have seen this in me, who have encouraged me.

Have I really been attentive to them?

Have I fully accepted their gifts?

I stay with these encounters for a moment.

I see the faces of these persons and listen to their voices again.
Repentance

Next, I see the moments of my day that I regret. I rely upon the fruit of the Holy Spirit, especially love, peace and patience, for help in returning to these moments. This is uncomfortable. And yet repentance that is of God is a return to the love God wants for me. It is the journey home.

For a moment, I consider the ways I am stuck, or lost. Why do I resist change?

I ask for the courage to return to God.

Confession

As I reflect on the day, I ask God to reveal the harm that I have done to others and the harm I have done to myself. I make an honest assessment of my failures and mistakes. Where I have not loved my neighbor as myself, I confess that I have sinned.

What is the sin that separates me from those closest to me? How does arrogance, judgmentalism, ego or privilege distort the way I see others? How have I buried my birthright gifts and refused to enjoy and share them?

Faith

I ask for the gift of God’s healing and renewing grace. I set aside my own claims of righteousness or merit. In faith I say yes to Jesus Christ, who loves me and gave himself for me. I place my trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of salvation.

And for a moment, I consider how I am actually living by faith. Do I find it difficult to trust?

I return to the good news that I embraced when I first began to walk with Jesus. I ask that God would empower me to live this day in faith.

Love

God has created me. God knows me. God’s sacrificial love in the crucified Jesus is for my salvation. When I have received the gift of faith, I become a more loving person. And when I have placed my faith and trust in Jesus Christ, I become a part of his body, which is the church.

I boldly ask that I will be made perfect in love in this life—that I will love God, and love the people I encounter each day in God.

I ask that my love for God would grow as I read the scriptures, spend time in prayer and receive communion as often as possible.

I ask God to give me a greater love for others, especially those to whom I have made promises and covenants, and those with whom I have differences.

I ask God for the happiness is taking the daily risk of living in grace, practicing repentance and confession, and growing in a faith that expresses itself through love.

Amen.