

Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality, Gender and Race in a worldwide perspective

In January 2014 the Executive of the Council of Bishops installed a Task Force on Human Sexuality, Gender and Race to facilitate a world-wide conversation as it has been recommended by the Council in its meeting in Lake Junaluska in November 2013. From the beginning, we focused on the question how we as bishops live faithful to the call "to guard the faith, to seek the unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole church....".

We committed ourselves to intensify our prayer lives and to ask colleagues to do the same, to learn from our colleagues how to offer pastoral care to all people, to provide room for intensive conversations and to share learning material within the Council.

- At the COB meeting in Oklahoma City, we facilitated listening sessions on core values and best practices in the work for unity. In Berlin, we had a fishbowl discussion on guiding principles for the ministry and mission in our diverse contexts.
- We recognize that the work of the task force is enormously complex. We have dealt with specific topics, all of them which need special attention and are impacted by cultural dynamics that are different in the various places around the globe where United Methodists live. We also recognize we have limited time and resources. Nevertheless we are grateful for the progress that has been made:
- We, the Bishops, dared to say publicly that we are not of one mind on many questions including human sexuality, gender and race, *and* we are committed to learn and grow together and commit to lead the Church in the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
- Some of us contributed to the book "Finding our Way". The book and the panel discussion November 1, 2014 turned out to be a helpful tool to engage in conversation with United Methodists.
- The Council of Bishops issued a pastoral letter on racism, saying: *"As United Methodists, we affirm that all lives are sacred and that a world free of racism and xenophobia is not only conceivable, but worthy of our pursuit. We renew our commitment to work for a Church that is anti-racist and pro-humanity, believing that beloved community cannot be achieved by ignoring cultural, racial and ethnic differences, but by celebrating diversity and valuing all people"*.
- We embrace an increasing commitment to serve as spiritual leaders in preparation of General Conference.

- We are on a steep learning curve in relation to what it really means to be a worldwide church.

We received all of the input and recommendations from the Council in the intensive conversations in Oklahoma City and Berlin and integrated them by formulating seven core values for us as Episcopal leaders and for our denomination. We, the bishops, serving as your task force, commit ourselves to live with these core values and we encourage our colleagues to join us.

1. God's Grace for All

As Wesleyan Christians, we affirm that God's gracious gift of grace is available to all. As leaders, we are called to proclaim and live this reality. The scripture reminds us that there is no place where God is not present (*Psalms 139*); the Spirit is poured out on all flesh. Throughout our lives we are going on to perfection, in response to God's prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. In our life together, we err on the side of grace (*Acts 15*), extending hospitality through the open communion table that includes the "fits" and "misfits".

As episcopal leaders, we are bishops of everyone; this is the general superintendency to which we have been called. Therefore we actively oppose all forms of discrimination; God shows no partiality (*Acts 10*). All are created in the image of God (*Genesis 1*). Further, we oppose racism and injustice in all its forms and seek to promote internal and external equity in our denominational life.

2. We live in Covenantal Relationships

As God's people, we proclaim and live our theology of connection in a specific way: we are in covenant with God, connected to each other through vows of church membership, professions of faith and sisters and brothers in the human family. When we describe our life together, we always note that we are speaking about people, not about "problems" or "issues".

As Bishops, we freely enter into sacred covenants with the church, through baptism, confirmation, ordination and consecration. We understand our church to be informed through practice and democratic engagement. It is conciliar rather than confessional, with theology and doctrine discerned in conferences over two hundred years. Our covenant life is both external (our commitments to each other and to received tradition) and internal (the role of conscience). It is freely embraced and life-giving.

We believe that covenantal relationships are based on transparency, competence and integrity. We are formed, over time, to trust God and each other, and to become more trustworthy. We

also know that our Covenant God is always calling us into relationships that transcend our tribal, national and political loyalties, toward friendship with the stranger and the other.

In this way the very specific covenant of consecration as bishop is linked to the affirmation of the church declared at our baptisms, as a people “of all nations, ages and races”.

3. We keep our Consecration Promises

We reaffirm our calling “*to guard the faith, to seek the unity and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church; and to supervise and support the Church’s life, work and mission throughout the world.*”

We confess that we have not always been faithful to these promises, and we recognize our lack of accountability. We claim our identity as servants of the whole church, as pilgrims in a common discernment, and as members of an accountable community. We claim again the common experience of our consecration. We seek to be constantly aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit, to the end that we are a visible symbol of the unity of the United Methodist Church and the universal Body of Christ. This public role will include acts of visible repentance (see core value 4) and evangelical witness, which we hope to model for clergy and laity.

In our spiritual leadership, we will pray, preach and teach in a way that the flock is nourished by the Great Shepherd. We will also seek to build bridges with leaders of other denominations and other faiths, for the common good of our people and our planet.

4. We are committed to Repentance

As bishops, we acknowledge with the apostle Paul that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3). In our leadership we are to proclaim and live a call to repentance. The God who created us has begun a good work in us and will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1); in the interim we are honest in our failures, as a church. We must therefore be “fruit inspectors”, who reckon with the lack of faithfulness that leads to an absence of fruitfulness.

We call the church to rediscover the purpose of conferencing as context for confession of sin, watching over one another in love, trusting in the power of God to transform, and the subsequent growth in holiness. As bishops who love the church, we nevertheless remember and confess our flawed history: too often we have been silent in the face of evil and complicit in the practice of injustice.

We therefore call the church to live into its liturgical confession: “We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will. We have broken your law, we have rebelled

against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.”

5. We serve as Messengers of Hope

We hear a call for more engaged leadership by the bishops, toward a clearer vision of the future. We offer these specific commitments, as men and women set aside to shepherd the flock that is the United Methodist Church across the world:

We will intensify our prayer life. We will continue to have substantive and prayerful conversation within the Council. We will walk with the people of our areas and particularly those elected to the delegations to the 2016 General Conference, and seek together to discern a way forward into God's preferred future, particularly with regard to human sexuality, race and gender.

We call for congregations to reflect on the ways that they are and can be in ministry with persons in the LGBT community, and acknowledging and celebrate the ways we are blessed by their gifts.

We acknowledge there will be faithful followers of Jesus Christ who choose to leave the United Methodist Church over irreconcilable differences. As leaders of the UMC we must be a faithful witness to the gospel and encourage support and offer thanksgiving for their ministry and commit to ongoing prayer for future kingdom work.

We call for even greater support for the young, the new and diverse people of faith that offer hope and promise of greater unity for the future; recognizing their capacity for bridge building.

We must become better storytellers of the great things God is doing in our midst that incarnates our core values into a common narrative.

We acknowledge that the unity of our church is strained. And yet the source of our life together inspires us and gives us hope:

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6)

6. We are called to be a Missionary Church

As bishops, we claim the mission of the church to make disciples and transform lives and the world. We stand for unity and justice recognizing the need for a renewed commitment to evangelism.

We are and have always been a missionary church. A shared paradigm shift from sending and receiving “to everywhere, from everywhere” must guide our missionary commitment for the future. This renewed shared commitment enables us to live with differences and impact questions of race, gender and sexual orientation while holding nothing sacred but the mission.

7. We live as a Global Church

We are united in our desire to lead the church in the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We serve in diverse missional contexts and in a time of deep cultural change in some regions of the global church; yet we are seeking ways to offer pastoral support to all people in a complex and broken world. This support will look different across annual conferences, even as our contexts are not the same. We recognize that committed disciples of Jesus Christ interpret the scriptures differently, and yet we share a common commitment to uphold the discipline.

Recognizing the broader political reality infecting the church, we commit to even greater prayer for colleagues and delegations of partner churches. We will make a commitment to overcome privilege and invisibility and instead reach deep into the margins to build real relationships with partners based on kingdom values and not on money.

As bishops of the church, the Council must be a visible reminder that offers peers and colleagues the space to hold their own views while honoring others and engaging in meaningful conversation to understand one another. We understand that these global views often come with a price. We will learn of the consequences, their context and respect their differences and priorities in a conciliar spirit.

As we offer these core values to our sisters and brothers in the Council of Bishops, we ask them and all United Methodists to join us in prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit, come!”

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Respectfully submitted

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