

Reflections of a Former FUMC Pastor by Dr. Karl K. Stegall to members of First United Methodist Church, Montgomery, Ala.,

Wednesday, April 19, 2023

One of my favorite verses in all the Bible is found in the book of Psalms (133:1): “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity!”

Dr. Eugene Peterson paraphrases those words in The Message: “How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along.”

I love this church! Every inch of this sacred space has a very special memory for me. Surely one of the greatest days of my life was that day 40 years ago when I received an unexpected telephone call from Bishop Frank Robertson who said, “Karl, I want you to go and be the senior minister at First United Methodist Church of Montgomery.”

I fell in love with this church and its members. I had previously fallen in love with the Alabama-West Florida Conference, the United Methodist Church as a denomination, and the World Methodist Council, and to be appointed to serve this great church was the icing on the cake!

Looking back across those 23 ½ years that I was privileged to serve here at First United Methodist, I want you to know tonight that there is far more that unites us than divides us.

We all long for the very same things.

We all long to worship in our beautiful sanctuary and feel the presence of God.

We all long to kneel at the altar, confess our sins, and experience the love, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We all long to hear our fantastic choir sing the great anthems of the church. We all long for strong Sunday School classes for adults, youth, and children that for decades have been a great strength of this congregation. We all long for a mission program that supports Huntingdon College, Respite ministry, Meals on Wheels, Valiant Cross Academy, and a hundred other worthy causes scattered across our capital city. We all long for our sons and daughters to one day have the opportunity to walk down the center aisle of this magnificent sanctuary to be married in a solemn and sacred ceremony. We all long when a loved one dies to be surrounded by family members and friends and feel their support as our organist plays loudly the familiar hymn, “Because He Lives!”

Yes, we are family. Deep down inside, all of us tonight long for the very same things. Because of the great love that all of us have for this church, all of us want to be supportive of this church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

Yet, I would suggest to you tonight that there are forces outside this church that have the ability to destroy this great church.

When the special-called General Conference of the United Methodist Church was held in St. Louis during February 2019, it was held for one specific reason. It was held to settle once and for all our stance as a United Methodist denomination regarding the issue of human sexuality. Several petitions were presented in advance of that meeting, one of which was strongly supported by our Council of Bishops. A large number of prognosticators predicted in advance that the petition supported by the council of

bishops would pass. However, when all was said and done, the delegates voted to retain the present language within our Book of Discipline, primarily as a result of the conservative vote of African delegates. For the past 50 years, the African delegates have come to our General Conferences and shared the same basic message. They have stood on the plenary floor and said, "We are confused. Hundreds of years ago, you brought to our shores the wonderful good news of Jesus Christ. We listened intently as you shared with us the teachings of Jesus Christ. You taught us for hundreds of years that a Christian marriage was only between a man and a woman. We believed you when you told us that this has been the stance of the church for two thousand years. Now after sending missionaries to our shores hundreds of years ago to teach us about marriage, you have come back to this General Conference to tell us, "We were wrong with what we taught you! We are so sorry. We made a mistake. You can now ignore those passages within the Bible that the church has upheld for the past 2000 years."

Then the African delegates always conclude, "You don't understand us! We do not want to change the Bible. The Bible changes us!"

However, let me be perfectly clear tonight that the problems within the United Methodist Church are far greater than homosexuality. When the final "Amen" was pronounced at the special-called General Conference in St. Louis, it was evident that we were living in a time described in the book of Judges (21:25), "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

When the delegates to the General Conference in St. Louis packed their bags and headed back to their respective homes, three unfortunate things happened.

First, there was a public outcry from the majority of the members of the Council of Bishops saying that they would not only disregard the stance of the Book of Discipline, but they would also encourage the clergy in their respective episcopal areas to do the same. Let it be known that Bishop Lawson Bryan from the South Georgia Conference, Bishop David Graves from the Alabama-West Florida Conference, and Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett from the North Alabama Conference were a part of the minority who declared that they would support the Book of Discipline. However, there was no sense of consistency. Among the majority of bishops, it soon appeared that they followed the Book of Discipline when it advanced their personal positions, and ignored the Book of Discipline when it did not advance their personal positions.

Secondly, the delegates who did support the Book of Discipline and voted in the majority for the sanctity of marriage as being between a man and a woman were suddenly labeled as homophobic, racists, misogynous, troublemakers, and those who wanted to divide the church. Some were even depicted as hate-mongers, simply because they took seriously those words of holy scripture (Matthew 19:5), "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two of them shall become one flesh." It appeared that almost overnight, supporters of the holy scriptures were categorized as those who did not love and care for homosexuals. I want to say loudly and clearly tonight that Brenda and I have many homosexual friends that we love dearly, and we also have many friends with homosexual children and grandchildren that we love dearly.

Thirdly, the homosexual issue all of a sudden became the tip of the spear for any and all other controversial issues, large or small, within our United Methodist Church whether it was abortion, inclusive language, or the use of personal pronouns. It soon appeared that all of our boards and agencies joined in a concerted effort to attack those who disagreed with them. Out of this unfortunate

experience, I quickly learned that those who shout “inclusive” the most are those that are the most “exclusive” if you do not agree with them.

As more and more conservative United Methodists expressed their displeasure with the chaos and confusion created by our Council of Bishops, and the direction in which our once proud denomination was headed, leading voices of the progressives calmed their fears by reassuring them that the United Methodist Church was a “big tent” and all voices would be heard. Unfortunately, a strong gust of liberal wind swept across our United Methodist Church one night and blew that “big tent” over and it fell flat on the ground. United Methodists holding fast to the sanctity of marriage as one between a man and a woman were not allowed to even get close, much less, enter “the big tent.”

With all the confusion and chaos swirling over our heads, I kept hearing progressive pastors within our United Methodist Church say, “We cannot get distracted by what is happening in California or anywhere else. Our church is doing great! We all love our church. We love our music program. We love our mission program. We just need to focus on the great things we are doing in our local church and not get distracted.”

All of that sounded great, but it could not be done! One of the greatest strengths of the Christian church is that we are the “body of Christ” and belong to one another. For hundreds of years we United Methodists have celebrated our connectional system in which all of our churches have a vital connection to all of our sister churches. Through the decades, we Methodists have lived out the lyrics sung by our children’s choirs: “I am the church; you are the church; we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we’re the church together.”

As frustration and discontent grew stronger following General Conference, a group of individuals, both clergy and laity from different theological persuasions, met secretly in an effort to resolve the crisis within our denomination. With great intentions, they came up with a creative idea of a protocol that would bring an amicable solution of separation at the upcoming 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis. However, the terrible coronavirus pandemic swept across our nation and the General Conference in Minneapolis was cancelled. However, the growing restlessness spread all the way down to Montgomery, Alabama. As a result, the 2022 AlabamaWest Florida Conference held at Alabama State University within walking distance of this church was very contentious.

Following our 2022 Annual Conference, I bumped into one of my favorite United Methodist bishops one day and he said to me, “Karl, our United Methodist Church is getting ready to either divide or implode!”

It was only a short while later that Dean William B. Lawrence, a progressive clergyman from North Carolina who once served as the dean at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology, wrote an article entitled, “The United Methodist Church is splintering, not splitting.” Sadly enough, he was right on target.

When I looked around and saw our once great denomination dividing, splintering, and imploding, I said to myself, “Somebody needs to speak up! Our United Methodist Church is imploding all around us before our very eyes. It is going down the tubes! Somebody needs to sound an alarm and tell the truth that a pending trainwreck is on the horizon.” It was then that God whispered in my ear, “Karl, you need to stand up and tell the truth.” When I discovered that this upcoming trainwreck was going to directly impact our Seminary Scholarship Foundation, I sat down and wrote my personal observations of our United Methodist Church to members of our Board of Directors of our Seminary Scholarship

Foundation. Little did I know that the statement I wrote would become “viral” and be shared among United Methodists across our nation.

I have always been turned off by obnoxious people who say, “I told you so!” However, it pains me to remind you tonight that every single word that I put into my written statement on June 22, 2022, has proven to be true, even the brazen prediction I made that there would never be another conservative bishop elected within the United Methodist Church.

Even though I received lots of criticism for writing my statement, I want to go on record tonight as saying, “I was not trying to hurt this church or any other United Methodist Church. I was simply trying to tell the truth about what was on the horizon and wake up those who were totally ignorant of this upcoming trainwreck. While I was licking my wounds over the criticism I was receiving for telling the truth, Bishop Mark Lowry, who once served as the episcopal leader of the Fort Worth area, sent me a one-sentence message: “Karl, as painful as it was for you to write your statement, it was right on target!”

Over the next several weeks after I wrote my statement, Bishop Mark Lowry of the Fort Worth area, Bishop Scott Jones of the Houston area, and Bishop Mark Webb of the Upper New York area felt as though the United Methodist Church had lost its way, and they all resigned from the episcopacy of the United Methodist Church and became bishops in the new Global Methodist Church. Incidentally, Bishop Scott Jones’s father, Jameson Jones, as well as his brother, Greg Jones, served at different times as dean of the Duke Divinity School, so Bishop Jones does not come from an ultra-conservative background.

The General Conference in St. Louis was a disaster filled with chaos and confusion, but things got worse in the fall of 2022 when the five Jurisdictional Conferences of our United Methodist Church met the first week of November. The primary purpose of a Jurisdictional Conference is to elect bishops. The five Jurisdictional Conferences are geographical, but they always meet at the very same time. They met on November 2-5, 2022.

The Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference, which historically has been, by far, the most conservative of all five Conferences, met at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

The South Central Jurisdictional Conference met in Houston, Texas.

The North Central Jurisdictional Conference met in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

The Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference met in College Park, Maryland.

The Western Jurisdictional Conference met in Salt Lake City, Utah.

During the same time last fall when these five Jurisdictional Conferences were being held, Auburn University was preparing to play Mississippi State and the University of Alabama was preparing to play LSU in football. Both games went into overtime, and both Auburn and Alabama lost. There must have been something in the air! At the same time, delegates to our Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference being held at Lake Junaluska were working overtime to elect new bishops, and in my humble opinion, the Conference also ended in defeat. There were nine nominees from various Conferences of the southeastern jurisdiction. There was no episcopal nominee from the Alabama-West Florida Conference nor the North Alabama Conference, nor the South Georgia Conference. simply because the delegates from these three conservative Conferences knew that no one from their respective Conferences had any chance whatsoever of being elected.

A keen observer of all of the proceedings at Lake Junaluska that first week of November 2022, said, "When the final history of the United Methodist Church is written, November 4, 2022 will go down as the day when a huge nail was placed in the coffin of the United Methodist Church. Why?

In advance of the Conference, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference office at Lake Junaluska had sent out the list of the nine individuals who had been nominated for the episcopacy. All nine nominees stated their stances on various issues. Whereas six years ago when the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference was held, a nominee for bishop could not have possibly been elected if he or she had not proclaimed that they supported traditional marriage. Six years later, not one of the nine nominees for bishop from the southeast could have been elected if he or she did not publicly support same-sex marriage.

Among all the newly elected 16 bishops within the five jurisdictions, all went on record as supporting same-sex marriage. Not a single newly elected bishop in any of the five jurisdictional conferences scattered all across the United States went on record as supporting only Biblicallybased marriage between a man and a woman. You would have thought that at least one of the five jurisdictions scattered across the United States would have at least "thrown a bone" to conservatives like many of you here tonight. But no, it was a clean sweep, a total wipeout of any ounce of conservatism on this issue within our United Methodist Church. As one bishop expressed it, "On November 4, 2022, the United Methodist Church across the United States was symbolically gift-wrapped, placed on a silver platter with a red ribbon on top and freely handed over to the liberals of the United Methodist Church for now and forever. There will be no turning back!"

Get the picture! Among the 3,119,885 square miles of the mainland or the 48 contiguous states, there was not one newly elected bishop in the United Methodist Church in these contiguous states who did not support same-sex marriages. As a follow-up, all five of the jurisdictions voted overwhelmingly for three controversial petitions that supported their special interests.

Let me be clear! If you think the majority of United Methodists of our Alabama-West Florida Conference are going to sit back and watch this complete take-over of our once proud denomination with each of the 16 new bishops unanimously supporting same-sex marriages, you are living in a fantasyland. They are not going to stand by and watch our United Methodist Church go down the tubes on this issue!

When the elected delegates of our Alabama-West Florida Conference returned home from Lake Junaluska last November, they saw with their own eyes what had happened. They saw the total disregard that the delegates to the Southeastern General Conference had for any biblical views and the overwhelming support that the delegates gave to three controversial petitions. In response, when our delegates returned home, they told their churches, "Get us out of the United Methodist Church now! There is no need for us to wait around any longer. Things are only going to get worse." Because of their convictions, out of the 20 clergy and lay members of our delegation that attended the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference, all except one clergyperson and all except two lay persons have disaffiliated with their respective churches. The other 17 have kissed the United Methodist Church goodbye.

I need to remind all of you that additional bishops will be elected next year when the 2024 Jurisdictional Conference will be held again at Lake Junaluska. With hundreds of conservative delegates disaffiliating all across the southeast and southwest and more and more progressives being elected to take their place, it will be a cakewalk for the progressives to do whatever they want to do. The same holds true for

the 2024 General Conference that will be held two months earlier (May 2024) in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Book of Discipline is definitely going to change and become much more liberal for United Methodists in Alabama and northwest Florida.

Sadly enough, more and more United Methodists are becoming more aware of the direction in which our church is headed and they are headed to the exits. They are increasingly saying with Bishop Jones, Bishop Lowry, and Bishop Webb, "I am not leaving the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church has left me."

As we sit here tonight with all the changes I see ahead, I am convinced that the greatest threats in our nation today are the attacks upon the church and the Christian family. The church is supposed to look differently from the world. The church is our only hope in a society where Hollywood is setting the agenda. Children today are confused by today's culture. Parents today are dealing with situations they never dreamed they would be facing with their children. Our children are dealing with new social norms that have rapidly changed. They are yearning for guidance from us. When they don't receive guidance from the church or Christian parents, they will look elsewhere to the media that offers free advice quite differently from God's eternal truth. As John Wesley said, "What one generation tolerates, the next generation embraces."

Bishop David Graves intends to stay with us for two more years. If and when he chooses to move to a new assignment or retire, one of these newly elected bishops, or one of the new progressive bishops elected in 2024, will come to serve our area.

For those of you here tonight who are uninformed to what is happening today all around you within the United Methodist Church, we are imploding. Our United Methodist Church of the Alabama-West Florida Conference is going up in flames! Anyone who tells you differently is not telling you the truth. We are hemorrhaging in loss of membership within our United Methodist Church. When I entered the Alabama-West Florida Conference in 1967, it was reported that we had over 12,000,000 members within the United States. That number today is moving rapidly towards 5,000,000.

We are hemorrhaging in loss of membership within our United Methodist Church of the Alabama-West Florida Conference. Forty-three of our United Methodist churches have already disaffiliated. One hundred ninety more will be disaffiliating at 4 p.m. on May 7. That means that 233 churches will have disaffiliated 18 days from now. If the November 12 vote proceeds, a minimum of 50 more churches will be disaffiliating which will bring the total to 283. Today, there are 480 churches within the Alabama-West Florida Conference. This means that there will be fewer than 200 churches left within the Alabama-West Florida Conference. The financial roof of our Alabama-West Florida Conference is collapsing. Over half of the apportioned gifts of our Alabama-West- Florida Conference each year are coming from churches that are in the process of disaffiliating.

The episcopal residence for Bishop David Graves located on Lancaster Lane was sold a couple of weeks ago, and even though he continues to be our bishop, he and Nancy have moved back to Chattanooga with all their belongings. The Alabama-West Florida Conference headquarters located on Woodmere Boulevard is half-empty and the Board of Trustees of our Alabama-West Florida Conference is discussing what they want to do now with all that space.

The North Alabama Conference had 638 churches when their annual Conference was held last June. On December 10, 2022, one hundred ninety-eight United Methodist Churches of the North Alabama Conference voted to disaffiliate. On May 11, 2023, 158 more churches in North Alabama will disaffiliate, which means that 356 of the 638 churches of North Alabama will have disaffiliated.

The United Methodist Children's Home has changed its name to "Embrace Alabama." The United Methodist Home for the Aged, Wesley Gardens on Taylor Road, has dropped the name "United." The United Methodist Women have chosen to drop their name of "Methodist" and they are now known as "United Women in Faith."

The two largest churches within our annual conference have disaffiliated.

The two largest churches in the Mississippi Conference have disaffiliated.

The two largest United Methodist churches in Georgia have disaffiliated.

One hundred eighty-seven Georgia United Methodist Churches are suing their bishop.

The two largest churches in Louisiana have disaffiliated.

The two largest churches in Texas have disaffiliated.

The two largest churches in Oklahoma have disaffiliated.

The two largest churches in Arkansas have disaffiliated. You would be interested to know that the large Central United Methodist Church in Fayetteville voted to disaffiliate but their annual Conference blocked their disaffiliation, and just recently, that once great church was divided into three different churches.

The 2023 Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference is scheduled to be held at the University of South Alabama, June 11-14. We will be meeting in the Mitchell Center, the basketball arena. In past years, we have had as many as 1400 delegates to attend our Annual Conference. This year, they are anticipating approximately 600. For me, it will be the saddest Annual Conference that I have attended in 56 years. I have been asked to represent the family of Hays McKay at the memorial service at Annual Conference. Hays was one of my former associates who years ago became somewhat of a "step-son" to Brenda and me when he lost his parents. However, it will also be a sad occasion for me because when I walk into that arena at South Alabama on June 11 and look around, hundreds of clergy and lay delegates that I have seen over the past 56 years will not be in sight. They and their churches have gone, never to return to the United Methodist Church. Somebody needs to wake up!!!

Let me invite you to join me on an imaginary trip tonight starting in Clanton at the northern tip of our Alabama-West Florida Conference. First United Methodist Church of Clanton has chosen to disaffiliate. As we ride southward to Prattville and Wetumpka, their two largest churches have chosen to disaffiliate. Continue with me down to Montgomery where Frazer Memorial, St. James, Dalraida, Woodland, and Century in Pike Road have chosen to disaffiliate. Let's go east to First United Methodist Church of Opelika, Trinity of Opelika, and Cornerstone of Auburn, and they have all chosen to disaffiliate. Let's ride southward to Hope Hull, Troy, Brundidge, Abbeville, Enterprise, Opp, Covenant in Dothan, Harvest in Dothan, Brewton, Bay Minette, and Lillian, and they have chosen to disaffiliate. As we cross into Florida, Crestview, CrosspointNiceville, Lynn Haven, Destin, Woodlawn in Panama City Beach, and the fast-growing Good News Church on 30A have chosen to disaffiliate.

A bishop said to me several months ago, "If you are looking for the bishops to turn this big old ship around, you are looking in the wrong direction." He then added, "We have members of the Council of

Bishops who are willing to run this United Methodist Church in the ground just to get their way on the most controversial issues.”

I have a secret that I want to share with you tonight. I spent 23 ½ years of my life serving as senior minister of this church, and I am not going to sit idly by and watch this great church go down the tubes.

It is past time for the administrative board of this great church to make the decision to enter into a fair and impartial discernment with transparency. Everyone is entitled to a view, a voice, and a vote.

You will have lots of choices.

You will have a choice to stay with the United Methodist Church.

You will have a choice to disaffiliate and become a part of a fresh new branch of Methodism.

You will have a choice to become independent Methodist.

It is time for all of us to get rid of the rancor, bitterness, and animosity. It is time for us to get rid of the name-calling, fussing, and fighting. It is time for us to heal broken relationships within families and church members. We can do better than that!

It is time for all of us to refocus on Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

We find ourselves tonight in the afterglow of Easter! We are people of hope! One of the things that we learn from Easter is that none of us is ever helpless, and no situation in life is ever hopeless.

One of my favorite hymns down through the years has been a hymn that was written by Edward Mote, an English cabinet-maker. The words are so simple, and yet, so true, for all of us who claim to be “Methodists”:

*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.
Amen.*