

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

Hello Sojourners Class!

Here is my article below for this week. These articles are intended to provide some food for thought in the absence of our usual lessons on Sunday morning. Feel free to offer your comments or thoughts by using the "reply all" button on your device. In addition, I hope you will join us for worship on this Palm Sunday, and also take advantage of the other special Holy Week services on-line.

Last Sunday (3/29) during Pastor Andy's sermon, "How Do We Fit In?" he addressed the United Methodist Church's focus on our mission, to go and make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Well, duh? Our preoccupation with sexual orientation issues for the last 49 years does not absolve us from fulfilling our calling to obey Jesus' command, and should not "blind" us to what church is really all about. I share the "hopes" lifted up by Chris Ritter in this article, and would love to hear from you!

Bill Cleveland

Dreams for a New Church

March 17, 2020 - By Chris Ritter

The opening of the 2019 United Methodist General



There is good reason to believe that the United Methodist Separation Protocol will be approved early at the 2020 General Conference and today's United Methodist denomination will give way to two separate churches, each different from anything we have previously known. While it is possible additional options may surface, I believe most congregations and conferences will choose between one of two oxymorons: A New Traditional Methodist Church and a Post-Separation United

Methodist Church. We will all take part in fleshing out what these curious descriptions will ultimately mean.

There is ample evidence accumulated over the years about the shape of a United Methodist Church no longer frustrated with organized Traditionalist interference. The Post-Separation UM Church in America aspires to be connected globally but governed separately as a U.S. mainline denomination. It will be open, permissive, and institutional. It will embrace theological pluralism on a scale the UM Church never could and will take the quest for social justice and diversity as its unifying paradigm. There are things that I would love about continuing to serve in the institutional UM Church. But my First Love calls me alongside those who will begin figuring out what "new traditional" means. Glimpses of the future have surfaced here and there, including the draft *Book of Doctrines and Discipline* offered by the Wesleyan Covenant Association. But more voices must come to the table to

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

give this task the justice it deserves. What we shall be has not yet been revealed. For now I can only share my hopes.

I hope the new church is all about Jesus: His lordship, his gospel, his message, his cross, his resurrection, his transforming power, and his coming kingdom. I hope it is never about anything else. I hope we proclaim the Jesus prophesied in the Old Testament, revealed in the New Testament, and proclaimed in the classic creeds.

I hope we are charismatic in the highest and best definition of that word. I hope the Holy Spirit fills us with a fresh Pentecost so that our gospel consists not only in words but in power. I hope our sons and daughters prophesy and our seasoned saints continue to dream dreams.

I hope we are a praying church, not just a church that prays. I hope we are worthy of the great heritage of prayer left to us by folks like Susannah Wesley, E. Stanley Jones, and E.M. Bounds.

I hope we always find ourselves in humble awe as we gather at the table of the Lord. I hope we never lose the joy and calling of our baptism. I hope we worship deeply, richly, joyfully, and sacrificially.

I hope we are a singing and song-writing church. I hope Charles Wesley and Fanny Crosby smile down from Heaven on a whole generation of artists inspired by and inspiring the work of God happening around them.

I hope we confess our sins to one another and hold one another accountable in love. I hope we recover small groups such as bands, class meetings, and other forms of intentional discipleship. I hope we break free of the gravity of shallow consumer Christianity.

I hope we are global. I hope we are African, European, Asian, and North American. I hope autonomous churches in Puerto Rico, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, and South America help us comprise something completely new. I hope elements of Evangelical British Methodism will find their way to a place of close fellowship.

I hope we are conspicuously multi-ethnic here in the U.S. I hope it happens inevitably as we lift up Jesus together. I hope the new traditional church is a home for African Americans, Koreans, Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, and newer immigrant communities coming to the U.S. I hope we creatively conference together so as to maximize our impact in diverse communities and prosper our collective witness.

I hope there is no Board of Missions because the whole church is mission. I hope there is no Board of Evangelism because the whole church is evangelism. I hope there is no Social Witness Board because the church itself is the living embodiment of social holiness.

I hope the church embraces education and life-long learning. I hope we have the best minds in Wesleyan theological scholarship and do not make a golden calf of institutional education as the sum of the preparation needed by our clergy.

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

I hope we have a strong “culture of call” and that the clergy union gives way to pure servant leadership. I hope the best and the brightest of our young people answer Jesus by giving themselves away in ministry. I hope our current gifted young evangelical clergy are filled with holy boldness to lead.

I hope we produce pastors from shift workers, Ivy League faculties, the recovery community, second career people, and former prostitutes.

I hope we are the church of bishops who are apostolic shepherds, prophetic and scholarly with missionary hearts. We need bishops who are truth-tellers and ministry strategists. I hope all our bishops maintain laser-like focus on equipping healthy local churches to aim them outward toward their communities.

I hope local pastors and bi-vocational pastors are fully recognized and empowered for ministry. I hope the hard categories of laity and clergy become more and more blurred as we are all in ministry together.

I hope we plant three new churches a day to make up for the losses we have experienced since we planted two a day in a different era. I hope we are worthy heirs in evangelism to Phoebe Palmer, Harry Denman, Francis Asbury, Martin Boehm, and Peter Cartwright.

I hope our conference meetings are like revivals. I hope our iron sharpens iron. I hope we quickly abandon habits that do not produce fruit. I hope we fast and lay prostrate before the Lord when we don't know what to do. I hope matters of structure and strategy are always kept as secondary concerns.

I hope the Methodist social witness will find a fresh flowering as we give voice and flesh to Wesleyan faith and practice in the larger marketplace of ideas and values.

I hope we repent when we mess things up. I hope we never hit the snooze button when the Holy Spirit tries to awaken us to new opportunities. I hope we resist the trappings and comfort of nationalism. I hope prophetic voices are not kept out in the wilderness.

I hope our large church pastors are honored as ministry pioneers and not looked upon with suspicion. I hope micro and mega churches alike successfully reproduce healthy DNA in new locations.

I hope we sell what we have and give to the poor. I hope we adopt and foster kids who need a home. I hope warm-hearted pro-life beliefs are matched with practical assistance to those who are struggling. I hope we welcome the sojourner and stranger. I hope we are a place of welcome and healing for the broken, the outcast, and the afflicted.

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

And **I hope** we engage more deeply with the LGBTQ community. I hope we stop arguing over what we believe and begin serious missiological reflection and action based on those beliefs. I hope the battered and broken refugees of the sexual revolution find a home with us.

I hope we don't react so strongly against what was wrong with the UM Church that we lose what was right. I hope we don't try so hard to prove what we are not that we miss claiming who God is calling us now to be. I hope we don't succumb to the temptation of replacing all the comfortable structures we are leaving behind.

I hope we can forgive and bless our brothers and sisters in the post-separation UM Church so they, too, can move forward with their own hopes and dreams. To borrow from President Abraham Lincoln, who said in a different historical context, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right..."

As we are the ones that will be separating, I hope we leave well – and not look back. And I hope we begin well, too. It is time to build and that's kind of exciting.

(Chris Ritter is the Directing Pastor of Geneseo First United Methodist Church in Illinois.)