



THE MOUNTAIN CIRCUIT

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by Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball



Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball presides Friday morning at Conference Photo: Laura Allen

*T*he Gospel of John records Jesus' farewell prayer for the disciples on the night before he was crucified. He said: "I do not pray for these only (meaning the twelve who were gathered in the room with him, the first disciples), but for those who believe in me through their word (meaning all of us who are heirs of the faith through the ripples of evangelism and witness cast forth from the first disciples), that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

There is a saying long attributed to John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, which has frequently appeared in Methodist writings through the years, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and, in all things, charity." Some claim this saying originally came from a man named Meldenius, who wrote it during the religious wars in Europe in the 17th century. Whoever originally penned it, the saying is a basic guide for those who believe we

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On Unity by Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball

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can do more for the kingdom of God together than we can do individually.

This saying was used in England, in John Wesley's time, as an antidote to the religious wars that had ravaged the country. In the 18th century, religious people fighting and killing one another was still a painful and living memory. The people were sick of religious wars. That is why this aphorism became so popular. But Wesley used this phrase not only to refer to the religious wars but also to express his concern about division in the early Methodist movement.

Our present day is not the first time that Methodists have had different, competing thoughts and ideas. In early Methodism factions emerged among the leadership within the societies. People identified as Calvinist, Moravian, or Arminian Methodists and there were significant, serious differences among these perspectives. These theological differences have never really gotten resolved and have led to differing views in our present Methodist ecclesiastical house. I believe that Wesley realized that for the sake of unity, meaning the unity of which Jesus speaks and which is a gift of God, it is necessary to decide whether doctrines or relationships should become essentials.

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and, in all things charity."

Out of the same revulsion to religious division, and in the same century, the founders of this country ensured the separation of church and state in the Constitution, so that the state would never use its arms on any side of a religious struggle.

This country's European ancestors/founders remembered religious wars where people were killed because religious factions sought superiority over one another. They recognized the terror often borne out of strongly held differing religious beliefs. In our time, both at home and around the world, terror continues to occur because of competing religious ideologies.

Our Wesleyan belief in grace, specifically perfecting grace, tells us that God's dynamic love works through change and becoming. Instead of God looking at the world and condemning all of us who are sinners, saying, "No, you are not part of me because you have sinned/are sinning," God sent Jesus, Love in perfect form, to show us sinners that God is not done with us yet!

Additionally, Jesus tells us to go and share the Good News that God is not done with anyone yet. We are called to tell people – even in the midst of difference – that God has given, that God's gift and God's desire for all creation is to be in unity through grace and love. The unity that Jesus speaks of is not an act of human will or tolerance; it is the idea that God's dynamic love works through transformation and is given by and is a gift of God.

Religion, or at least the practice of Christian religion, is not meant to divide or to harm or to tear people down or to kill people. The purpose of religious practice is to build people up, to lift people high, and to give people hope and life.

Lately, there has been much conversation in The United Methodist Church about what divides us, especially when it comes to the topic of human sexuality. There has been talk among some of schism, of dividing the Church over the particular issues that divide this country – many of those issues being the "isms" of this world. There is disagreement, and in the midst of the fear and defensiveness that often comes from disagreement, some people actually push for the church to divide into groups of like-minded people and form various homogeneous communities, where everyone thinks alike and acts alike.

But to take that action would be unfaithful in light of Jesus' prayer. Jesus prayed that we might all be one. The unity of God's people, the unity of God's people with God and with one another, was the top thing on Jesus' mind, the top priority of his life, even in his very last hours of life as he made his journey to the cross. Jesus did not make this journey to stand against something or to protect something, but to be the bridge for God's perfecting power of love and grace.

For United Methodists, as followers of Christ, we need to ask: what are the essentials?

One essential we believe in as United Methodists is that each of us is a holy, beloved, and valuable child of God. We are created in God's image. We are all pursued, accepted, and covered by the unbounded love of God's grace. No one of us is better than

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The Conference Cartoon

by Tom Bone III





A scene from Wednesday's Memorial Service in Wesley Chapel. Photo: Whitney Cherry

The Refuge...is God

by The Rev. Jake Steele

In pleasure or pain, pause to consider Psalm 46. The passage is powerful: "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (v.7). Often amidst the fever pitch pace of life this affirmation isn't always apparent, and in the grip of grief, especially, it's frequently forgotten. In Friday afternoon's memorial service, the promise was repeatedly proclaimed: "The Lord of hosts is with us." While it's one thing to see it written in the Psalm and even say it out loud, it's another thing to receive it as a gift, and because of Jesus we can.

If one wishes to communicate their commitment to keeping a promise verbally, they'll often say, "I give you my word." It's certainly not a stretch to surmise, but what a comfort it is, particularly in this context, to remember that God is a promise-keeper and Psalm 46 kind of spells it out for any disciple who may have doubts. Some may contend, "Well how do you know God kept God's promise?" Simple. God gave us God's Word; the Word made flesh in Immanuel. It's the Word that John's gospel states was there in the beginning; the Word that was with God, that was God and who is with us. In Genesis, we recall that God spoke the word and created the world. In Jesus, we affirm that God sent the Word and thereby changed the world forever!

In the throes of grief, we often wrestle with the unquenchable questions that ask, "Why?" In the words of the renowned author, Philip Yancey, we never have to wonder how God feels about us because God gave us a face in Jesus Christ. And the Spirit he promised us is a very present help in a time of trouble. In the weight of grief and loss recite the Psalm, yes; but receive the gift as well: "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." Because of that precious promise proclaimed loudly through a vacant cross and an empty tomb, we can—through tear-laden lenses—fix our faces to the future unafraid with the certain assurance that the worst things are never the last things.

Thanks be to God!





Photo: Whitney Cherry

Tree of Life

Five decades after his chestnut carvings of the Twelve Apostles were installed along the back wall of Wesley Chapel, Wolfgang Flor was back in the worship hall for the dedication of an unintended “bookend” on Friday morning.

Flor, 88, who emigrated to America as a World War II refugee from his native Germany, carved his massive new artwork “The Family Tree” from a block of wormy chestnut.

He and his wife Maria were welcomed to the Annual Conference business session by West Virginia Wesleyan College President Pamela Balch. The hundreds gathered gave the Flors a standing ovation after “The Family Tree” was unveiled in the front corner of the chapel. Balch said that Flor’s story and their meetings together will be among her favorite memories of her time as Wesleyan president.

The interaction in the artwork of the five figures, each relating to the trunk of a tree, “reminds us of how special life really is,” said Greg Cartwright, a woodworker and friend of the Flors who was instrumental in the effort to bring the piece permanently to Wesley Chapel.



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another. This is the unity God gives us. It is part of the divine purpose and is present as God is present. It is more powerful than our thoughts, our theologies; our actions which divide. It cannot be overcome or denied. We have all received grace upon grace. When we divide ourselves, we are turning our backs to the unity that is all around us, the unity in which we live in spite of our limited awareness.

A second essential to understand is that none of us is perfect. That contributes to our limited awareness. We are all sinners saved by grace. None of us has all the truth. None of us sees or understands perfectly. Sometimes we want to cast out evil when that is God's job and not ours. If we would seek all for Christ, we can trust that in the midst of changing and becoming, ours and theirs, God's transforming power and love will cast out the evil in all of us, whatever form that evil may take. All of us now see ourselves through a clouded mirror, through a lens that has been damaged by fear, hurt, or hopelessness. The distortion of our sight is exacerbated by our biases and prejudices.

We must confess that and seek God's more excellent way.

As we seek God's more excellent way, a third essential is that we follow Jesus to the best of our conscience, wisdom, knowledge, and with as much passion and energy as we have. And, knowing that each person, created as we are, in the image of God, we must seek to see, hear, and know the divine image in the other person while hoping to be a conduit, a revelation, of God's Spirit contained in the divine image within us. An essential is to be intentional in our work of "having the mind of Christ."

These are the things I believe Wesley put forth as the essentials. Wesley thought if we could be united in these efforts and beliefs, then in other things we could trust God and allow liberty, so that in all things we could be charitable and gracious with one another.

I believe that the Church must operate in this way, with these essentials in mind, not only for its sake, but also for the advancement of God's mission, ministry, and saving efforts for the world. The prayer of Jesus is that the world would be one, so the world may believe. It is for the world that we must be united.

If religious communities fight within and among themselves, how can the world be saved?

Our mission is to show a better way. Our mission is to show that in this God-given world of wonderful diversity, there is a better way of handling differences, disagreements, and differing opinions among human beings. God sent God's son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the world would have life through him. God's rescue plan and life-saving mission in and through Jesus Christ gave us a prayer, a prayer that I believe expresses God's deepest yearning and deepest hope. "I pray that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us so that the world may believe."



Photo: Whitney Cherry

Episcopal Nominee

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Kenaston (center) stands encircled in prayer with his family, members of the delegation to General Conference, and Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball. The time of prayer on the conference floor happened yesterday after Kenaston was elected to serve as the episcopal nominee for the West Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church. He will be on the ballot in a few weeks when the Northeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church meets in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



Take a Breath: reflecting on two conferences

by Erin Sears



Photo: Laura Allen

*O*n Tuesday of this week, overwhelmed with preparations for Annual Conference, I set out for an afternoon walk around the campus of West Virginia Wesleyan College. A rain storm changed my plans, and I shortly found myself nestled in the quiet of the Meditation Chapel. For the first time all week, I allowed my mind to wander and settle into the familiar thoughts that seemed to consume me these days.

The thoughts began a year ago this week when the 2015 West Virginia Annual Conference elected me as a part of the delegation to General Conference. As I sat in the Meditation Chapel, I remembered those moments as if they were yesterday. I had been filled with awe at first because the people of West Virginia had affirmed the calling I felt from God last year at Annual Conference. However, the awe was tainted ever so slightly with fear. I wondered if I would be able to handle the enormous responsibility of being a delegate to General Conference.

The emotions of last year's Annual Conference faded away.

My mind jumped to this past January, when I held the Advance Daily Christian Advocate, the workbook for General Conference, in my hands for the first time. I was oddly giddy for a college student who had just received an additional thousand-page reading assignment for the spring semester.

The work of General Conference seemed real for the first time. It was not just talking anymore. That first night I spent hours skimming through the various petitions and resolutions. My excitement faded, and anxiety crept back into place, again. The deadline that once seemed so far off started rapidly approaching.

As I digested petitions and resolutions, I began to worry I lacked all the knowledge I needed to make the right decisions for the global church. I felt backbreaking pressure about the importance of each decision.

The anxiety and pressure remained with me when I arrived in Portland, Ore., for General Conference. The time was now for the United Methodist Church to show its true self. Each decision we delegates made could define us, the church.

My mind raced through the events that unfolded over the course of General Conference. I was so overwhelmed by emotions that I did not know what I felt. Each day was an emotional rollercoaster. One moment I experienced pure joy. The next, devastating sadness.

Fast forward to this week.

I could not focus on my emotions anymore. Instead, my mind turned toward the decisions that the delegation was preparing to report at Annual Conference. A long list scrolled through my mind - the bishops' proposal, episcopal tenure, Imagine Abundant



Health, withdrawal from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice - and anxiety overtook my confused emotions. I wondered how the Annual Conference would handle the news of all the decisions from General Conference and how they would see me afterward.

Would the Annual Conference, still see me as a young lady called by God?

As I wondered, I looked around the Meditation Chapel. My eyes drifted towards the stained glass window beside my seat. I was taken back by the sight in front of me. I had placed my full water bottle in window sill when I had walked into the room. Etched across the tumbler was the General Conference logo "Therefore Go." The logo pointed directly to the cross.

Then I realized that I must go and set aside my anxiety and be filled with the living water Christ offers.

That living water began to flow through me as glimmers of hope from General Conference emerged in my mind.

After one intense session, I walked into the hallway on the brink of tears. Someone gently ushered me toward Bishop Larry Goodpaster, one of the several bishops offering prayer outside the plenary hall in the Oregon Convention Center. As Bishop Goodpaster poured out a prayer, I felt God's presence enfolding me and filling me with love and hope.

Another glimmer of hope: During legislative committee, my group spent time seeking to understand one another and the various contexts of our ministries. The dynamic of our conversations about petitions changed because of this process. Although we did not all agree, we worked respectfully with one another and left continuing to develop relationships with one another in spite of our division.

Yet, another glimmer of hope: One morning, I met a fellow delegate while in line at the coffee shop inside the convention center. As we worked our way up to the front of the line, we shared a little bit about ourselves. He offered up encouragement that I needed to hear that morning and graciously bought my coffee.

Even in the mess of emotions of General Conference, God kept showing up like a breath of fresh air.

However, my anxiety had covered up those movements of the Spirit. I allowed something other than Christ to consume me. When I laid that down at the cross, I was refilled with something greater and more satisfying than that which consumed me - the living water of Christ.

May it be so with us.



Photo: Whitney Cherry

"Do This Fast"

by The Rev. Jake Steele

Empty phrases, mechanical praises, polished Sunday shoes.
Painless abstaining, busy maintaining...

Is this the fast I choose?

Starved of the word, absent in the world, but present
in the pews,

Witness refraining, masquerading...

Is this the fast I choose?

Housing the homeless, reaching the hopeless,
breaking all bonds loose;

Clothing the naked, guarding the sacred...

Is this not the fast I choose?

May the master of all be the servant of all; let the first become
the last,

Do this! This do! Do this fast.

Wed talking with walking, start moving, stop gawking
Deployment is our task!

Weld creeds with deeds so that the world may see,
We're not fasting just to fast.

Don't just hear the words, receive the words,
take the words and DO them.

It's not liberal or conservative, not political, just human!
If the Church won't, who will? Who will bear the weight?
The harvest fields are ripened. A starving world awaits.

Not someday, one day, later or maybe,
Tomorrow's too late; stop hesitating!
Church, move now! Too much time has passed.
This fast do and do this fast.



BUSINESS HIGHLIGHTS

Formal welcome from
West Virginia Wesleyan College President, Pamela Balch.

Approved rule changes rule 21 from Section II. Rules of
Order and Business Procedure and rule 8 from Section IV.
Miscellaneous Standing Rules of the Conference
as submitted by the Rules Committee

Elected Judi Kenaston as the Conference Secretary
for 2016-2020 quadrennium

Nominated Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Kenaston who was elected
after the first ballot as the episcopal candidate
(office of bishop) from the West Virginia Annual Conference

Bishop Steiner-Ball introduced Circles of Grace,
a small group discussion time

General Conference delegation gave the first of two reports

Welcomed new Director of Youth and Outdoor Ministries,
Rev. Shea James, from the Kentucky Annual Conference

Passed a resolution entitled Urging Holiness,
Civility and Respect in Conversation from the
Justice and Advocacy Team and a resolution to designate
Scott's Run Settlement House as a United Methodist
Historical Site from Archives and History

The Board of Pensions recommended no increase
in premiums for 2017 and celebrated the current pension
holiday where congregations are using the money
which would be paid for pensions to find creative ways
to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Also approved reports from Equitable Compensation
and Covenant Council.



American Indian drummers perform Friday evening outside of Wesley Chapel.
Photo: Sarah Lowther Hensley

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