

Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, Unfinished business.

Steve Manskar, the Director of Wesleyan Leadership at the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, recently wrote:

On May 24, 1738, some of John Wesley's friends compelled him to accompany them to a Moravian Society meeting a few blocks away from St. Paul's Cathedral. Wesley wrote in his journal:

In the evening I went, very unwillingly, to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley experienced a "conversion" in thinking and understanding about the nature of grace and salvation. That night Wesley realized that forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God is a free gift. Nothing we can do will ever make us worthy or acceptable. God did the work of atonement on the cross in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wesley was awakened to the truth Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

My memory of reading the Bible is that the Old Testament tends to speak more strongly of a vengeful God and that the New Testament tends to speak more strongly of a loving God. Over the past year or so, I have listened to both Pastor Kelly and Pastor Jong speak strongly of our loving God. "God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it."

Michael Jenkins, president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, recently wrote:

The world in all its startling and sometimes indecipherable diversity is no longer on the other side of the globe. The whole wide world is on our doorstep. This makes some people nervous and unhappy. Some people see such difference as a threat to their way of seeing the world, a threat to their own culture, their faith. Consequently, they sometimes try to bar admission to their society. Reacting with a fortress mentality, they may try to erect walls and dig moats to keep difference out.

Not only is this reaction ill-conceived and counter-productive for economic and social reasons, it runs exactly opposite the expansive message of the gospel.

People from language groups scattered throughout the ancient world were together on the day the church was born. They all chattered at once. We are told: "when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing the other speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6).

This was the miracle of Pentecost. Pentecost was a miracle of hearing, of comprehension, of listening.

That should give us pause in these days when so many people strain to shout their views at others, but seldom strive to listen. The church's birth is swaddled in listening to people who speak differently.

A language or a way of thinking marks the boundary between different cultures, and between different ways of understanding the world around us. Christian faith crossed these boundaries – not- by force of argument, but through the generous act of hearing, listening, and entering into the ways others conceive of the world we all inhabit.

The church, at its birth, did not attempt to force others into rigid agreement. And the church certainly did not attempt to build walls and construct moats to keep out those who are different.

There are many worthy causes that need attention today. I will mention three:

- Racial Civil Rights
- Women's Rights, and
- Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Bisexual Civil Rights

Civil Rights movements began in the USA as early as 1848 with such documents as the Declaration of Rights and Sentiment. Consciously modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments became the founding document of the American women's movement and a fore runner to a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution in 1878; it was –41-- years later, in 1919, when the Congress submitted the amendment to the states for ratification. It became the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

In 1944, 1948, and 1952, the Woman's Division of Christian Service of The Methodist Church petitioned General Conference for full clergy rights for women, but their petition was rejected each time. In 1946, women were denied ordination in the newly formed Evangelical United Brethren Church. Then in 1956, The Methodist Church granted full clergy rights to women—36 years after ratification of the 19th amendment.

John Wesley was an ardent opponent of slavery. Many of the leaders of early American Methodism shared his hatred for this form of human bondage. The American Civil War was fought in the 1860's in part due to civil rights abuses of African Americans. One hundred years later, in the 1960's our country painfully began discussions that lead to the recognition and protection of universal civil rights.

Still, racial and women's rights are not fully enjoyed today and progress is yet needed. By comparison, the rights of other minority groups remain contested, with moats remaining to be drained.

1972 was the first General Conference at which the then four-year-old United Methodist Church addressed human sexuality and added language to the Book of Discipline. Paragraph 161.F of the Discipline states: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." That paragraph leads to the decision that self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

On May 3, 2012, the United Methodist General Conference reaffirmed paragraph 161.F in response to a petition to remove or alter the current language. After more than an hour of passionate debate and clear disagreement, a proposal stating Christians have different opinions about homosexuality was not approved, leaving the current language intact. A proposal to soften language in the main proposal, the

Hamilton-Slaughter substitution, was defeated by a vote of 441-507. Then the main proposal failed 368-572.

Hamilton-Slaughter proposed adding the following statement to the current language:

Homosexuality continues to divide our society and the church. All in the United Methodist Church affirm that homosexual persons are people of sacred worth and all are welcome in our churches, but we disagree as a people regarding whether homosexual practice is contrary to the will of God.

The Bible is our primary text for discerning God's will. We read and interpret it by the light of the Spirit's witness, with the help of the thoughtful reflections of Christians throughout the centuries and assisted by our understanding of history, culture, and science.

The majority view through the history of the church is that the scriptures teach that same-sex sexual intimacy is contrary to the will of God. This view is rooted in several passages from both the Old and New Testament.

A significant minority of our church views the scriptures that speak to same-sex intimacy as reflecting the understanding, values, historical circumstances and sexual ethics of the period in which the scriptures were written, and therefore believe these passages do not reflect the timeless will of God. They read the scriptures related to same-sex intimacy in the same way that they read the Bible's passages on polygamy, concubinage, slavery and the role of women in the church.

United Methodists will continue to struggle with this issue in the years ahead as a growing number of young adults identify today with what is the minority view. The majority view of the General Conference, and thus the official position of the church, continues to hold out that same-sex intimacy is not God's will. We recognize, however, that many faithful United Methodists disagree with this view.

The Fair Oaks United Methodist Church adopted a "Reconciling Statement".

"We believe that each individual is of sacred worth. Therefore, we pledge ourselves to engage in the sacred hospitality and responsibility Christ taught. We commit ourselves to maintaining a place of safety and sanctuary for all who come together in ministry and mission: people of all races, cultures, ages, sexual orientations, family structures, economic situations, and mental or physical conditions. Through the grace of Christ we dedicate ourselves to live out these commitments creatively, humbly and with hope."

Through our commitment to reconciliation, we affirm our belief in God's loving attitude, and in our belief that God's way will prevail.

"Open Hearts and Open Minds Open Doors." We have unfinished business. We are an unfinished Church.