

Today Pastor Laura and I will be taking a look at our personal and professional perspectives about General Conference. We are both deeply aware of the anxieties within all of us, particularly now as the conference is underway, and the debates we've already seen emerging. What continues to bring hope for me, well beyond the discussions, is that we still find ourselves as a singular Body of Christ, when we focus on and believe in the God who is walking with us through this time. The worship services in St. Louis each seek to remind, not only the delegates and guests, but anyone who is watching. Our primary, our deepest focus is not on what divides us. It is on what unites us: God. We may differ on how we view Jesus, even how we view God, but we come together when we seek to worship, to sing, to praise, to lift up, to pray for one another and the world; to sing hymns and songs and spiritual songs; and as we share in the other element that unites us, the holy sacrament of communion.

We are also aware that, no matter what, everything could and probably will change. But let me take things back a bit and look at what got us to this point, and this being a little more personally. My father was a delegate in 1972 when the language about homosexuality was added to our Book of Discipline. One of his best friends, Bishop Jack Tuell was also there, and instrumental in the way in which the language was added. Jack was both an attorney and a Bishop. He made sure the language was legislated correctly and written appropriately. Part of why it was added, according to at least some involved, was because of the uniting that came a short time before; a uniting that had a much more theologically conservative denomination unite with us, and add part of its' name to ours. Because of that union we became the United (Evangelical "United" Brethren) Methodist church. It seemed right at the time. Many now look back with regret.

And let's be honest, in 1972 we didn't know much about homosexuality. It would come up in whispered tones regarding those two "aunts" who had lived together and never married. Or the movie stars who seemed to be with men, albeit secretly, rather than with women. The "closet" hadn't

even been invented yet, let alone anyone coming out of it. Twelve years later AIDS was discovered in France, and the epidemic began to rear its ugly head. Homosexuality was named as the primary culprit for spreading the disease. That deepened the judgment and deepened of the debate and the gap between the ever-widening theological sides of the issue, including the pain surrounding the issue.

My first real encounter came when working with a Christian filmmaker. The year was 1990. He and I were co-writing for the United Methodist Publishing House. His name was Mel White, and he had just come out with his book titled, “Stranger at the Gate.” It was the first time I’d heard of a conservative Christian talking openly about being gay; the pain, the judgment, of being ostracized by what he had viewed as his trusted family and community. The pain was often overwhelming for Mel. By 1992, twenty years after the language was added, the debate had taken hold and truly began to deepen the divide in the United Methodist Church. The debate had begun long before that, but it took on a renewed sense of urgency as both sides drew battle lines.

My whole perspective began to change with Mel, and then changed even more in 1992. The first retreat I was a part of as a new clergy person was held in Issaquah. It was called, “Strength for the Journey” and changed both my life and my perspective about homosexuality and the Church. I saw first-hand the pain, both physically and emotionally as these stage 4 AIDS patients, most of them gay, talked openly about their lives. I’d seen pieces of it, particularly as my brother and sister came out. Their stories, added to my family’s, made me realize that the church had to step in with a greater role, and with greater understanding. I watched as Dave came out and became suicidal because of the treatment he received, partially from the greater church. My sister was beyond angry and continues in that anger even today particularly at the church. Our children watched and tried to understand. Trying to explain it was a challenge. I remember sitting in a restaurant after church on Easter Sunday. Adam was about ten years when he heard us talking about it,

when in a very loud voice he said, “You mean uncle Dave and Aunt Judy or both gay? Why?” It felt like the whole restaurant stopped and looked. It was at a time when sides were more significantly being formed and the church seemed unable or unwilling to answer his questions.

Finally, I remember attending General Conference in Pittsburgh in 2004. I saw the pain on both sides of the issue. Almost the entire focus around that General Conference was this issue. I met with attendees from The (Liberal) Reconciling Network, and heard them completely villainize those on the other side. I then went and spent time with The Good News contingent. I found that they didn’t villainize as much as they shared their deep concern. They prayed with me for change, and for peace in the denomination. They also stated clearly that they would not move on their understanding and adherence to the language in the Book of Discipline. And now here we are fifteen years later. So why share all of this with you?

By that General Conference in 2004 I was able to hear, in much more significant ways, the change that had taken hold of both my father and Bishop Tuell. Jack went to his grave believing that the most heinous thing he had ever done was to add that language to the Book of Discipline. Jack talked of his own transformation. My dad had changed, particularly as he spent time with my siblings, and then having served as two time national president of PFLAG where he was able to hear the stories of those like Matthew Shepherd, spend time with his family after his murder, and with others who shared the pain. Both took on the battle in ways that changed them. They both felt it was a part of a renewed call to ministry, not only in this denomination, but the world as they talked of Jesus and openness and acceptance. They spent the remainder of their ministries seeking to do that. They felt they had failed, but they also held on to the hope that the needed changes would come. Maybe this is that time. I believe it could be. Why do I believe it?

I believe in what the scripture reminds us. Each statement in today’s reading, whether about Noah, Abraham, Sarah or Moses, each statement begins with two words. “By faith.” And it is by faith that we

must enter into this time. None of us has experienced a time quite like this in the greater United Methodist Church. Some of us experienced the uniting yet it seems a part of our distant past. And now we look at something that has also defined our history; divisions that lead to a potential split. Friends, please remember that the splits of the past have strengthened Christianity. Splits began at the beginning of Christianity. For Methodists, they provided opportunities for Wesleyan followers to more accurately practice, serve, worship, evangelize, and be the people the sides felt God was calling them to be. Out of those splits came: The Church of the Nazarene, The Free Methodist Church, The Salvation Army, The African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and others. Each of those expressions, based in a Wesleyan foundation, have grown and expanded Christianity. It is a reminder that “All things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) As painful as they may be, they can and often do create something more, not something less. If we split, or with whatever happens, I trust that God will be a part of it, filling it with possibilities. I believe in transformation and what Romans 8:28 states. Add God to any equation and the possibilities grow exponentially. Whatever happens this weekend, I want to assure you we will be fine. It may take some time, it may have some elements of pain, but new birth is always like that. So let’s have faith, and now that God is here, guiding, directing, filling and moving through every aspect of this. It’s why, as I said at the outset, worship may be the most important part of what’s going on in St. Louis, and it will be the most significant part of what we do as we look ahead.