

Bishop Sue Reflects on The Way Forward

Following is Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson's address to the 2018 North Georgia Annual Conference on The Way Forward on Thursday, June 14.

Bishop Sue:

I wanted to talk about the results of the poll yesterday, and to talk about the Commission on a Way Forward and the recommendations in the work that is before us in the next year, leading into the called General Conference in February.

The first thing I'd like to do is to acknowledge Jasmine Smothers.

Jasmine has worked tirelessly on the Commission on a Way Forward, and I think that this annual conference owes her a great debt of gratitude.

Rev. Jasmine Smothers (pastor of Atlanta First UMC and member of The Commission on a Way Forward):

Thank you so much.

It has been a privilege to serve our denomination and to serve you as a member of the Commission on a Way Forward.

I want to thank you for your prayers, for your emails, for your suggestions, and I want to ask you to continue to pray.

Just because the meetings are over does not mean that the work is over.

Pray for our church, pray for our bishops, pray for the Commission, and pray for the meeting that is to come.

Thank you so much for your support and for all the work that we're going to be doing in the days ahead. God bless you.

Bishop Sue:

Thank you, Jasmine.

Let's go ahead and put up that slide, Sybil.

We've had polls like this now with the North Georgia Delegation, with a large number of the North Georgia clergy, and with the annual conference, and they're striking to me in their similarities, how they've aligned.

On the question, "When I think about the future of The United Methodist Church ...",

The two adjectives all three groups used the most were "hopeful" and "concerned."

Among your Delegation, 40% were hopeful and 34% were concerned.
Among the clergy, 27% were hopeful and 42% were concerned.
And as our annual conference was polled yesterday, 34% are hopeful and 43.5% are concerned.

I think hope and concern many times in life go together, and that's what we found.

For the next poll question, "When I think about the future of the North Georgia Conference, I am ..."

Once again, very similar in response.

The delegation: hopeful 37%, concerned 34%.
Clergy surveyed: hopeful 41%, concerned 31%.
For the annual conference: hopeful 44% and concerned 28%.

The next question, about the language on human sexuality as it stands in the Book of Discipline.

The Delegation said:

I agree with this statement as it is, and if it changes I will leave the church, 22%.
I agree, but if it changes I will stay, 24%.
I disagree with this, but if it stays the same I will stay, 46%.
I disagree with this, and if it does not change I will leave, 8%.

The clergy, once again, tracked pretty closely.

I agree with the language on human sexuality as it stands and if it changes I will leave the church, 16%.
I agree, but if it changes I will stay, 28%. (Note - a typo on slide read 38%)
I disagree with the language in the Discipline but if it stays the same I will stay, 49%.
I disagree with the language in the Discipline, and if it does not change I will leave, 6%.

For the annual conference, I agree, and if the language changes I will leave the church, 25%.

I agree, but if it changes I will stay, 34%.
I disagree with this, but if it stays the same I will stay, 35%.
I disagree with this, and if it does not change I will leave, 6%.

There are two more ...

I believe the action coming out of the General Conference will maintain the unity of the church.

Delegation:

agree 28%,
disagree 28%,
I don't know what to expect, 44%.

The clergy:

agree 16%,
disagree 38%,
I don't know what to expect, 45%.

The annual conference:
I agree, 23%,
I disagree, 22%, and
I don't know what to expect, 55%.

And now the last one. I hope the action coming out of the General Conference will maintain the unity of the church.

For the delegation, 82% agreed, 11% disagreed, and didn't know what they hoped, 8%.
With the clergy, 81% agreed on the unity of the church, 7% disagreed, and 13% didn't know what they hoped.
With the annual conference, 76% agreed, disagreed 5%, and didn't know what they hoped, 19%.

You see that we are a diverse group of folks.

The Commission on a Way Forward was assigned this task, this is the vision they were tasked with.

“The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with the desire for as much unity as possible.

This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.”

The Commission worked over a thousand hours.

It was tremendous to see last week at the Florida Conference one of the lesbian members of the Commission on a Way Forward and one of the most traditionalist members speak about the deep respect they have for each other.

And the traditionalist said, I hope I can be as mature a Christian as Alice is some days.

I think they showed us what mutual respect and dignity can be.

The results of these polls show us that the church is not of one mind on this issue, and indeed many people disagree with the wording of the Discipline as it exists.

So where does that leave us?

The Council of Bishops had one of the most honest, transparent, gut-wrenching, and prayerful meetings I've ever seen when we gathered in, gosh, where were we? We were in Chicago, I do remember now. When you're in a conference room locked up for a week in any town, it seems the same.

We prayed. Much of the time we were on our knees. Much of the time we were speaking with each other and hashing out the different routes ahead.

There is not a clear answer to this problem. As so many things are in life there's give and take, there's disagreement, and there's not a clear answer.

If there was a clear answer, 40 years ago we would've had it.

Gil Randall, who is the consultant who worked with the Council of Bishops and with the Commission on a Way Forward, said something that had an impact on me.

He said that every institution has a public and a private mission, and he used an elementary school as the example.

The public mission of a school is to educate children, right?

But the private mission of a school is usually, what do the teachers think, what do the administrators think, what does the legislature think.

Everybody has ways in except the children, right?

And so the public mission of the institution is co-opted by the private mission of the institution.

When I pray about this, and I am a person who does the Divine Office, I'm a person who does Lectio Divina daily, I am a person who is immersed in scripture often and deeply, and one thing that resonates with me is that the church exists to serve most those who are not in it yet.

And so as we look at the public mission of the church our question is, how does the church in the 21st century best reach those who are not in it yet?

And I got frustrated in our previous Council of Bishops meeting in Dallas because we sat around for a week and talked about every stakeholder's future in the church.

How would any of these ways forward affect our educational institutions, and our nonprofits, and our, you name it, every church institution, but the one piece of newsprint that we didn't fill out is how will these decisions affect people not in the church yet?

And that is a critical, critical thing to think about.

The three models that were sent from, well there were two models sent to the Council of Bishops from the Commission on a Way Forward.

The One Church Model, recommending that the language in the Discipline regarding homosexuality be eliminated, and letting a choice to marry two same-sex people, let that choice be made by individual pastors as they make choices on every marriage they do. And I fear I'm gonna have to answer to God for some of the heterosexual marriages that I performed.
(audience laughs)

But, this way forward would eliminate the language in the Discipline, and would permit every pastor to have the personal discernment of who they would marry, but it would also include language that no pastor would be forced to conduct a same-sex union if that is not part of their conviction.

It would also allow annual conferences to discern who they want to ordain, as all boards of ministry do, but the annual conferences could determine whether or not their annual conference would ordain homosexual persons or not.

That's the One Church Model.

The multi-branch model that was also sent from the Commission on a Way Forward created pretty much three different branches of the same church, one traditionalist, one still United Methodist, and one more of a progressive branch.

Those two were sent to the Council of Bishops, and then some bishops requested that the traditionalist model be considered as well.

The Council of Bishops, if anything, is a gracious body, and we agreed to consider that as well, so all three were under consideration.

We prayed, we spoke at length, we agonized, we talked, we debated, and in a spirit of profound humility there was nothing contemptuous or ugly about the Council of Bishops' decision, but the majority of bishops felt that a way forward, not an answer, not a solution, not a clear-cut way to go, but a way forward was to endorse the One Church Model.

There was not a lot of traction for the traditionalist model from the Commission, because they felt it was extremely punitive and it really was not a way forward, it would pretty much hold the status quo but enforce even more stringent restrictions on clergy and annual conferences.

So that is where we stand.

I'm so conservative theologically in the sense that I don't think any, the church does not exist without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Without Jesus Christ, His life, death, and resurrection we have no reason for being, and the Holy Spirit is what drives all of us, and informs all of us, and truly moving on to perfection and being conformed to Christ is really my life's goal, and I hope it's your life's goal as well.

The church I think is to be a place where all gather under the grace of God and are working together, companions on the journey, having God conform us to Christ as that may be.

I also have to say that I am unapologetically going to fight, no fight's not the word, I hate battle imagery, this is not a war, this is not a zero-sum game.

In fact, if this is a zero-sum game I think we all stand to lose an awful lot, and there's too much at stake to draw battle lines and to entrench.

And so I'm asking our churches, our clergy, and our laity to be in conversation, and we are willing and open to help you in any way we can foster conversation.

It's interesting.

One of the most traditionalist and one of the most progressive pastors in Florida agreed to be a trial run in their churches for a conversation pattern, and they both were amazed that they had read their churches wrong.

To presume any sort of consensus, to presume that everybody in a church believes in one way,

I think is naive.

I'll tell you this story.

I've always served conservative churches. I still don't know how Barack Obama won, because the Democratic Party did not buy air time in any of the places I served.

I thought that the members of that church were all of one mind. We were part of a group that socialized together monthly, 12 couples, and I thought I was pretty clear, they're very conservative folks, and I was pretty clear on how they believed, until one of their sons came out as a gay man.

This is a boy that they had raised, a boy who they taught in Sunday school, a boy who was an Eagle Scout, a boy who they knew well, served in the youth group, and it changed the conversation.

And then he met a person who was also a person of stellar integrity, a wonderful young man, and they had to move even farther in their understanding.

They began to ask why, in this church where we baptized him, confirmed him, raised him, nurtured him, could he not be married there?

These are questions we struggle with as a church.

We are not the first to have to struggle with major issues. 50 to 100 years ago the church struggled similarly on divorce and remarriage.

We've had these discussions over slavery and split, we've had discussions over segregation and split, we created a whole polity, a whole Methodist polity around segregation that we are still paying the price for.

So our decisions over the next year are incredibly important but I think these poll results help us see that we are not all of one mind, and that to presume that is foolish.

I also want to point out ... So my request is please, in all your churches, start a conversation and discuss this, and gain understanding.

If you never had, you know, you know homosexual people. They just might not tell you.

And if they haven't, you might ask why.

But to really see God, the image of God in every human being requires us to see the image of God in every human being, and that is the role of the church.

I preached a couple months ago at Peachtree City United Methodist, one of our really amazing United Methodist churches, and afterwards an older gentleman approached me and said I need to talk to you, and I'm thinkin' okay, this could be interesting.

And he said no, I appreciated your sermon, it was very grace-filled and open.

He said, but it prompted me. I need to tell you this story.

I said, okay.

He said, a couple years ago, three or four I think he said, three or four years ago my wife and I, oh it was a year that Christmas fell on Sunday and he and his wife were with friends and they said we have a problem, we only have one car and we have big obligations at church on Sunday and one of us doesn't wanna get up at the crack of dawn with the other to be there.

And so one of their friends said, and this man said, I couldn't believe it, the guy said, I'll take you, and he said, this is a friend of ours who had never been to church and never had any kind of religious inclinations, so he thought, well great, he's gonna take me to church. How great!

And he said, and I'll stay with you for one of the services, which really surprised him as well.

So this man stayed at the service and he talked about, afterwards they were talkin' about the sermon and the service and it really captured his heart.

And so he began to attend worship and Bible study and be engaged in the life of the church.

And then the man went to his friend and said, I need to talk.

Oh, the couple sat down with the friend who'd driven them that Sunday and the friend said I need to talk to you and just ask you something.

He said, I love your church and I love this gospel and I love what I hear and who I meet at your church, but he said, I have to tell you, I'm transgender.

The man who talked to me said, my wife and I didn't know what to do with that, so we prayed.

That's a good thing.

And he said, we prayed and we prayed and the Holy Spirit said, you know what?

We need to, he's a wonderful friend to us and we love him, and we need to be Christ to him.

So they continued, he continued in the life of the church, I don't think anybody else really knew he was transgender, but this is what the man said to me.

He said, my friend died a couple years ago, and he said, this is what haunts me.

He said, if the first thing I'd known about him was that he was transgender,

I don't know if I ever would've had a relationship with him.

Church, we're called to do better. Christ calls us to have a more excellent way.

John Wesley was part of a church in his time where they'd come out of a 30 year war on religion, and many, many people in the early Methodist movement wanted to break apart from the Anglican church because they weren't Christ-like enough, and they weren't pure enough, and they weren't doing the mission of God enough.

Thomas Oden, a theologian, a few years ago wrote a great article called "Do Not Rashly Tear Asunder."

Comes from a Wesley quote, "do not rashly tear asunder the society to which God has entrusted you."

My word to you is do not rashly tear our United Methodist connection asunder.

This is what Tom Oden wrote, and I'm gonna post that article on our website.

Wesley urged resistance to the hot heads on both sides.

"O beware, I will not say of forming, but of countenancing or abetting any parties in a Christian society.

Never encourage, much less cause, either by word or action, any division therein.

It is far easier to prevent the flame from breaking out than to quench it afterward."

Similarly I plead, this is what Tom Oden says, "With my fellow evangelicals in a discordant church, do not take pleasure in contention.

Do not encourage division.

Distance yourselves from those who love dispute.

Distance yourself from those who love dispute."

I implore you on behalf of the Council of Bishops and The United Methodist Church that if you disagree, to disagree civilly, to not fan a flame of discord, to not be unkind or ugly.

I also have to say publicly that it grieves me that Bishop Karen Oliveto has had death threats, that pastors in her annual conference have been held at gunpoint to explain how a lesbian can be a bishop.

I have to say that Karen Oliveto is one of the finest bishops I've ever seen.

What do we make of that?

If she were not a lesbian, I dare say every person in this gathering would long for her to be their bishop.

I struggle myself, what do we make of that?

How does one not of Christ bear fruit?

How does not one endowed by God with leadership bear fruit?

I pray that we will be about the spiritual disciplines that we will pray and open ourselves to the Spirit of God, to the way forward.

I started out with, "what is the nature of the church?"

I've long said that we can disagree on the issue of human sexuality, but we can agree that this is not an issue that should divide our church, nor should it be an issue on which we establish our polity.

To me that seems short-sighted, and not in service to our mission.

I pray that you will be about your spiritual disciplines, that your thoughts on the future of our church will be forged in your prayer closets and in civil discourse with one another, rather than a missive from a caucus on any side of this issue.

I pledge that I have promised to be a bishop for the whole church, that I seek no ill for anyone, that I am pledged to be a non-anxious presence in the turmoil of crisis, and that in the end, mission overcomes everything.

I long for the day when every child of God is truly welcome in the church, when we leave it up to God to sort out whatever God's categorization of sin is.

I'm not sure in the economy, the divine economy, that God would place homosexuality so high on the list of sins as many in our church have.

I myself would put racism up there.

Perhaps annoying people. Can we add a Discipline Passage that would prohibit unkind or annoying people from being members, ordained, or married in our church?

(audience laughs)

I'm not being glib, I'm just saying that I will bear witness in my ministry, and I did not start in this place, but throughout my ministry in the church I have seen the Holy Spirit in amazing ways in the lives and leadership of lesbian and gay people in my churches.

They have been leaders, they have been Christ to me, and they have been Christ to me in some circumstances where nobody else was.

So, You may violently disagree with me, and I'm okay with that, but I'm just trying to be Christ and have His church be a vessel of grace in the 21st century in a way that those not in the church ...

One thing that I will say, and I know people disagree with me about this, but weigh this too.

Our survey did show yesterday that over 46% of you have been in the United Methodist Church for over 40 years.

I value your wisdom, I value your spiritual depth, I value that you are farther along the road to perfection, but like me, the decisions you make now you will not have to live into.

The Native Americans say whenever you make a major decision, weigh seven generations down the road.

As clear-cut as you see the matter of human sexuality, a lot of people over 60 see it in a very clear-cut way.

My 16 year old and her peers don't get our consternation.

One more thing, and this troubles me.

I keep hearing that, you know, the US church needs to be careful because our brothers and sisters in Africa, people are killed for being lesbian or gay there and this'll disrupt their church.

My response to that is that we, the US church, the church united, the entire United Methodist Church, should be of one voice in saying why in the world is anybody in the world put to death for being lesbian or gay?

We may disagree on the issue, but a human rights violation is a human rights violation and we need to get our priorities straight.

I would not wish upon my worst enemy the hours, the tears, the struggle that I've had in this issue, as an episcopal nominee where I bear the scars from folks who really thought I should be clear-cut on this issue.

And so I leave it to the Holy Spirit and to Christ.

I invite you to read your gospels, because Jesus, the Jesus I know, the Jesus I love, got more upset with people who put stumbling blocks in the way of his children than any purity code He could establish.

And so I leave it to your churches to do holy work.

If you're a person who's never talked with a lesbian or gay person, that you know of, it's time to have that conversation.

If you're over 60 and you haven't had a lot of conversations with anybody under 20 lately, probably a good time to start.

We see from the poll that this is not clear-cut, and that in this room we are divided.

But what we've seen across the board is 70 to 80% of us would rather go ahead together than apart.

And I hope that those working for division in the church are well aware that 70 to 80% of the church wants to stay together, and regardless of what's decided in February we can still choose to stay together, and that's what I will lead.

I make jokes and say if Keith Cox and I are in a double-wide, give me some young clergy and we'll build a church like you've never seen.
(audience laughs and applauds)

And, I think a lot of the old clergy would be up for that as well.

I have no idea, Donn Ann, what's next on the agenda? I've just kind of gotten lost in the time.
- The Advance. Good.

I will say one more thing. Do not rashly tear asunder UMCOR, do not rashly tear asunder The Advance, do not rashly tear asunder Camp Glisson and all that you've worked for, do not rashly tear apart Congregational Development, do not rashly tear apart all that we have built and that people, generations have built their lives building.

Do not rashly tear it apart.
Amen.