



UNITED METHODISTS OF GREATER NEW JERSEY

Bishop John Schol's Remarks to the GNJ Special Session of the Annual Conference March 16, 2019

The Wesleyan movement was born out of tension and dissent. They made fun of the Wesley's and even burned down their home. Jacob Albright, the great circuit rider in the Evangelical United Brethren branch of our family, was beaten within an inch of his life for preaching the gospel and calling men to treat their wives better. He barely got out of town alive. He was bandaged up and rode back into town to serve God.

The Methodist Church was in part formed at John's Street in New York City. Because of a card game, a group of Methodists from John's Street decided that other denominations were not Godly enough. They broke with John Wesley's admonishment to not become a denomination but to be a movement that supported other denominations.

At around the same time in Baltimore, Robert Strawbridge and other lay people took it upon themselves as laity to baptize and offer communion. Again, breaking with John Wesley.

The formation of the Methodist Church occurred at the first "General" Conference session. It was held in Baltimore, MD in 1784. It was called the Christmas conference. It didn't start out as the Christmas Conference. Methodist preachers gathered in early December for several days to launch a new denomination. Controversy broke out and the conference lasted through Christmas. They broke away from John Wesley and consecrated the first bishops of the church. John Wesley never wanted a denomination and he didn't support having bishops. At that General Conference, Francis Asbury was ordained as a Methodist minister and then consecrated as a bishop.

Since that first General Conference, United Methodists during general, jurisdictional, annual and congregational conferencing have disagreed. On several occasions the church divided or organized differently. In the end, God has made a way for us to be a powerful force for mission and ministry. We grew to be the second largest denomination in the United States and have a world-wide reach building churches, schools, hospitals, and clinics. How did we become such a force for good, for God? By trusting the leading and teaching of Jesus Christ:

Our recent General Conference has deeply divided us, but no more than our past divisions have regarding other differences such as alcohol, tobacco, divorce, women in ministry, segregation, or slavery. We have not always gotten it right. And when we did get it right, it did not mean our work was completed. Even today, while we reversed our vote to ordain women, discrimination against women in the church continues. We have not fully addressed privilege, racism, and discrimination. What we have found is that votes may retain or change policies, but votes do not change hearts. The work we need to do on our differences, on full inclusion of women, African Americans and all ethnicities, is a lifelong journey of understanding, changing and addressing the systems that create and maintain privilege and oppression.



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Our concern and conversation about the LGBTQ community should not lesson our commitment to change hearts and minds so that we end prejudice, oppression, sexism, racism and privilege.

In the midst of present disagreement, I am proud and glad to serve in a theologically and ethnically diverse conference. Our efforts like our 10-year plan for cultural competence and the lawsuit to end school segregation are steps in the right direction. But there are still miles for us to travel. As we gather today, let us be mindful that a vote is not the destination. Transformation of hearts, minds and systems is the long-term goal.

Here in GNJ we are making tremendous progress. We are one of the top five most diverse conferences in all of United Methodism. We speak nine languages on a Sunday morning, have more than 150 multicultural congregations and 100 cross-racial appointments. You are a gift to the church. Let us continue to move forward in our giftedness to be light and hope for others.

We are a “big tent” denomination. George Bush and Hillary Clinton are both active members of United Methodist Churches. Big tents invite big differences and will mean that there will be times when culture – values and beliefs – influence people more than policies. For instance, there are clergy and congregations that are not abiding by the UMC restrictions on gays and lesbians. The Traditional plan passed even though the Judicial Council ruled that it was not legal nor constitutional, and we have learned that a bishop invited his son to come to General Conference even though he was not a delegate and he voted during General Conference.

Maybe the real lesson here is that it will not be our voting and Book of Discipline that will resolve our current differences. We will need to find another path that respects and honors differences, treats all people with dignity, and allows for different ministries in different contexts.

Today we will engage in holy conferencing to begin to seek for us a new way forward. Often Holy Conferencing about human sexuality goes like this:

Voice 1 (Glenn Conaway) - *Why is it that we keep having the conversation about homosexuality? The Bible is clear about homosexuality and for 47 years the General Conference has voted and supported the current position of The United Methodist Church. Why can't you accept the Bible and the decisions of the church?*

Voice 2 (Gina Hendrickson) - This is not the first time the church and general conference have taken vote after vote to maintain a disciplinary standard relying on a handful of Bible passages. On some issues, votes occurred over decades. We have seen discrimination, marginalization and even brutality supported and condoned by the church concerning slavery, woman in ministry and segregation that were supported by Bible passages and maintained over many more decades of voting by General Conference. If the church changed then, why is it taking the church so long to change now about homosexuality?



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Voice 1 (Glenn Conaway) - The church changed its position because Jesus and the New Testament taught differently about these matters than the Old Testament. Jesus instituted a new covenant and new understandings and the New Testament books taught differently about these matters.

Voice 2 – (Gina Hendrickson) Not really, Jesus never said anything about women in leadership of the church, and Paul said he would not submit to a woman’s teaching. The New Testament not only permits slavery but tells slaves to submit. The Bible talks about slavery more than six times more often than it talks of homosexuality, and never once says you shouldn’t own slaves. If experience and wisdom prevail over Biblical teaching concerning women serving as clergy and the Biblical understanding is wrong for us today, why can’t you understand this about LGBTQ people?

Voice 1 – (Glenn Conaway) God is clear, one man and one woman marry. Homosexuality is a cultural change and is different from matters of women in ministry and how we treat people of different races. The church is succumbing to culture.

Voice 2 – (Gina Hendrickson) We agree if you call the teachings and example of Jesus as a cultural shift. We see it as more being faithful to the love and understanding of Jesus.

And the debate goes on and on.

I recognize this is not how all of you approach the matter of homosexuality. For many of you the conversation is far more nuanced.

We are not going to debate today. We will be in Holy Conversation. We will reflect on several questions and rather than trying to convince each other, we will share our own stories, our own feeling and our own hopes.

1. Share a personal story that informs how you experience or understand our church’s current LGBTQ differences.
2. Has anything changed for you because of the General Conference decision?
3. In light of the recent General Conference decisions, what do you or what does your congregation need to faithfully carry out our mission to transform the world as we make disciples and grow vital congregations?

Vote on the Way Forward Team Legislation

4. What questions or matters would you like the GNJ Way Forward Team to consider?

The following are questions I am hearing that I want us to reflect upon.

1. Should we not pay our apportionments since the General Conference voted “an even harsher Book of Discipline”?



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This is not a time to disengage. This is a time to engage. We need to invest in relationships with people who think differently and have different experiences than ourselves. We need to invest in theological education in parts of our Global Connection particularly where there are fewer opportunities for theological education and where leaders all think alike on issues like scriptural interpretation, ethics and homosexuality. When everyone thinks alike, that is not a strength but a weakness.

2. What does it mean to be a one church conference?

One Church people recognizes we will not all interpret the Bible the same and that we will not all think alike. It provides room for differences while remaining faithful to biblical scholarship and reason, tradition and experience. In GNJ we will welcome people as they are, including the LGBTQ community. Also, in GNJ we have LGBTQ people serving as chairpersons of Church Councils, Boards of Trustees, SPRC's and serving on staff. They are gifted and called and will serve in GNJ. I want you to go home to your congregations and share with LGBTQ people and say, our bishop says you are wonderfully made and are created by God and gifted to serve the church and that I thank God for them.

3. What does it mean to be bishop of all?

I am called to serve the whole church. I am called to create space and room for everyone to serve and everyone to feel valued. I am called to create space for open conversation and to ensure all voices are heard and honored. I will make appointments that respect and honor theological differences. I will ensure that resources are shaped to support all our congregations and that I, the cabinet and staff will resource and support all our congregations.

Path Forward

1. **FOCUS** on our mission - church leadership 100, Miracles Everywhere Campaign, partnerships with Puerto Rico and Tanzania, call and equip apostolic leaders, Next Gen, AFWH, The United Methodist Stewardship Foundation of Greater New Jersey.
2. **RELEASE** a team to identify how we will move forward that reflects theological differences and supports congregations and clergy to be in ministry with the LGBTQ community.
3. Have an **OUTWARD** mindset, in which we seek to understand, connect to build relationships with those who do not think like us, and love like Christ Jesus.

God continues to do a new think even in the midst of tension and dissent. The Hightstown Church just voted to go from part-time to full-time pastoral ministry. A future with hope.

The New Brunswick Church just committed \$48,000 and the Piscataway Church committed \$75,000 to the Miracles Everywhere Campaign.

These are just three examples of the many churches who are focused on the mission, released for service in the community and around the world, and have an outward mindset.

Thank you for your continued commitment and ministry.