



St. Peter's United Methodist Church

111 HODGES STREET
MOREHEAD CITY, NC 28557
Telephone (252) 726-2175

The following was sent to all Council of Bishops members, active and retired. A copy of the letter is offered for your information. (PTS)
April 29, 2011

Dear Bp....:

Easter grace and peace to you. As a brother in Christ by baptism and as an elder in the North Carolina Conference, I am grateful to you for reading and considering what follows.

The April 6th Leadership Summit reviewed the Call to Action Steering Team Report. The summit's panelists repeatedly referred to the report's "adaptive challenge for The United Methodist Church," which is "to redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of **vital congregations** effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." (p. 8, emphases in the original) Near the end of the third hour of the summit, Bishop Rosemarie Wenner restated the "adaptive challenge" in her own words: "It is a shift in the culture of the church, most of all. It's a shift in the faith-bound trust which we [bishops and other leaders] in the West [can] regain, because we ask each other serious questions, and we are committed to answer those questions...[I]t's good that we remind ourselves of these questions: how to change the culture [of the church], being less political and more Christ-centered and related to each other and to people in the world of God." (emphases added)

Whatever language is used -- "redirect[ing] the flow of attention, energy, and resources..." (Call to Action Steering Team Report), "chang[ing] the culture [of the church], being less political and more Christ-centered" (Bp. Wenner), or simply changing the church's status quo -- a compelling call for serious change in the church is being advanced.

But how does the church change? Serving as a pastor, I have come to observe this simple principle: when church leaders change, the church changes. So, when church leaders repent, the church is more likely to repent. When church leaders are faithful to Christ, the church is more likely to be faithful. Therefore, I believe that if the Council of Bishops changes for the good, The United Methodist Church will, by the grace of God, change for the good.

How must the Council of Bishops change? The Council now seems to be held in check by what might be called a covenant of collegiality. Conceived in good intention and described by The Book of Discipline (Par. 427.1-2), this covenant appears to be preventing the Council from teaching the church's own teaching, which needs to be taught and heard today.

To be more specific, the unwillingness of the Council of Bishops to teach truthfully and lovingly the Church's faith on matters related to human sexuality, which are potentially schismatic, is now harming The United Methodist Church. (At other times, there have been, and will be, different challenges facing the church.) As you well know, thirtysomething retired bishops recently issued a statement calling for the church to accept into ordained ministry those who practice homosexuality. In response, a Council of Bishops' officer released a brief statement about "Holy Conferencing" and "living within the covenant defined by our Book of Discipline." But the Council did not teach the faith, or defend the discipline, of the church. Because of this unwillingness to teach and defend, church "attention, energy, and resources" continue to be needlessly squandered in skirmishing; the church remains highly politicized; and real change in the church is delayed.

So, the problem in our church is that the Council of Bishops is not teaching the Church's faith to United Methodists, clergy and laity. An accompanying problem is that bishops in dissent from church teaching are aggressively promoting their opinions.

Though the Council of Bishops is divided on matters related to human sexuality, it could and should work to transcend this division. The Council could establish a teaching process: first, the Council could teach the Church's faith; then dissent (perhaps from retired bishops) could be heard; and finally the Church's faith could be defended. This process would exercise the Council's teaching office and recognize the church's authoritative position that bishops would be expected to honor.

The Council of Bishops "is charged with the oversight of the spiritual and temporal affairs of the whole Church..." (Book of Discipline, Par. 427.3) Bishops are obligated, by vow, "to guard the faith, to seek the unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church." (The United Methodist Book of Worship [1992], 703) Today's pedagogical silence of the Council and most bishops does nothing but deepen and widen the current of distrust that runs through the denomination.

I believe that, more than anything else, The United Methodist Church needs a Council of Bishops that is, and bishops who are, first, last, and always servant teachers of the Church's faith. Without the loving truth of the Church's faith, The United Methodist Church will continue business-as-usual -- no matter what changes, under the Call to Action banner, are attempted.

Therefore, I pray to God and I plead with you: help the Council to find its God-given teaching voice on matters related to human sexuality. Admittedly, that will be difficult -- but, by God's grace, doable. It will require courage and boldness, but God provides what the Church and her leaders need.

I welcome further conversation. Let us all strive to be faithful, to Christ and His Church, in all things.

In Christ,
(The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor