

## 2022 LIFEWATCH SERMON: WHO ARE YOU? WHY ARE YOU HERE?

by The Reverend Dr. Tesia L. Mallory

Have you ever considered these questions: Who are you, and why are you here?

Self-help gurus, social-media influencers, and life coaches host webinars and sell ebooks to help clients reflect on who they are and establish personal identity. These are designed to guide clients in creating meaning for their lives, aid decision making, and assist in goal setting. On a larger scale, we see the practice of establishing organizational identity, commonly known as making a mission statement, in businesses and non-profit organizations of all shapes and sizes, ranging from small shops to Fortune 500 companies. So what is a mission statement?

Entrepreneur.com says that a mission statement should: (1) define who the organization's primary customers are, (2) identify the products and services an organization produces, and (3) describe the geographical location in which an organization operates. Furthermore, it "...captures the essence of your business's goals and the philosophies underlying them..." and "...signals what your business is all about to your customers, employees, suppliers and the community." A mission statement signals to the wider market what a business is all about. It clearly answers the questions: Who are you, and why are you here?

The best mission statements become so enmeshed in organizational culture that every decision, every word, every move strategically flows from the mission. The employees believe and buy into the mission because they know that it brings value to their own lives and the world around them. It unifies groups of people around a similar purpose. Frequently, when I visit a website of a new company, I will click on the "About" menu tab to get a sense of the company's mission, vision, and values. This will help me decide if I want to invest in it or support it with my patronage.

### JESUS' MISSION STATEMENT

In light of the mission statement, in our gospel lesson for today (Luke 4:14-21), we see Jesus in the synagogue with the gathered assembly on the sabbath

day. The text says that this was his custom, but on this particular day he went forward to read from the sacred scriptures. The scroll was handed to him, and he opened it to Isaiah and read aloud: "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'" (Luke 4:18-19). Everyone was in awe of his authoritative and grace-filled reading, and he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21), as he took his seat.

To put this in context, a chapter before this, in Luke 3, we see a man named John the Baptist calling the people to repentance and preparing the way for Jesus and his ministry. While John was teaching and baptizing the people, Jesus got into the water with him. As John baptized him, the text says, "...the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Luke 3:22).

After this, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led into the wilderness and tempted by the devil for forty days (Luke 4:1-13). The devil taunted him with questions about his true identity as the Son of God. But each and every time Jesus snapped back with words of scripture, defending himself with the word of truth. Finally, when the devil departed from him, he left the wilderness and journeyed to Galilee, again, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to our reading for today. At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus is opening the scroll and reading the ancient words. In these words, Jesus reveals who he is and what he was sent to do. Some might consider it Jesus' mission statement. He clearly knows, compared to our definition earlier, his primary customer, his products and services, and his geographic location. He is officially open for business. The business of good news. The gospel business.

In the following chapters of Luke, we see the good news in action. Jesus sets people free from the bondage of disease. Jesus casts out unclean and oppressive spirits from those who are tormented by the demonic. He miraculously multiplies bread and fish to feed thousands

upon thousands of hungry people. He publicly forgives the sins of a woman who is ostracized by the community. As she washes his feet with her tears, he restores her dignity and sends her away to live a new life. Jesus frustrates the religious leaders by championing the cause of the vulnerable and weak, including women and children. He has the power to control the raging sea and, even greater, to bring people back from the dead.

Through his actions, we see that the good news of Jesus is about restoring dignity to those who are seen as disposable, those crying out for God's grace and compassion. Jesus is caring for and ministering to those whom society has cast away as if their lives do not matter.

### **CLARIFYING HIS MISSION**

Let's get an even clearer picture of this mission statement by revisiting the reading from Luke, specifically the quotation from Isaiah. Jesus said he said he was sent: "...to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The question is, what is binding, oppressing, blinding, and enslaving people, and holding them captive? And what is the favorable year of the Lord?

Jesus is specifically referencing what is known as the Year of Jubilee from Leviticus 25. In Leviticus, the Lord commands every fifty years to be known as a year of liberation for the land and for the Hebrew people. The Year of Jubilee was essentially an economic reset. Families returned to their ancestral homes and reconnected with their inheritance. Hebrew slaves were set free according to the law, and there was a year of rest from working the land. The people were commanded to eat whatever grew on its own, including what was left over from the previous year. It was a year marked by freedom, blessing, and liberation, especially for the poor, oppressed, and enslaved.

So when we look at Jesus' mission statement, we are starting to get a little more clarity. The year of the Lord's favor is like the Year of Jubilee. It is a year of liberation. But we need even more clarity to get to the bottom of it. From what is Jesus setting us free, exactly? Again, what is binding, oppressing, blinding, enslaving, and holding people captive.

Today we are at an advantage, compared to those in the synagogue hearing this mission statement from Jesus for the first time. For Church history and the riches of Apostolic teaching have given us the answer to the question, from what is Jesus setting us free? Sin and death. Jesus was sent to liberate us from the bondage of sin and death! In his mission statement he is declaring, "I have been sent to take back what was stolen and devastated by sin and death. To reclaim the territory that has been torn asunder by the devil and reconnect humanity back to the

inheritance of God." In Romans 5, Paul says that sin and death came into the world through one man, Adam, but the gift of God's grace, eternal life, has come through another man, Jesus Christ.

Sin is pervasive. Sin affects every area of our lives, including our knowing. It is no secret that our world is struggling with disease, demonic oppression, poverty, famine, war, racial injustice, political turmoil, and assault against human life and flourishing. Sin and evil, the work of the devil, are meant to steal, kill, and destroy. They steal our human dignity, mar the image of God in us, and ultimately seek to devour all of creation in death and decay.

But Jesus is the remedy for the invasive disease of sin and has been sent for the Jubilee reset! This is not a normal save-the-date, mark-your-calendars, by-invitation-only, fifty-year observance for a small group of people. It is the eschatological inbreaking of God's kairos calendar! A proclamation that the Kingdom of God has finally come, and Jesus is in the business of setting us free, the gospel business! And everyone is invited!

God the Father saw the depths of human sin and suffering; and when the time had come, he sent God the Son to become incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus was fully human and fully God. He emptied himself, being born as a humble baby into a world that was rife with political turmoil, war, violence, oppression, and poverty. He grew in wisdom and stature, and after being baptized in the Jordan River, began his public ministry empowered by the Holy Spirit. He carried the Kingdom of God with him, teaching, healing, releasing the captives, restoring life with deep-hearted compassion everywhere he went. But Jesus knew that his ultimate mission was to go head-to-head with death itself. And the scriptures say that Jesus, who was sinless, became sin for us, died on the cross for us, and was raised again to life on the third day to set us free from the bondage of sin and death.

He ascended into heaven, and we know that Christ will come again in final victory. And when the Kingdom comes in fullness, death will be destroyed for all eternity. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

Jesus has come to give us life, abundant life. This is the good news!

### **WE ARE PEOPLE OF GOOD NEWS AND LIFE**

Now, church, what does this mean for us?

We, too, as the Church, the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head, are filled with the Holy Spirit in our baptism and commissioned with the same mission statement. In the waters of baptism, we share in Christ's death and resurrection; we are brought to new life in Christ to be people of the good news and life! To champion the cause of the vulnerable and weak, to cast out demons in the power of the Holy Spirit, to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and that abundant, everlasting life is found in Jesus Christ.

**Please remember to pray and fast for the ministry of Lifewatch on the first Tuesday of every month.**

Every time we feast at the table, we declare in the post-sanctus narrative: “By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection[,] you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.” (The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 9)

Now that we have been delivered from sin and death, we too must be unashamedly people of life. That means we must preserve life as much as we can in every situation, from start to finish, the womb to the end of life. Essentially, we must have a consistent ethic of life. That is the reason why we are here today at the 2022 Lifewatch Service of Worship. Because we want to promote and champion a consistent ethic of life.

The problem is the clash between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Our culture does not have a consistent ethic of life. Our culture has a preoccupation with the autonomous self and is rooted in an incoherent ethic of personal choice. Everyone is her or his own queen or king. The Church must resist this incoherence at all costs as it sounds very tempting. I admit that sometimes a life that is shaped by all of my wants sounds like it would be wonderful. But I know, through personal experience and the witness of the Church, that God knows what I need more than I do. My life must be shaped by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit to bear fruit for the life-giving Kingdom of God. This is good news because I am set free from the personal “prison of self-invention,” as Roman Catholic Bishop Robert Barron refers to it.

An incoherent ethic of personal choice, rather than a consistent ethic of life, also has dangerous repercussions for weak and vulnerable persons who rely on others for care. In some cultures, life has value only if it does not place an “undue burden”—that is, if life is “wanted” or deemed “healthy” (that is code for meaning free of physical or cognitive disabilities). In some cultures, one gender is more valuable than the other. Other cultures openly practice genocide of people based on their religious affiliation. Many states and nations have legalized physician-assisted suicide. What is the basis for this? It is all based on personal or societal preference. Life is only considered valuable when an autonomous individual or government deems it so. The question is, where does this incoherence end?

For example, first-trimester, prenatal screening allows parents to see if their unborn child has genetic abnormalities, such as cystic fibrosis or Down syndrome. While education and knowledge around genetic diseases can be helpful in preparing for a child’s treatment, it also has become an unofficial tool of genetic selection. A 2012 study reported that, in the United States, an average

*“Now that we have been delivered from sin and death, we too must be unashamedly people of life. That means we must preserve life as much as we can in every situation, from start to finish, the womb to the end of life.”*

67% of babies are aborted because of a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome. ([obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com](http://obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com)) In Denmark, it is a staggering 95%. ([www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com)) Would we officially or publicly call it genetic selection? No, because most people would agree that is abhorrent. But that

is essentially what it is. Human life is permitted, and in some cases even encouraged, to be thrown away because it might cause a financial, physical, or emotional burden. Again, life is considered valuable only when an autonomous individual or government says so.

This is not a new phenomenon. The early Church in Rome also dealt with a society that believed infants were disposable. Infanticide and exposure were accepted and encouraged, especially when infants were born with physical disabilities. Christians would rescue infants from the garbage dump, care for them, and adopt them into their own families. Sometimes it was too late. All they could do was give these precious children a burial with dignity and honor. We see throughout early Christian writings and writers that abortion itself was not permissible to Christians. The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian among others taught that abortion was essentially murdering a child in any period of gestation. This teaching continued through the centuries. We must hold fast to historic Christianity’s consistent ethic of life. This ethic would never view life as an undue burden.

Because where would we be, church, if Jesus thought that we were too much of a burden for his self-giving love? Where would we be if he had not been sent to liberate us and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor? Where would we be if he did not plunge the depths of death coming down into our own pit, our garbage heap, abandoned by the effects of sin, to rescue us and bring us into the family of God? Where would we be without King Jesus, the Lord of Life? To preach anything else but a consistent ethic of life, to champion anything else but the sanctity and worth of human life, is to proclaim that Christ gave his life for something unworthy!

## SO WE FOLLOW

So we follow our King, full of the power of the Holy Spirit. We follow him to the vulnerable. We follow him to the least. We follow him in supporting policies that preserve and uphold the dignity of human life, from the beginning to the end. We follow him in supporting policies and laws that resource mothers and families who need access to healthcare and education. Policies that are pro-family and pro-woman. We follow King Jesus in creating support systems for mothers and fathers who need help in our churches and even be willing to become spiritual mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers for those in our midst. We follow King Jesus in opening

up our homes to children who have no family through fostering and adoption. We follow him in surrounding families with prayer and support in the midst of hard

decisions, like preservation of life in a pregnancy where the lives of mother and baby are threatened. We follow King Jesus in valuing the lives of persons with physical and cognitive disabilities or struggling with suicide and staunchly advocating for their health and well being. And we never, ever abandon the gospel, because King Jesus would never abandon us.

This is our mission: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed to free, to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is here.

We follow King Jesus in being people of good news and self-giving love. People of life.

*Dr. Mallory is the Dean of the Chapel at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH. ♥*

## THE FIRST CULTURE OF DEATH

Consider ancient Rome.

“Violent death was always on the menu in Rome, in the Republic and under the Empire both. In the country’s founding myth, after all, Romulus murdered his brother Remus. Nearly half the Roman emperors died by assassination, and roughly a tenth took their own lives. Emma Southon (in [A Fatal Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum: Murder in Ancient Rome](#) [2021]) sets out various ways deaths were arranged, tried, and punished. Rome never had to defund the police, as many progressives now desire we do in the United States, because it never had an official police force or a long-term prison system. In Rome, murder, and the apprehension of murderers, was for the most part a family affair. Plutarch cites Cato the Younger bewailing the fate of his country and cursing ‘the fatal ambition which made so many Romans murder one another.’ Cato himself took his own life after the defeat of Pompey at Pharsalus.

“In Rome a distinction had to be made between homicide and murder. The distinction is that homicide wasn’t murder; it was merely killing a human being, and everything depended on who that human being was. The enslaved did not qualify as human beings; since they were regarded as property, they could be disposed of as their owners wished. Southon writes that in Rome ‘murder was not technically a crime, in that it was not investigated or prosecuted by the government. The Roman state, at least until the dawn of the Imperial period, did not consider itself to be harmed, threatened or challenged when a man stabbed his wife or stabbed a rival.’ Families that suffered loss through the killing of their members fell back on that old standby, vengeance. And vengeance could be expansive: If you killed a man who had killed your brother

*“Caesar, ‘the noblest Roman of them all,’ may also have been the greatest killer of them all ....”*

or father, then while at it, you would probably do well to kill that man’s entire family so that its members wouldn’t return to kill you or your family.

“Romans did fear parricide [murdering a parent or other near relative], especially patricide [murdering one’s father], and set out the severest punishment for it. After being beaten with rods, the parricide was put into a sack with a dog, a rooster, a monkey, and a snake, and the sack was then thrown into the sea. Crimes other than murder could also entail horrendous punishment—being thrown off the Tarpeian Rock into the Tiber, for example, for giving false testimony.

“Then there was crucifixion, reserved largely for those who fell under the category *infamia*, or people who had no legal standing. Crucifixion combined death and suffering, with the suffering very much a public matter, so that others could witness the victim’s agony on his way to a slow death. ‘It was,’ writes Southon, ‘a spit in the eye as well as a punishment for the victim, and a terrifying, very loud warning for other people who might be tempted to commit really bad crimes, like banditry or practicing Christianity.’ Southon doesn’t mention it, but when the revolt of Spartacus was ended in 71 B.C.E., 6,000 of Spartacus’s followers were crucified, their crosses set up along the Appian Way from Capua to Rome (around 120 miles).

“Or consider gladiatorial games, the pro football of the day in Rome. Watching slaves and criminals kill one another or be killed by beasts or in staged battles in which real weapons were used—bloody *fetes* put on by wealthy political figures to entertain the masses—made for a diverting afternoon in old Rome. No one knows how many men died in gladiatorial arenas. Once restricted to events commemorating funerals, Julius Caesar turned gladiatorial combat into a form of pure public entertainment, which became, to quote Southon again, ‘a nightmarish mishmash of the Kentucky Derby, a Premier League football match, and a political rally, with more blood.’ Caesar, ‘the noblest Roman of them all,’ may also have been the greatest killer of them all, responsible in his military campaigns, gladiatorial events, and proscriptions for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, a pile of corpses equaled only by Alexander the Great’s....” (Joseph Epstein, “Rome Wasn’t Murdered in a Day,” [Commentary](#) [June 2021], pp. 55-56)

What a horrible, bloody picture of the first culture of death. Into exactly that culture was born a Jewish, baby boy named Jesus. At His birth, no one knew He was bringing life, as never before, to the world. Indeed, He would become the Gospel of Life in person, take on the culture of death, and strangely and mysteriously defeat it by dying on a cross. Because of His victory over death, He reigns to this day as the Lord of Life. In Him we trust, and obey Him we must. (PTS) ♥

## WHAT LEADS THE AMERICAN BISHOPS?

The last issue of Lifewatch (December 1, 2021) contains a Special Report entitled “The Word of God in The United Methodist Church.” That report declares that The United Methodist Church’s doctrine, constitution, and liturgy point United Methodists to the centrality of the Word of God in the church’s faith and life, mission and ministry. For the Word of God truly to take center stage in the church, church leaders—particularly bishops—must stand up and serve the Word of God by reading and proclaiming and teaching exactly that Word to the church—and by trusting and obeying exactly that Word before the church. Without leaders in the church faithfully serving the Word of God, the Word cannot gather and guide the church; so the church suffers.

In The United Methodist Church, when elders are consecrated to become bishops, they are examined by the church, and they make promises to the church. During their consecration service, they are asked: “Will you accept the call to this ministry as bishop(s) and fulfill this trust in obedience to Christ?” (The United Methodist Book of Worship, #703) Furthermore, they are asked: “Will you guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church against all that is contrary to God’s Word?” (#703) Those being consecrated bishops respond: “I will, by the grace of God.” to the first question, and “I will, for the love of God.” to the second. So, at their consecration service, by promising “obedience to Christ” (that is, obedience to the living Word of God) and by promising to guard the church from that which goes against “God’s Word,” new bishops solemnly vow to orient their ministries *according to the Word of God*. Again, that is their vow. That is their promise. That is their duty—to be directed by the Word of God, for the good of the church they serve. The bishops promise to be led by the Word of God, to be guided by the Word of God.

How is that working out?

### THAT NOVEMBER MEETING

The Council of Bishops met last November—during the first week of the month. Virtually. The Monday-morning and Friday-morning sessions of their meeting were digitally livestreamed to those who were interested.

What seemed to lead the bishops during their recent meeting? Well, to be frank, they chose to address issues favored by the cultural elite and political left. Racism and anti-racism, climate change (“an existential crisis the Church cannot ignore,” one said) and climate justice, and vaccine equity and vaccine advocacy (not to mention financial sustainability and legal concerns)—all issues routinely favored and framed by those who lead American institutions—were taken up by the bishops. Yes, at times the bishops referred to “God” and “Christ,” and “grace” and “love” (especially when they discussed their new statement entitled the “Narrative for the Continuing United Methodist Church”). But the bishops made sure

these terms served the cultural and political goals that currently lead American public life (and United Nations life).

So, the Word of God appeared not to lead the bishops. Instead, a cultural and political agenda, popular among elites in the United States and in the West, seemed to lead them.

That has been going on for decades. An example will illustrate.

### A BISHOP MISLED

During the 2000 Southeastern Jurisdictional [SEJ] Conference at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina, Bishop James K. Mathews (1913-2010) took the stage for a speech. Bp. Mathews had been one of the most prominent and popular bishops in United Methodist life. Near the end of his address to the SEJ Conference, he said: “...I would note that United Methodism is still capable of producing laypersons of outstanding quality.” He then revealed his preferred example: “Harry A. Blackmun, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, who died March 4, 1999.”

As you probably know, Mr. Harry Blackmun was indeed an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court and the author of its infamous 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. Roe, of course, knocked down abortion law in all 50 states and made abortion available on demand, more or less, across all the states. Many legal scholars, from all jurisprudential persuasions, consider the Roe decision to be deeply and fatally flawed. Even pro-choice and pro-abortion legal scholars are critical of Roe. Recall that this summer Roe might well be declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, through its Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision.

The cultural elite and political left deeply influenced Associate Justice Blackmun as he wrote the Roe decision in the early 1970s. Almost 30 years later, those same ideological realities led the notable Bp. Mathews to be unembarrassed in naming Mr. Blackmun one of the most outstanding laypersons In The United Methodist Church. Though Blackmun wrote a legal decision that, between 1973 and 2000, had resulted in the destruction of 40,000,000 unborn children in the United States, he was celebrated as a top layperson “of outstanding quality” by a top bishop of The United Methodist Church.

This incident reinforces the earlier observation: the culture and politics favored by American elites and progressives seem to guide the bishops of The United Methodist Church. Led by contemporary culture and politics, the bishops seem to ignore or de-emphasize or misunderstand the Word of God.

### THE BISHOPS’ WORLD ROCKED

As the bishops were meeting last November, off-year elections were in progress across the United States. In many of those races, the candidates preferred by cultural elites and political progressives came up short.

During the same time, the mainstream media—whose

work has shifted from biased journalism to activist journalism—had many of its cherished narratives turn out to be false. Andrew Sullivan, a fiercely independent American journalist-commentator of British origin, recently listed many of the legacy media’s failed and false narratives: the “2016 election. Rittenhouse. Covington. Russian collusion. Vaccines. Bounties of US soldiers. Lab-leak theory. Jussie Smollett. The Pulse shooting. The Atlanta shootings. Hunter Biden laptop. Inflation. Steele Dossier. The [Mainstream Media] got every single one wrong.” (Loop, November 16, 2021)

In the world of the cultural elite and political left, those stories had been written and rewritten to fit their ideological cause. But as these stories were investigated, as they unfolded in fact, they were found not to support the grand narrative that pictures all conservatives as whites who are Trump-supporting-white-supremacists; and non-whites as oppressed, progressives their allies, and government as deliverer of all. For years, the bishops have fallen in line with the cultural elite and leftist politicians. But at this moment, those elites and their political allies seem to be falling out of favor and retreating. So the bishops are exposed.

## TRUE TENSION

Time out. What is the point of all this?

The point is this: The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church seems to be following this world, global elites, progressive politics—and, to be candid, the activism of the Democratic Party. The point of this article is not to hope and pray for a Council of Bishops that would think like conservatives and/or Republicans. The point is to hope and pray for a Council of Bishops that would take its marching orders from the Word of God, as bishops through the centuries (and at their best) have done. Trusting and obeying the Word of God often puts bishops in tension with this world, with elites and populists, with progressives and conservatives, with Democrats and Republicans.

“The Failure of Evangelical Elites” (First Things, November 2021), by Carl R. Trueman of Grove City College, gets a United Methodist to thinking. For example, Dr. Trueman notes how Christian elites (such as bishops) are tempted to ape this world’s elites. However, writes Trueman: “The Christian gospel is first and foremost a judgment on this world, not a selective affirmation of it in the service of winning friends and influencing people.

“Christians should not expect to be warmly embraced by the world, nor even to be tolerated. In John 15, Christ tells his disciples: ‘If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not

*“Bishops, you are leading The United Methodist Church according to the fads and fashions of this world. See the results of your leadership: confusion, chaos, and unraveling throughout the church.”*

of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.’...Jesus’s warning surely reminds us that we do not need to take our cultural despisers [of religion, who are cultural elites and political leftists] seriously; still less ought we to side with them against those who actually share

our faith. *Christianity tells the world what it does not wish to hear. We should not expect to be embraced by those whose thoughts and deeds contradict the truths of our faith. Nor should we seek to make our faith more palatable, lest the salt lose its savor. Accommodating the world’s demands is a fool’s errand....*” (emphasis added)

Bishops, you are leading The United Methodist Church according to the fads and fashions of this world. See the results of your leadership: confusion, chaos, and unraveling throughout the church.

Bishops, why not lead The United Methodist Church according to the Word of God—even if that is opposed by the world and certain precincts in the church? If you were to lead the church by the Word, most United Methodists would support and encourage you. More importantly, the Holy Spirit would empower you. (PTS) ♥

## ANOTHER LETTER TO ANOTHER BISHOP

Bishop Laurie Haller  
Office of the Bishop/Iowa Area of  
The United Methodist Church  
2301 Rittenhouse Street  
Des Moines, IA 50321  
December 18, 2021

Dear Bp. Haller:

Advent Season grace and peace to you and yours, as we go through the necessary but difficult task of preparing for the coming of the Lord—in whatever way the Father decides to send Him. I write to you about your episcopal ministry of the Iowa Area with regard to “Leading Now and Into the Future—Our Vision” (below “Leading Now”).

About this matter, I had intended to have a telephone conversation with you. To make that happen, I called your office several times and left messages (with a person and on voicemail) requesting a call from you. Because there was no such call, I resort to this letter.

As an elder in the North Carolina Conference, I am simply astounded by the cavalier attitude you display toward the doctrine (rule of faith) and discipline (rule of law) of The United Methodist Church. Evidently, you

believe that whatever you decide overrides what The Book of Discipline declares. Your word on permitting pastors and local churches to participate in same-sex services becomes a command to your Annual Conference—even though the Discipline clearly disallows pastors and churches from leading and hosting such services.

About your dictate, questions arise. Why did you so grossly violate your vows of consecration as a bishop (including “Will you guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church against all that is contrary to God’s Word?” [UMBOW, #703])? And where did you get the authority to declare what the Iowa Annual Conference will do, and not do, when the Discipline’s church law states otherwise?

If you answer with “conscience” (as does “Leading Now”), I would ask you to consider what Rev. John Wesley preached about the conscience of the Christian. In his sermon “On Conscience,” Rev. Wesley noted that the Word of God forms the Christian’s conscience: “A person is doing something which the Scripture clearly forbids. You ask, ‘How do you dare to do this?’ and are answered with perfect unconcern, ‘Oh, my heart does not condemn me.’ I reply: ‘So much the worse. I would to God it did. You would then be in a safer state than you are now. It is a dreadful thing to be condemned by the Word of God, and yet not to be condemned by your own heart!’ If we can break the least of the known commands of God without any self-condemnation, it is plain, the god of this world hath hardened our hearts....”

In the same sermon, Rev. Wesley asserted: “Whatever it [conscience] directs you to do according to the Word of God, do, however grievous to flesh and blood. Whatever it forbids, if the prohibition is grounded on the Word of God, see you do it not, however pleasing it may be to flesh and blood.... So true is our Lord’s word, ‘except a man deny himself, and take up his cross daily,’ ‘he cannot be my disciple.’” (The Works of John Wesley edited by Albert C. Outler, Volume III, pp. 487 and 488) Therefore, according to Wesley, actual conscience never leads the Christian to do what opposes the Word of God or what pleases the flesh of humanity.

Given that your Cabinet apparently complies with your leadership and avoids telling you things that you would not want to hear, I will remind you of something. Your leadership—which lets you rule over The Book of Discipline, instead of allowing the Discipline (or better yet, allowing Christ through the Discipline) to rule over you—harms the entire United Methodist Church. Bp. Haller, your leadership is saying to clergy and laity alike: “The doctrine and disciple of the church do not matter. The Book of Discipline does not matter. Only my opinion matters.” This is de-moralizing countless laity and clergy

*“[S]aying to clergy and laity alike: ‘The doctrine and disciple of the church do not matter. The Book of Discipline does not matter. Only my opinion matters.’ This is de-moralizing countless laity and clergy ....”*

throughout The United Methodist Church.

During Advent, during this season of repentance, I sincerely urge you to let go of “Leading Now,” admit a mistake, and demonstrate that you, as a bishop of the church, are submitted to Christ’s rule of The United Methodist Church

through The Book of Discipline.

Be faithful, to Christ and His Church, for the sake of the world.

In Christ,  
(The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth  
Lifewatch Editor and President ♥

## JUST GO TO ROME?

Dr. Jason E. Vickers, a professor of theology at Asbury Theological Seminary, has written “Is It Time to Leave the Riffraff for Rome?” (February 1, 2021) for Firebrand Magazine, an online publication. In his article, Dr. Vickers recalls the several theologians who have left Protestant pastures and migrated to Roman Catholic fields. Patiently, he works through their reasoning for doing so. Interestingly, he notes that none of The United Methodist Church’s major theologians have journeyed to Rome—though a few (e.g., Dr. Thomas C. Oden, who devoted his last decades of ministry to increasing the catholicity [or catholic content] of The United Methodist Church) must have considered such a move.

Since Dr. Vickers’ article was published, those who make the case for the next General Conference not adopting the Protocol, and The United Methodist Church not dividing, are often asked: “...if you really believe in unity at all costs, then why are you not already a member of either the Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic branches of the Church universal?” (Bishop Mike Lowry, “Back to Our Future,” Good News, September/October 2021, p. 12)

Dr. Vickers’ article and Bp. Lowry’s question raise the question—Why should clergy and laity, refusing to go to Rome, stay in The United Methodist Church?—to which your editor will try to respond. You will notice that the responses below are framed more in the language of faith than in the language of reason.

## FOUR REASONS TO STAY

**First**, as Dr. Oden used to write, teach, and preach: God gives the Church what she needs to be faithful, to survive, and to flourish. God really does provide. That was true through the centuries. That remains true today. God gives what The United Methodist Church needs. So why depart?

**Second**, vows in The Baptismal Covenant and in The Ordination of Elders serve as anchors in The United

Methodist Church. At baptism and at baptismal-covenant reaffirmation, the soon-to-be-baptized and the baptized are asked: “As members of Christ’s universal Church, will you be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?” At the ordering-of-ministry service during Annual Conference, the elders being ordained are asked: “In covenant with other elders, will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God’s Holy Word, and accepting the authority of those who are appointed to supervise your ministry?” Notice that all baptized United Methodists are charged to “be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church,” and elders are charged to “be loyal to The United Methodist Church,” its ministry and mission, doctrine and discipline. (emphases added) Affirmatively but imperfectly responding (in word and deed) to those questions, over the decades, tends to keep laity and clergy grounded in The United Methodist Church.

**Third**, since there remains much work to do in The United Methodist Church (like rebuilding its faith and practice, using the rich resources of the Church catholic), and since there is still the freedom to preach and teach in that church, remaining in the same church makes sense.

**And fourth**, many United Methodist clergy and laity are regularly instructed, deepened, and encouraged by official Roman Catholic teaching. So why not be edified by the Catholic witness and remain in The United Methodist Church?

If the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation passes the next General Conference, a separation (or division or schism) will take place in The United Methodist Church. Then, The United Methodist Church will become the post-separation United Methodist Church (psUMC). In addition, many Traditionalists and Liberationists will most probably form their own denominations (the Global Methodist Church and others). Depleted (membership-wise, financially, and spiritually), the post-separation United Methodist Church will need love, attention, response, service, encouragement, and admonishment—not abandonment. That, this editor believes, would be the way of Christ. I may be wrong—I have been many times before. But that, in faith, is what I hold to be true. (PTS) ♥

## BOOKS ON OBEDIENCE AND LIFE

One of the joys of being the editor of Lifewatch is that a few newly published books appear in my mailbox, as if by magic. Two such books recently arrived.

Obedience: The **Joyful** Discipline? (2021, 170 pages, \$14.99 paperback) is written by Patricia B. Brown. A faithful member (along with her husband Rod) of a beloved congregation I once pastored, Patti noticed that odd phrase “joyful obedience” in the Prayer of Confession

in The United Methodist Church’s Communion liturgy. She struggled with it. She thought about it. She studied it. Then she wrote a book about it.

Interesting that there is so little discussion of obedience in United Methodist churches today. It seems many churches have canceled, intentionally or not, obedience.

In the Great Commission, the risen Christ commands His disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV, emphasis added) Unfortunately, the mission statement of The United Methodist Church—“to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”—drops Jesus’ word about “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” So there is no reference to obedience in The United Methodist Church’s mission statement. No wonder there is little mention of obedience in United Methodist congregations. No wonder obedience is seldom addressed in United Methodist settings—except when we sing the hymn “Trust and Obey.” Therefore, Patti Brown’s book is urgently needed. Now, already.

Mrs. Brown’s book invites her readers into a journey toward joyful obedience. (In the time of Rev. John Wesley, that same journey might have been called a journey of holiness toward Christian perfection.) According to Brown, to reach joyful obedience, one must first progress from “blind obedience” to “dutiful obedience” to “trusting obedience.” Brown warns: this journey features many “obstacles”—e.g., fear, confusion, doubt, shame, and pride—that can and must be overcome on Obedience Road.

Profoundly consistent with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s thought and life, Obedience is sure to help you and your group to increase in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. In our disorienting and unraveling time, that, my friends, is an achievement.

Buy it—from Amazon. Read it. Discuss it. But most importantly, be obedient.

A Crucifix (WestBow Press, Bloomington, IN, 2021, 203 pages, \$15.95 paperback) is written by The Reverend Dr. Marlene Louise Walters. Throughout her book, wondering why a Roman Catholic acquaintance gave her a crucifix just before his death, she traces the highest points of her life and ministry in The United Methodist Church. On life issue after life issue, Dr. Walters seems to have been on the cutting edge of debates, as they relate human life and dignity, in the church and American society. From being a wife and mother of three, to studying theology, to serving as a pastor, to ministering as a hospital chaplain, Dr. Walters was forever learning about love and life—especially sacrificial love for those cast aside.



Dr. Walters tells her story in a way that inspires the Church and the Christian to recall their high calling of standing up for and serving the weakest, who are mortally threatened by the strongest. She describes

Christians sacrificing for the good of the little ones—the unborn, the ill, the disabled, and the dying. In a world that is impatient with people (or “cases”) who demand too much attention and too many resources, Dr. Walters proposes that we Christians slow down, see God’s handiwork and presence, and offer a love to them that is as odd as a Savior dying on a cross.

I highly recommend both Obedience and A Crucifix. Because of these books, many congregations and Christians on the way will be strengthened by the Spirit. (PTS) ♥

*“Unfortunate that there were so many United Methodist participants in the legal disaster and moral catastrophe titled Roe v. Wade.”*

first consult Mrs. Evans.) Mrs. Evans and I are grateful for you, for your friendship in Christ, for your prayers, and for your financial support.

• “Jesus forgive me for being a weak bishop & failing to speak more boldly & lovingly to President Biden who promotes the slaughter of unborn children & still receives the Body of Christ in Communion. Jesus give me the grace to speak boldly against the sacrilege he is committing.” This Tweet is from Roman Catholic Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, TX. What a beautiful prayer of repentance and reform by a bishop. O Holy Spirit, give to Bp. Strickland the grace for which he prays! (Loop, 12/24/21)

• At 27 years old and just graduated from law school, Sarah Weddington made the pro-choice argument in front of the United States Supreme Court in the 1973 Roe v. Wade case. On December 26, 2021, Weddington died. May she rest in peace.

Fox News noted that Weddington was “[t]he daughter of a Methodist minister” (Tyler O’Neil, “Roe v. Wade lawyer dies, former student says; as Supreme Court reconsiders landmark abortion case,” December 26, 2021, accessed December 27, 2021), and CNN mentioned that “Weddington attended McMurry University [a United Methodist school in Abilene, TX]” (Paul LeBlanc, Keith Allent, and Joe Sutton, “Sarah Weddington, lawyer in landmark Roe v. Wade case dies at 76,” December 27, 2021, accessed December 27, 2021). Unfortunate that there were so many United Methodist participants in the legal disaster and moral catastrophe titled Roe v. Wade.

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

• Thank you for your continuing support for Lifewatch’s witness. Because of you, Lifewatch can keep pointing to the Gospel of Life and pushing back against the culture of death. As always, your gifts to Lifewatch can be given in three ways. First, you can write a check to Lifewatch, and send it to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. And third, if you are over the age of 72, you can give a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000...!]) can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your minimum required distribution without being considered as taxable income. If you are considering giving a gift from your IRA, please

## SEND LIFEWATCH TO A FRIEND!

Extend your outreach—and ours—with a free subscription to a friend. Simply provide the information requested below. Also, your contributions—however large or small—will help advance the ministry of Lifewatch by inspiring United Methodists to love both the unborn child and mother. Thank you for caring enough to act.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail to: Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville MO 63338.

Lifewatch is published by the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization.

**ORDER FORM:** I wish to order: \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **THE RIGHT CHOICE: Pro-Life Sermons** (\$12.00/copy); \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **THE CHURCH AND ABORTION: In Search of New Ground for Response** (\$5.00/copy); \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT ABORTION** (\$7.00/copy); \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **THE JERICHO PLAN: Breaking Down the Walls Which Prevent Post-Abortion Healing** (\$8.00/copy); \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **A LOVE FOR LIFE: Christianity’s Consistent Protection of the Unborn** (\$10.00/copy); \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **10 TIPS ON HOW NOT TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT SEX** (\$12.00/copy); and \_\_\_\_\_ copies of **30 DAYS FOR LIFE: A Prayer Devotional** (\$2.00/copy).

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Prices include shipping. Please enclose your check, payable to Lifewatch, and mail to: Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville MO 63338.



# Lifewatch

Taskforce of  
United Methodists on  
Abortion and Sexuality

P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338

03/01/22

- \* 2022 Lifewatch Sermon:  
Reverend Dr. Tesia L. Mallory
- \* What leads the American bishops?
- \* Just go to Rome?

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Lancaster PA  
Permit No. 507

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

● St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church: “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (I Corinthians 1:11-13, NRSV)

On St. Paul’s words, Rev. John Wesley commented: “Verse 12...That is, what I mean is this: there are various parties among you, who set themselves, one against another, in behalf of the several teachers they admire....

“Verse 13. *Is Christ divided*--Are not all the members still under one head? Was not he alone crucified for you all; and were ye not all baptized in his name? The glory of Christ then is not to be divided between him and his servants; neither is the unity of the body to be torn asunder, seeing Christ is one still.” (Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament)

From its beginning, the Church has always found

unity to be both a divine gift and a formidable challenge. It remains so today—especially in The United Methodist Church. According to St. Paul, disunity should be addressed by turning to the headship, the Lordship, of Jesus Christ over His Church. According to St. Paul, bishops, clergy, and laity can turn to trust and obey Jesus Christ, especially as He exercises His Lordship over His Church. According to St. Paul, the Church surrenders to Christ—not to disunity.

● The 2022 Lifewatch Sermon—*Who are you? Why are you’re here?*—by The Reverend Dr. Tesia L. Mallory (*Dean of the Chapel at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH*) can be seen at <https://juicyecumenism.com/2022/02/03/methodist-pro-life/>. By the time you read this, the video probably will be also posted at <https://lifewatch.org/>.

● *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

## LETTERS/COMMENTS TO THE EDITOR:

Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth, Lifewatch Editor  
2400 Foxcroft Road NW, Wilson, NC 27896  
252.640.2755 / [paulstallsworth@nccumc.org](mailto:paulstallsworth@nccumc.org)

## HAVE YOU MOVED?

If so, please contact Ms. Cindy Evans to change your address.  
Call: 636.294.2344 / Email: [lifewatch@charter.net](mailto:lifewatch@charter.net)

VISIT US AT: [www.lifewatch.org](http://www.lifewatch.org)  
and on Facebook by searching for: **lifewatch-taskforce**

## Lifewatch Advisory Board

- Rev. Paul R. Crikelair**  
Pastor, Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania
- Mrs. Cindy Evans**  
Administrator/Outreach Coordinator  
Cottleville, Missouri
- Dr. Stanley Hauerwas**  
Duke University
- Ms. Myrna Howard**  
Alva, Florida
- Rev. Bill Hughes**  
Lexington, Kentucky
- Rev. Edward H. Johnson**  
Pastor, Sandston, Virginia
- Rev. Harold D. Lewis (ret.)**  
Florida Conference
- Mr. John Lomperis**  
Chicago, Illinois
- Rev. Dr. Leicester R. Longden**  
Assoc. Prof. of Evangelism and Discipleship Emeritus  
Michigan Conference
- Mr. Donald T. Sire**  
Treasurer  
O’Fallon, Missouri
- Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth**  
Lifewatch President, Editor  
Wilson, North Carolina
- Don and Carla Thompson**  
Whiteville, Tennessee
- Rev. Mrs. Pat B. Tony**  
Pastor, Manassas, Virginia
- Bp. Timothy Whitaker (ret.)**  
Keller, Virginia  
†
- Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright**  
(1939-2020)
- Dr. Thomas C. Oden**  
(1931-2016)
- Dr. John E. Juergensmeyer**  
(1934-2014)
- Bishop William R. Cannon**  
(1916-1997)
- Dr. Albert C. Outler**  
(1908-1989)  
*Titles and affiliations are for identification purposes only.*