

An Open Letter To The 2008 General Conference: Are We One Body?

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

We live in a polarized society where the church is often shaped by its environment, claiming a privileged posture for itself and demonizing anyone who disagrees. This happens in the crossfire among the left and right wing expressions of our political and cultural debate. One of the books I have been working through since the last General Conference, an experience I have been trying to repress from my memory (!), is a brief volume (only 62 pages) entitled *In One Body Through The Cross: The Princeton Proposal For Christian Unity* (Eerdmans). It is a statement offered by sixteen theologians about the present state of affairs in the church, and particularly about the divisions that exist. While there are very real disagreements, and important issues at stake, this fragmented condition is a problem for the church, which exists “*in one body through the cross*” (Ephesians 2. 16).

The authors of *In One Body Through The Cross* offer a number of compelling insights:

- we have celebrated diversity and pluralism, sometimes to the neglect of God’s gift of unity;
- our divisions contradict and jeopardize God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to us;
- we have learned to accept division and disunity as normal;
- the church is to be a sign of unity in the midst of a divided humanity;
- disunity is barrier to our evangelism in the world;
- the spiritual failure of Christianity in the modern era stems from our ongoing divisions; we make more of our distinctive identities (within denominations, or even in local churches) than we do of our common confession of the crucified Lord;
- division always distracts us from our mission;
- the division of the church undermines our teaching authority;
- and we sometimes presume others to be faithless and spiritually dead because they are different from us.

The United Methodist General Conference will meet in Fort Worth, Texas over ten days in late April and early May. In some areas of the world the Methodist movement is growing---particularly in the two-thirds world. In other regions, the church is on a plateau, growing a little, primarily swapping members with each other--- the southeast and southwestern United States. In the major media areas of our country the church has been steadily shrinking over the past decades. Therefore what United Methodist leaders do when they gather once every four years is *not that interesting* to the world, really.

There is one exception. The media---whether Fox or National Public Radio--- loves a church fight. The denomination doesn’t matter. Sometimes we fight each other. There is the story of a small southern town, two revivals happening on the same evening, the Methodists singing the hymn, “*Will there be any stars in my crown?*”, the Baptists singing, “*No, not one!*”! And sometimes we fight within ourselves; it is the common affliction at the moment for

Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians and Lutherans as well. And it is as if the media looks at us and asks, “*they are supposed to love one another; look at them*”.

In Fort Worth we will accomplish important business. We will affirm our core mission-to make disciples, for the transformation of the world. And yet one of the most profound ways we will do this is by the way we live with one another, and by the way we love one another.

A few decades ago, the big issue might have been the relationship between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and modernists. Some are still fighting those battles, but by and large, the world has changed. People are no longer interested in those battles. They are disillusioned. They are scared and scarred. The story is not new to them. They have heard it. They are just close enough to the religious community to gaze inside and wonder if it is real. They are more familiar with law than love, with rules than relationship.

Outside the church, the perspective is clear: nations have the capacity to destroy each other. The deep historic divisions are more pronounced than ever, and yes, these divisions are sometimes identified with religious traditions that have, at their core, important teachings about love.

God has only one reason for wanting to save the church: the church has been given a mission, a commission, to make disciples who know and share God’s love. This idea is embedded in our Scriptures and in the *Disciple* we will gather to revise. When we forget our mission, *God will use someone else*. When we rediscover our mission, we will have the assurance that God is with us.

Jesus clearly intended and prayed that the church might be one (John 17). The divisions within our denomination and even within our local congregations are not within God’s will. We are called to remain in the body, repenting of actions that divide. Ultimately, unity is never our human work. It is the gift of the “*God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation*” (2 Corinthians 5. 19).

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