



## **Out of Chaos...Creation: Imagining a Better Way of Being United Methodists**

### **The Pandemic – an Opportunity to Pause and Reflect**

In early 2020, the first reports of a new and dangerous virus made life as we know it come to an abrupt halt. Soon it was obvious that this virus would not spread in just some places, but all around the world.

In March of 2020, a handful of us came together as delegates to the 2020 General Conference to start a conversation and ask ourselves, *“Is this a Kairos moment? Is this the moment when we must truly confront and dismantle what has harmed God’s people, God’s creation?”*<sup>1</sup>

Given that we ourselves had much to lament, much to be thankful for, and much to hope for in our lives, our church and our communities, it was our desire to ask people in all parts of The United Methodist Church about their experiences. Two webinars and many returned surveys from around the globe have given us the opportunity to closely listen. Based on what we have heard, we offer the following reflections.

### **Being the Church Together**

We still believe The United Methodist Church has a purpose and a calling to serve in this world. Some people say this is a church on its’ deathbed. A quote attributed to the German theologian Dorothee Sölle reads, *“Death is what takes place within us when we look upon others not as a gift, blessing, or stimulus but as threat, danger, or competition.”*

We are committed to seeing all people as a gift and a blessing, not as a threat. We are committed to being the Church together, despite our differences. We each have a place at God’s table.

However, as our Communion liturgy reminds us, there is much that we have left undone. *“We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings.”*<sup>2</sup> As the baptized people of God, we strive to reconcile our brokenness as we pray: *“By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.”*<sup>3</sup>

### **The Crisis Exacerbates and Reveals our Failures and Shortcomings**

Lord we come to you mourning, deeply distressed, and troubled. As we proclaimed in our previous statement, *“Scores of untold stories of injustice and violence go unreported globally: extrajudicial killings continue to ravage the Philippines; intolerance and anti-immigrant nationalism rages in Europe; chronic food crises and internal displacement persist through the African continent. Throughout the world, unchecked forces of capitalism and the legacy of colonialism continue to cripple human flourishing.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See statement “Seeds of a Vision for a Renewed United Methodism, Pentecost 2020,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ece9a1d3e465434702ee8ba/t/5ee81dd1c0689e37da9ca7c3/1592270289680/Out+of+Chaos+Creation.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> “A Service of Word and Table IV” (Confession), <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-service-of-word-and-table-iv>

<sup>3</sup> “A Service of Word and Table I” (The Great Thanksgiving), <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-service-of-word-and-table-i-and-introductions-to-the-other-forms>

<sup>4</sup> See statement “Seeds of a Vision for a Renewed United Methodism, Pentecost 2020,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ece9a1d3e465434702ee8ba/t/5ee81dd1c0689e37da9ca7c3/1592270289680/Out+of+Chaos+Creation.pdf>

Together as United Methodists, let us continue to mourn that we do not see, or have ignored the privileges granted to some based solely on the color of their skin. We are complicit in systemic racism and injustice around the world, and in The United Methodist Church. Let us continue to cry out that all persons are not welcome to the table. We confess that we have not welcomed certain persons to the table. Our table should be abundant and full. Yet, we continue to see that it is not.<sup>5</sup>

We also acknowledge and regret the idol of authority that limits us to cheap unity and keeps us from opening our decision-making systems in ways that would empower and benefit all voices as truly equal.

People recently shared what they lament in their life, their church, and their community. They said,

“I lament [the] silence [about the] harm being done to communities.”

“I lament the suffering caused by loneliness, hunger, depression, loss of self-worth in our world and [that we] do not respond”.

“[I lament] the division not only in our world but in the United Methodist Church.”

“I lament not answering Jesus' call to ‘Love your neighbor,’ or not listening to the voices of people in the margins.”

“[I lament] a deep sense of individualism and self-serving actions rather than care for community and celebration with each other.”

“In the United Methodist Church, we see harm to LGBTQIA church workers and laity, systemic racism, harm to women, youth, and persons with disabilities.”

[I lament] “the constant attacks and lack of grace for a broken people.”

***Lord hear our prayers.***

We cry out for those who are hurting, suffering and mourning. We cry out on behalf of those who are dealing with the loss of loved ones, knowing they will carry that heartache for the rest of their lives. We acknowledge that we do not understand all that is swirling around us and have difficulty seeing you in the core of it. We confess that we do not want to understand how our actions impact those around us.

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<sup>5</sup> See “The Whole Assembly” (p.20) in *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/this-holy-mystery-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-holy-communion>.

May we all come to the table, where there is no preferred seating--no first and last--a place of unity and openness to the Spirit--a *table of Shalom*.

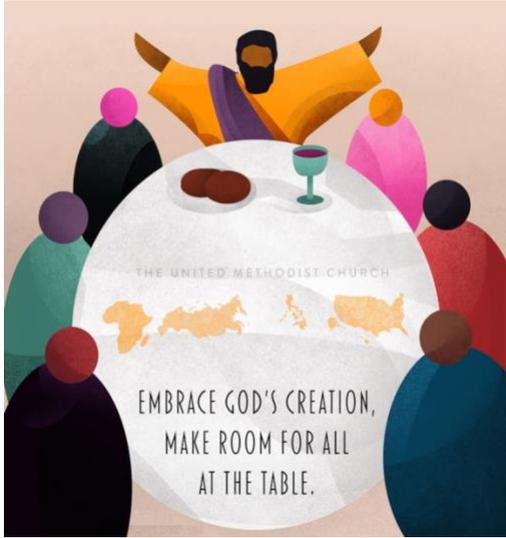
### **God's Call for Us: Let's Be the Church We Say We Are**

- We are United Methodists who are committed to being a vibrant, welcoming and growing church.
- We believe in the unity and value of all people. At the Lord's table, all people share God's grace.
- We are a people who affirm and live the Good News through word and action.<sup>6</sup>
- We affirm our call to be United Methodists through our personal and social witness, through doing no harm, doing good and staying in love with God.
- We commit to working together, to respecting one another, and to enhancing healthy and redemptive relationships.
- In order to begin to heal what is broken, we pay particular attention to:
  - Bringing the voices of those who shared their lamentations and their hurts into the center so that they may have a place at the table.
  - Welcoming and fostering incarnational love through healing and redemptive relationships and developing more contextual ministries.

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<sup>6</sup> See §55 of *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*: "Through baptism, persons are initiated into the Church; by the Lord's Supper, the Church is sustained in the life of faith."  
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/by-water-and-the-spirit-full-text>

## Realizing our Goals for a Renewed United Methodism: Let's Work on our "Table Manners"



### Tables are for Sharing and Bonding

When we eat at a table, we share food and drink, stories and ideas. No one should have to leave the table hungry. Sharing makes all of us richer. We listen to each other, get to know each other, build relationships.

### Tables are for Arguing and Debating

When families gather around a table, it can get noisy. We don't always agree on everything. This is not a problem as long as we treat each other with respect, and *as long as the freedom which some claim for themselves does not lessen the freedom of others.*

### Tables are for Learning and Growing

The ideas and stories we share around the table open up our minds. Hearing the stories of God working with others inspires and equips us for our own lives and ministry.

### God is the host of the Table

It is God's grace which invites us all to be guests at the table. We are not the host, deciding who may sit at the table and who may not. At the Lord's table we meet eye-to-eye. Gathering at the table, we focus on what unites us across all borders: God's infinite love and grace, revealed in Jesus Christ.

## FROM ASPIRATION TO ACTION

To realize the aspirations expressed in this statement and to better live out the "Table Manners we suggest, we call for United Methodists to engage concrete action in the following five areas:

1. ***Identity & Call--God's table is for learning and growing. Learning about and claiming our identity as United Methodists and our calling as a church engaged in the mission of God is crucial to any effort to move forward. Therefore,***
  - We challenge our bishops to claim their teaching ministry, in the context of real national and global challenges, with a focus on the document ["Sent in Love: A United Methodist Ecclesiology."](#)
  - We also invite delegates, annual conferences and local churches to study this document as it relates to the issues we face and ask the United Methodist Publishing House to produce resources to support such study.

- *And, because we believe it essential that The United Methodist Church begin to articulate a clear, distinctive ecclesiology and missiology now, we support using this document even before it has been approved by the General Conference. [cf. ADCA, p. 589]*
2. ***Christian Conferencing--God's table is for sharing and bonding. To live out our commitment to be the church together despite our differences requires us to address how we engage with one another in decision-making and more fully claim a healthier and more equitable tradition of Christian conferencing. Therefore,***
- We call the Commission on the General Conference to work with Faith and Order to develop systems of Christian conferencing at the General Conference level that are grounded in consensus-building and reflective of Wesleyan ecclesiology.
  - In doing so, we call the Commission to phase out, by 2028, the General Conference's use of Robert's Rules of Order given that they represent a predominately American form of decision-making that divides rather than unites and that creates winners and losers. Their continued use is disempowering to many delegates and does not allow for compromise.
  - In addition to phasing out the use of Robert's Rules of Order, we call for the development of resources on consensus building and conflict resolution for use throughout our global connection.
  - We also are concerned about issues of equity and accessibility if the General Conference meets virtually in 2021. Delegates living in different time zones and in communities with vastly different levels of access to the internet makes it nearly impossible to ensure all delegates are able to participate equally. However, Jurisdictional and Central Conferences should be held in 2021 regardless of whether the General Conference meets in August 2021. Elected delegates should be officially seated as delegates as a matter of equity.
3. ***U.S.-Centrism, Colonialism & Neo-Colonialism--At the Lord's table, we meet eye-to-eye. As such, we lament the harm done by racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, and recognize that U.S.-centrism is an outgrowth of colonialism in The United Methodist Church. Therefore,***
- We give full support to the passage of regionalization legislation, such as the Christmas Covenant or the CT's U.S. as a Regional Conference petitions, so that ministry can be developed contextually and so that the issues that divide within one region do not get inordinate weight in our global connection.
    - Doing so would help the church reject U.S.-centrism and U.S. normativity, as well as colonialist/neo-colonialist power dynamics, and fully commit to an identity as a global church expressing ministry regionally.
  - We also commit to decolonizing our missional relationships both locally and globally, altering power dynamics to honor the voices, aspirations and leadership of those often seen as recipients of our mission. We commit to resisting using power and money to dictate missional outcomes for others.

4. ***Stop the Harm--We do not decide who sits at God's table. Therefore, we repent of the harm done to LGBTQIA+ people by The United Methodist Church and wish to deepen conversation about human sexuality, beyond a singular focus on LGBTQIA+ persons. As such,***
- We call the bishops to commit to a continued moratorium on charges related to LGBTQIA+ identity and call for all United Methodists to stop filing charges against one another that are related to LGBTQIA+ identity.
  - We call for the removal of all harmful language about LGBTQIA+ persons from the Book of Discipline and for a commitment to contextual (annual conference level) decision-making about the ordination of LGBTQIA+ persons and the provision of same-sex marriage, without demanding uniformity of belief.
  - We call Faith and Order to develop a teaching document on human sexuality that is contextually relevant across our global connection.
    - This document would be in the spirit of our foundational documents on holy communion (This Holy Mystery) and baptism (By Water and the Spirit) and would place issues of human sexuality in the context of our understandings of the church and of how we are to engage in God's mission in the world.
    - We ask that such a document address human sexuality broadly, be disseminated widely, and be supported with resourcing from our general agencies and the United Methodist Publishing House.
    - We ask annual conferences and local churches to engage these materials as resources for spiritual formation.
5. ***An Anti-Racist Church--At God's table is infinite love and grace. A church that welcomes all to the table is a church that rejects systems that devalue and divide people based on race, ethnicity or national origin. Therefore,***
- We call for a public denunciation of racism, neocolonialism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, ideologies of white supremacy, and hate in all of its forms.
  - We call The United Methodist Church to commit to being an anti-racist, anti-colonialist denomination and develop concrete plans and actions to be taken at every level of the church toward this end. These might include the following:
    - Phase out the racist structures of jurisdictions in the United States by 2028.
    - Direct Discipleship Ministries, Global Ministries, the Council of Bishops, GCFA, the Racial Ethnic Plans, the Connectional Table and individual annual conferences to develop plans to increase United Methodist presence in underserved communities, especially in communities of color, indigenous communities, and immigrant communities.
      - In the U.S., for example, this would involve a focus on the development of new faith communities and the revitalization of churches in communities of color and in indigenous communities, with a budgetary allocation (at the annual conference and general church levels) that would be understood as reparations and that would continue for the next 25 years or until the United Methodist Church in the U.S. achieves racial/ethnic diversity reflective of local demographics.
    - Incorporate antiracism training across the denominational credentialing programs for lay and clergy leaders. Regular, ongoing antiracism training should be required for all active clergy.

## **An Invitation**

If you can see yourself in these reflections and are committed to being The United Methodist Church we say we are, we invite you to sign this statement, share it with others, and commit with us to the “Table Manners” and concrete actions that can bring us to a renewed United Methodism.

*Expectedly,*

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Jay Brim (Rio Texas Conference, U.S.A.)

Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai (Michigan Conference, U.S.A.)

Rev. Cristine Carnate-Atrero (Middle Philippines Conference, Philippines)

Lonnie Chafin (Northern Illinois Conference, U.S.A.)

Rev. Anne-Marie Detjen (Germany North Conference, Germany)

Jefferson Boye Knight (Liberia Conference, Liberia)

Molly McEntire (Florida Conference, U.S.A.)

Rev. Betty Kazadi Musau (North Katanga Conference, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Rev. Israel M. Painit (East Mindanao Philippines Conference, Philippines)

Rev. Paul Perez (Michigan Conference, U.S.A.)

Christine Schneider (Switzerland-France-North Africa Conference, Switzerland)

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