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For a United Methodist audience in preparation of some of the content that we will discuss at the Town Hall at Lovers Lane UMC Sunday evening 6:00 p.m.

EPISCOPAL INTEGRITY AND A CLARION CALL FOR UNITY

By Rev. Dr. Stanley R. Copeland

In the United Methodist Church our episcopal leadership, our Bishops, are charged with maintaining unity in the church and strengthening the connection in pursuit of our mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” In one day, ironically while interviewing those seeking the office in the South Central Jurisdiction, word came out about a Bishop acting with integrity regarding his own office and “call.” At the same time other Bishop colleagues seem to be “feathering their own nests” above all else and looking to form a new Methodist Church; and hopefully NOT inspiring or worse, assisting in planning what transpired in Florida.

In Florida, a group filed a document with the State of Florida to establish a separate Methodist Church apart from the United Methodist Church. Shockingly, three Florida Conference District Superintendents were listed as officers and signatories for the new denomination. Bishop Kenneth Carter met with his three cabinet members and as he stated in his letter to the churches of the Conference, “after respectful conversation, spiritual discernment and deep prayer” they came up with the following conclusion. Two of the DS’s removed their names from the document and agreed not to separate from the UMC and continue in their positions on the cabinet. One DS decided to conclude his tenure on the cabinet and he will be replaced with another Elder in the Florida Conference. Bishop Carter, true to transparency and integrity that he admirably possesses continued in his letter, “I wish to express my respect for these three beloved colleagues. At the same time, I am called to maintain the unity of the Church and strengthen the Florida Conference.” That is the definition of episcopal integrity, clarity of call and incredible strength of leadership that is needed like never before.

It is hard to imagine the sense of betrayal, deception and disregard for professional ethics that appears to have been at work in this act in Florida. Whereas Bishop Carter responded with grace and was true to his call to maintain unity, some of his Council of Bishop colleagues (several who are set to retire in August), seem to be burning the midnight oil to bring about discontent with proposed plans and therefore weakening the UMC. This all seems to be so self-serving. Upon the release of WCA’s plan for a new denomination and the revealing of their Book of Doctrine and Discipline, most of which was written ahead of the General Conference in St. Louis, it is now apparent that there is presently no future for Bishops in the new conservative (WCA) denomination that will operate more “congregational” than “connectional.” Word is also out that Bishop Jones and the group of bishops, will meet with the WCA leadership in coming days to see if changes can be made to accommodate their concerns regarding polity and connectional matters. Chief among their concerns, whether spoken or not, will be making a place for bishops. In other words, “feathering their own nests.”

Bishop Jones and several other bishops have secured summer dates for annual Conferences to be called that will no doubt be divisive. Many pastors are saying, “We don’t want to vote! Especially in the summer.” Their case is when we don’t know how everything is shaping up for our denomination if conservative non-compatibilist churches exit the denomination, why make a hasty decision as a UMC Annual Conference. With legislation for a UMC Regional Conference structure coming out of the Central Conferences, a plan for a 21stCentury UMC, new Social Principles proposed, and much more to decide on in May at General Conference, why would Bishops make plans to take a summer

vote and worse, why would they be actively working to form a new Church. Of course, if not retiring, they would avail themselves to lead as Bishops in their new creation. Where is integrity in this style of episcopal leadership? What happened to the call to work for unity and strengthen the church? Bishop Jones was the first to initiate a plan to dissolve the UMC. The Jones-Bard Plan, which carried the name of his bishop colleague David Bard, who later distanced himself from the plan, so in its waning days is known affectionately as the Jones-Bardless Plan.

- With some of our Bishops, where is the integrity and the commitment to the “call to unity?”
- Why are some Bishops working on plans to divide the church?
- Why are some Bishops already insisting on votes to “stay or leave” the denomination weeks after General Conference causing great angst?
- What is the reason for the rush to make such a monumental, even radical decision to leave the denomination?

Financial crisis and congregational disaffiliation is already the result in Conferences that are led by some of the “I’ve gotta better plan Bishops.” Do we think the finances will get better under such leadership if they get their way to form a new denomination and don’t change their current obsessions? Does anyone really think there will be harmony with traditionalist, centrists, and progressives together in such a “bishop formed denomination?” Or is the intent to lead to a homogenous expression of Methodism, where progressives are not really welcome and compatible centrists and traditionalists stay nervous? Do we really think a Bishop led, conservative expression of Methodism, will attract young people now and into the future, and stand as real alternative to Independent Bible Churches as it probably grows older, whiter and more male (among its clergy)?

The UMC is an institution that does so much good throughout the world. It stands, even in the midst of our struggles and conflict, as an others-oriented Christian expression. It serves as a global beacon that upholds a unique “connection” to do its holy work. My concern is not to retain the UMC as an institution for the institutions sake. My hope is that we United Methodists could move forward, led by Bishops with integrity, committed to strengthening our “big tent,” non-homogenous, United Methodist way approach as we make disciples for Jesus and transform the world for His sake like never before. I appeal to Bishop Jones and all of our UMC Bishops to tap the brakes, pray for a healing outcome at the upcoming General Conference, spend your time stabilizing your own Conferences, don’t primarily worry about your “nests” of leadership that is so obvious and unbecoming, and above all else, have utmost integrity that brings together the United Methodist Church that elected you to serve as an episcopal leader. Our UMC Jurisdictions in the United States are making our choices now for new episcopal leadership, we must insist on integrity and commitment to bringing a clarion call for unity and strength to the UMC.