



# OUT OF CHAOS... CREATION

## Seeds of a Vision for a Renewed United Methodism

Pentecost 2020

### **Now is the Time** *An Opportunity for Transformation*

*“There is a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:  
...a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted...  
a time for keeping and a time for throwing away.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2, 6)*

We now live in a world that has been radically reshaped. First, by the coronavirus pandemic that has wreaked untold devastation globally. Loss of life, loss of livelihoods, and loss of human connection shrouds our world with unimagined suffering and brokenness. Extra-ordinary pain and grief linger in the air.

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed the profound inequities that shape our world. Racial, economic, political, and ecological disparities have made some communities more vulnerable to the virus, placed lower paid workers at risk on the “front lines”, and unmasked the unequal distribution of health-care around the world.

COVID-19 is not the only virus plaguing society today. 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.

The contagion of anti-black racism and white supremacy continues to infect the United States. Brown and black people, like George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, continue to be killed disproportionately by U.S. law enforcement or white vigilantes bent on gratuitous violence. Minneapolis, the site of the 2021 General Conference, has been ablaze following the horrific killing of George Floyd at the hands of police. Across the globe, protests have broken out as communities have erupted in grief and righteous anger. Again, we are experiencing worldwide a dramatic reshaping of what it means to be human.

As Christians, the Feast of Pentecost invites us into radical solidarity with one another: to cherish and celebrate that we are connected globally by our common humanity, called to bear each other’s pain. Our pursuit of justice must be intersectional, because our past struggles, our present realities, and our futures are interconnected. Pentecost offers the church an opportunity for transformation, a chance for the church to be reborn in the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

It is God's Spirit that has inspired our ability to adapt quickly to these times, to care for one another, and to radically change the way we live, work, play, and worship — for the sake of our common survival and collective flourishing.

Our lives have slowed down and become more localized. Cities are experiencing dramatic reductions in air pollution, even as they become key sites for prophetic social action. Wild animals are beginning to reclaim stolen habitats. In this short time, the earth is healing.

***Joy still can abound*** — even amidst extraordinarily painful times. Many churches, almost overnight, creatively shifted to safe and responsible ways to worship, to be in ministry, to connect, and to serve their communities. We are learning not only how to survive, but how to thrive. The old watch word, "We've never done it this way before," quickly gave way to "We can do this together!" Churches can change in ways they never imagined they could. What a revelation.

As United Methodists we must ask, "**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? The moment to change our ways of life in order to save ourselves but also the earth? A moment to embrace the inherent creativity and ability to change the way we are called to be the church in the 21st century?

When our foundations are shaken, we are given the opportunity to ground ourselves again. The hymn writer is correct: "On Christ the solid rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand" ("My Hope Is Built, United Methodist Hymnal 368). It is in our grounding in Christ that we steady ourselves enough to be open in this moment to Spirit-inspired vision.

The novel coronavirus has perhaps opened up such opportunity as it has changed the connective cadence of our Church. We now have the chance to move beyond business as usual and reimagine our connective life together. Perhaps, the postponement of the General Conference 2020, Jurisdictional Conferences, and many annual conference sessions is the gift we always needed but didn't know how to ask for.

In this con-text, we seek to offer the following reflections and process, which might spark a strategy for building consensus for decisions to be made at 2021 conference sessions. We wonder aloud: **What if that consensus was not just about legislation, but rather about new ways of truly being the church?**

We realize that there are many urgent needs during our present moment. And we believe that the future of The United Methodist Church is and always must be informed by the current state of the world. In this statement and its invitation to conversation, we lament amidst death, crisis, and chaos — and we also hope in the power of resurrection and creation.

The reflections and process that follow are organized around two key themes:

- Imagining a New Way of Conferencing: Testing the Spirits in Love
- Inspired and Incarnate Good News: Towards a Mission of Human Flourishing

*“In the beginning God created. But the earth became chaos and emptiness — yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2)*

**We long for the spirit of revival to fall afresh on us**, so that when we gather in conference we will truly confer with the Spirit and each other (see Acts 15:28). Indeed, in conference we participate collectively in discernment as we test the spirits in love for one another (1 John 4:1-21). Conferences, particularly general conferences, have for too long been battlegrounds that have caused great harm to the body of Christ, especially to our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Today, we are invited to conference in different ways — beyond the performance and political manipulation to which we have too often resorted.

We yearn to make space to conference in ways that see more fully God’s Spirit at work. We humbly believe that the Spirit might still be revealed even in the face of “the other and each other.” Being rooted in the Spirit that is “poured out on all people” (Acts 2:17) allows us to see the value of our differences. We claim the collective power of our connection by understanding that our ecclesial witness is anchored in the triune God whose very nature is community.

Today, the church is called again to understand that the world is not dependent on our ability to make order out of chaos. During this moment in history, we deepen our roots in the God who creates order out of chaos in community. The mission of the church is always God’s mission for the church (*Missio Dei*). The new creation groans and longs for God’s future glory to be revealed (Romans 8:18-39). **Now is the time for innovative vision and adaptive leadership that propels The United Methodist Church into a truly 21st century posture for ministry.**

This movement invites us to surrender to God’s ordering of life and mission and ministry. We are emptying ourselves of our own designs and opening ourselves in new ways to God’s propulsion in the Spirit. We are opening ourselves to the invitation to wonder:

- *What might it look like to **confer with the Spirit and each other differently** and enter collectively into discernment?*
- *How might we agree now about ways to “test the spirits” and **reshape the culture of our conferencing** toward deeper discernment?*
- *How do we lead delegates to enter a process now that **opens our global connection** to the Spirit’s leading?*
- *How do we **listen for the vision** that will shape a re-newed and re-imagined United Methodism inspired by God’s mission?*

## **Inspired and Incarnate Good News** *Towards a Mission of Human Flourishing*

*“The Spirit of our God is upon us, because the Most High has anointed us to bring Good News to those who are poor; to proclaim release to those held captive; to cast vision for those who want to perceive God’s new thing; to send forth the oppressed in deliverance; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)*

**God’s mission for the church is always in-carnational and in-spirational: grounded in the body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.** The work of the church confronts the very real pain and struggle that is always in our midst — particularly in the lives of the vulnerable, the poor, the captive and the oppressed. Indeed, the birth of our Savior is rooted in suffering. We cannot ignore the context of God’s humble, self-emptying into human form: Jesus of Nazareth. The One who we adore and choose to follow is the same one borne to an unwed mother, in a poor Jewish family, in a Palestinian land held under Roman imperial occupation. Out of this story, might we imagine a United Methodist Church that empowers the disinherited and marginalized?

The ministry and mission of Jesus is to shine God’s amazing grace on us. As his followers, we all come to know ourselves as beloved. The baptized people of God become the body of Christ in communion and solidarity with those on the margins with whom Jesus spent his earthly ministry.

We must break bread amidst the brokenness that denies and betrays Christ’s hope for the world, as the Last Supper becomes our first point of contact. We dare not rush past the Good Friday realities of death and decay that are yet among us. **Indeed, our ministry must be embodied and enfolded with the scars that mark our present situation.** Only then can Resurrection in-spire us as we breathe in God’s Holy Spirit again.

## **Fruitful Next Steps** *Intention, Core Values, and Where We Go from Here*

*“Where there is no vision, there is chaos.” (Proverbs 29:18)*

Our intent, therefore, is not to offer a legislative or structural proposal for mere adoption or amendment. Rather, we seek to sketch a pathway for walking forward together toward a common vision. We offer this prompt as a **conversation starter**, not as the final word, to initiate an imaginative church-wide discussion about “who are we and where do we go from here?”

We believe that this process, and ultimately its products, must be theologically rigorous, Scripturally grounded, Wesleyan informed, hermeneutically sound, missional in scope, and relational in nature. It is our hope that whatever vision emerges will be grounded in identity and in the mission of God. We hope that it will be inspiring, empowering, equipping, and freeing. By tracing such a course, we invite congregations, clergy, and lay leaders to imagine and see their own aspirations for the future church. Might we, as a denomination, vet everything we do according to these criteria?

Only then, might we present legislatively to the 2021 General Conference, as well as annual, jurisdictional, and central conferences, a strategic **vision** for a vital United Methodist Church. Let us gather around the world — out of the ashes, out of the chaos — creating a community of a new spirit.

Towards this end, specifically, we hope that you would join us in doing the following:

- **Imagine** how we might listen to the Spirit's leading about a vision for a renewed and reimagined United Methodism grounded in the mission of God, identity, and core values.
- **Engage** in a collective conversation about how we might conference differently and prepare a strategy for General Conference 2021 that might reshape the culture of our conferencing.
- **Bring** examples of how we each might envision being the church and seeking intersectional justice in a post-corona world throughout the world and in our varying ministry contexts.
- **Join** us in a webinar on July 7, 2020 for the beginning of this conversation.

Hope is a seed that grows. The spirit of Resurrection blossoms into the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost. The early sprouts of Easter, planted amidst extraordinary uncertainty, fear, and doubt, ultimately give way to a celebration of new birth. While we do not yet know what is emerging, we are certain that life will come. As resilient people of faith, we are called to water these seeds and tend to what springs forth.

### **We invite you into the garden...**

*expectedly,*

Emily Allen (*California-Nevada Conference, U.S.A.*)

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*)

Derrick Scott (*Florida Conference, U.S.A.*)

Rev. Dee Stickley-Miner (*West Ohio Conference, U.S.A.*)

Rev. Jay Williams, Ph.D. (*New England Conference, U.S.A.*)