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## What's Going on Our Church Worldwide?

*"Bind us together, Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.  
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together. Bind us together with L/O/V/E/."*

- The Faith We Sing, #2226

We have a beautiful and rich heritage of a long history of the Methodist Movement, since Rev. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, felt his heart strangely warmed by the Holy Spirit and began his spiritual movement. He was theologically progressive welcoming all people regardless race, sex, nationality, denomination, etc. with Open Heart, Open Mind, and Open Door. Meanwhile, he was solidly conservative in his spiritual practices with a regular rhythm of life with his daily prayer, meditating the Word of God, proclaiming the Good News and receiving the Holy Communion. That's why he and his friends were called Method-ists in faith. With all the rhythm of faith and passion for the church, what bound his movement was love, God's unconditional love that no one can resist or escape from. That is the beautiful legacy we have in our spiritual DNA.

In these days, our denomination has a critical moment of understanding and interpreting what binds us together with mainly two of the issues we have, and I want our congregation to be aware of what we are dealing with and where we are; the first one is the right for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender and Queer) in the church and the other one is about the Amendment #1 which is related to God's image in man and woman. I understand that some of our church members that have been taught in a particular direction and that don't prefer to talk about it. But again I want to encourage you to open your mind and acknowledge this topic which might be natural to some of us and which might be uncomfortable to the others.

Let me explain what these two mean brief and straight, and I will deliver my theological understanding on these two issues. At first, discussion and debate about the human right for LGBTQ have been continuously going on, and the petition for the equal right in the church has been submitted to the General Conference since 1972. Since it is related to the doctrinal position which represents what we believe about who God is, how God is working in us, and what God requests of us to do, the church has been cautious to discuss about it, and the petition has been dismissed.

This extended period of discussion and debate has caused disappointment and frustration as well as anger and fear, depending on how you feel about this topic. And specific groups of people began to claim to divide the United Methodist Church just before the last General Conference 2016. Then, the Council of the Bishop decided to create a Commission of Way Forward and commended the Commission to study and bring some suggestions to the whole Body. The Commission has gathered and discussed it and eventually brought three suggestions to the Council of the Bishop in the first week of May.

The first suggestion is called "the One Church Plan" that the denomination embraces the right of LGBTQ in all level in the Book of Discipline and lets a local church to decide whether they would welcome an LGBTQ pastor and leadership in the church or not. It is what some of the other denominations have already accepted, such as U.C.C. The second suggestion is that the denomination has to be divided into two bodies and a local church has to decide to which body they would belong, while the denominational administration remains to work with both bodies. The third suggestion is to divide the denomination into two or three denominations. Throughout sincere prayers and discussion, the Council of the Bishop decided to recommend "the One Church Plan" to the Special General Conference in February 2019.

The second one is about the Constitutional Amendment #1, which is related to the image of God in us. It requests to add between ¶¶ 5 and 6 of Division One a new paragraph below;

*"As the Holy Scripture reveals, both men and women are made in the image of God and, therefore, men and women are of equal value in the eyes of God. The United Methodist Church recognizes it is contrary to Scripture and to logic to say that God is male or female, as maleness and femaleness are characteristics of human bodies and cultures, not characteristics of the divine. The United Methodist Church acknowledges the long history of discrimination against women and girls. The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate discrimination against women and girls, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large. The United Methodist Church shall work collaboratively with others to address concerns that threaten the cause of women's and girl's equality and well-being."*

This Constitutional Amendment passed at the General Conference (GC) 2016. When the GC passes the Constitutional Amendment, the petition goes to the table of each Annual Conference. Then, the GC collects the results from all Annual Conferences. By the Robert's Rules of Order, which the GC has been using for our administration, the petition has to have two-thirds of all votes. And the Amendment #1 received an aggregate vote across all the annual conferences in our global church of 66.5%, falling short of the necessary 2/3 majority by .2% (less than 100 votes). So, it failed to add the paragraph. And the result was presented in the first week of May during the Council of the Bishop.

I believe many of us feel more than disappointed, frustrated and even shocked, as I was speechless. And one person came to ask, "So, by our denominational Constitution, we believe my grandson is more precious than my granddaughter?" So, I replied clearly, "NO. Not at all." Then, I've re-visited our Book of Discipline and Book of Resolution. And I began studying on the voting. LET ME MAKE IT CLEAR! There is NO paragraph or sentence in the Book of Discipline (BOD) or the Book of Resolution (BOR) that says "man is only created in the image of God" or "a man is better than a woman." Believe me that I checked the whole BOD and BOR. When it comes to the image of God in us, both say that "all human beings" "men and women" or "all human regardless illness."

Then, what's the problem with the vote? Why did this rational petition not pass? I have two theoretical answers. Before the answers, I want to remind you that our denomination is a global denomination, found in more than 136 countries around the world. We are the most prominent Christian body, except the Roman

Catholic, which means there are all kinds of spectrums of cultural, political, economic and sociological views. There are many conservative Christians as well as progressive Christians in our denomination. There are many Christians who take the inerrancy of the Bible with their lives that every single word has to be true because it is in the Bible, no matter in what historical, cultural and political circumstance it was written. So the mention about the characteristic of the divine God really bothered their faith who didn't agree on the petition.

I was there when the petition was presented to the GC 2016 in Portland, OR. And I remember when our annual conference voted for this petition in 2017. And I never expected this petition would be voted down. So, when I heard about the result, I was shocked, and it was easy for me to blame some annual conferences in Africa and East Europe since they still have a hierarchy of men and women in their culture and family system. And it was true that two-thirds of annual conferences in Africa and East Europe voted down and almost the half of all dissenting votes were made in Africa and East Europe. However, I was also surprised that there were almost the same number of the dissenting votes were made in the United States, mostly in the Southern part of the country, including our neighbor Illinois Great River, while 94% of our annual conference supported the petition. We are in the same country. And we are even in the same Illinois state. The total number of the votes was 47,057 around the world, and the petition had the lack of just less than 100 votes.

Here is what I resonate about this vote result. It is not just about the equal human right for men and women. It is also about our understanding of the characteristics of the divine God. Metaphoric images help us understand the characteristics of the divine God. However, once we take the image itself as the divine, as Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich insisted the limitation of our human language and epistemology, we fail to have a deeper understanding of the divine God. Therefore, if we have only the image of God as a male or female, we end up limiting God's characteristics and divine working in us, and we eventually fail to have a deeper understanding of God's extravagant love and magnificent work in us and through us.

In conclusion, what we believe about the human right as the denomination is, as both the Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolution declare, that all human beings are equally created in the image of God and called to do ministries to give glory to God. There is one thing I want to emphasize more than any others, even more than doctrines; it is, WHAT BINDS US TOGETHER IN CHRIST IS LOVE, GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR ALL. NOT HATE, DISCRIMINATION, OR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, BUT ONLY GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL. AND ALL MEANS ALL. THAT'S THE MOST PRIORITY OF OUR FAITH IN GOD.

At this critical season, as your pastor, I request of you all to pray with me for our denomination and our leaders.