

A WAY FORWARD

February 2019

As I begin to write, I am mindful that today is the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There was a time when churches across the country celebrated this 'octave of prayer.' For a season we began to discover that often we had more in common than that which divided us. For a season we even dared to believe that we might take halting steps towards unity. There were Ecumenical Services of Worship, and clergy and laity met together to explore our common faith. Sadly, that day seems to have passed. I have not heard of observances of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for years.

On February 23-26, 2019 United Methodist Delegates will meet in St. Louis to consider the future shape of our Church. I have been concerned for the future of the United Methodist Church for a very long time.. Issues have now 'come to a head' and a special General Conference will consider a way forward from the divisions that consume us today. There are some who actually feel that the Church should divide. I do not share that view.

Eighty years ago I was born into a Methodism that was divided and racially segregated. With the creation of the Methodist Church in 1939 the division was formally ended, but the church remained racially segregated, and women were denied full ordination credentials until 1956. When I was ordained in 1962, the Methodist Church was still racially segregated. With the creation of the United Methodist Church in 1968 the formal segregation ended. I believe that a way forward cannot and must not be a return to a divided past. There are those who believe that full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the United Methodist Church is the breaking point. I do not share that view.

In Los Angeles there is a non-traditional "Garden Church" founded by Anna Woofenden. There's no building, just a lot where folks of all descriptions turned a vacant lot into an 'edible sanctuary.' On Sunday afternoons they gather to sing and pray and read scripture and share communion and share a meal together - in the midst of a garden. When asked about her church, Anna said: "We tried to live out our commitment to gather around God's table where all are welcome to feed and be fed. Whenever anyone walked through the gate it was the job of those already inside to welcome that person and look for the image of God embedded in the new comer. What are they hungry for? What do they have to offer, to feed others? This 'sanctuary' is a place where we could all experience our humanity together, all hungry, all able to feed."

We are at a crossroads. Either we trivialize ourselves by returning to a divided, segregated past, or we find a way forward that welcomes every person who walks through the gate as a precious Child of God. The test of faith, I believe, is this: "There is one lord, one faith, one baptism." To deny one is to deny all, and turns one's back on Christ. I long for a spirit of charity that keeps us from returning to the divisions of the past. I will be praying that we will find a way forward that includes all.

In his hymn, "Together We Serve," Daniel Charles Damon writes: "Together we serve, united by love, inviting God's world to the glorious feast. We work and we pray through sorrow and joy, extending your love to the last and the least. We seek to become, a beacon of hope, a lamp for the heart and a light for the feet. We learn, year by year, to let love shine through until we see Christ in each person we meet.

We welcome the scarred, the wealthy, the poor, the busy, the lonely, and all who need care. We offer a home to those who will come, our hands quick to help, our hearts ready to dare. Together, by grace, we witness and work, remembering Jesus , in whom we grow strong. Together we serve in Spirit and truth, remembering love is the strength of our song.”

AMEN!! That, I believe is the way forward!