

Knowing How to Read The Signs:

A Non-theological Description of the Work of The Commission On A Way Forward

Gil Rendle*
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The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus. In order to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

But he replied, "At evening you say, 'It will be nice weather because the sky is bright red.' And in the morning you say, 'There will be bad weather today because the sky is cloudy.' You know how to make sense of the sky's appearance. But you are unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is.

Matthew 16: 1-3

History is history because it already happened. Its completion makes history easier to understand. Looking back, the past can be seen both in context and in perspective. It fits into the pattern of larger moments and movements that swirled about in what once look like confusion but would later look more ordered and purposeful. Looking back over time allows us to understand the past that brought us to the present.

Not as easy is to stand in the current moment and to make any certain sense of the swirling of events and information that immediately surrounds us. "You know how to make sense of the skies appearance," said Jesus. For even the morning and evening skies come with a full and complete history of what the critical observer knows of the skies that came before. But, continued Jesus, "you are unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is." Looking for signs when all the information is in the present tense is the far greater challenge, with far less secure results. Surely there must have been those times of teaching when Jesus despaired of the limits of the people that he addressed who could not perceive the future of which he was so aware.

** Gil Rendle is a United Methodist consultant serving as coach to the moderating bishops of The Commission on A Way Forward, a role that gives attention to the design and process of the work of the Commission. This monograph is a product of reflection on the structure, and process, not the content, of the work of the Commission.*

In a sense, this may be descriptive of the moment in which the United Methodist Church now stands. Things of great portent are in the offing and it feels to many as if the future hangs in the balance. The General Conference of 2016 meeting in Portland Oregon, in historic departure from past decision-making, asked the Council of Bishops for an intervention to break the General Church's gridlock that was producing significant tensions and disagreements over issues of denominational purpose, human sexuality and social justice. The Council of Bishops chose a conciliar intervention, calling for a carefully chosen, representative "Commission" to do the hard work of recommending steps ahead – finding a way forward.

The swirling is now almost palpable. For some the outcome of the work of the Commission will determine their future relationship to the church; for others it is a distraction of lesser importance. For some there are issues of Scripture at hand, for others issues of social justice, for others issues of moral behavior, for others issues of theology, for others issues of institutional authority, for others issues of... (the list goes on.) The Commission will do its work in the shadow of the experience of the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ and other sister mainline churches that stumbled along their own paths of discernment. Also within the landscape are political divisions between peoples of different parties, different geographies, and different social economic levels (which by virtue of the size and geography of the United Methodist Church are all highly represented in the denomination) all of which have taken positions on issues of same-gender marriages and the acceptability of a fully lived homosexual life. In the mix as well are generational differences where the most puzzling and disturbing problems to one generation are not even a question to another generation. On the much larger (and therefore the more difficult to understand) stage, the differing impulses of individual human freedom among developing nations, in contrast to developed nations, in contrast to a global economy that discounts national differences, adds to the swirling that makes clarity even more elusive.

If the swirling is palpable, so also is the confusion of expectations. Gridlock on substantive issues is produced when there are powerful competing expectations without a central authority with sufficient power to make and implement a clear decision. If the current competing expectations have brought us to this point of gridlock, there is no

reasonable expectation that there can be a way forward that will satisfy all, or even the majority, of expectations that by their contest have brought us to this place.

In time, this moment too will be history. Others who will come later will enjoy the luxury of time and perspective that will offer a more ordered understanding of what, in the immediate moment, still feels like swirl and confusion. The current competing voices will settle into a more coherent narrative of the work of the church and the movement of the Spirit. Until then, we may feel that we know the sense of the sky's appearance, but we will be "unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is."

How then, to move ahead?

There is a critical difference between offering an explanation and offering a description. An explanation wants to provide meaning and conclusion to the current situation. It seeks to bring the current confusion to an end, treating it like a problem by offering – by means of the explanation – the solution. A description is far less ambitious. A description seeks only to draw the picture of what can be seen at this point, without attempting to claim meaning or conclusion. It is an attempt to say that, at this moment and from a particular perspective, this is what can be seen so far. The task of a description is only to support the efforts of moving ahead by offering what steppingstones can currently be seen. It does not claim to know the full path of the journey, and certainly not the destination.

What follows is only a description – one among other descriptions that could be offered if the current situation were viewed from other perspectives.

The purpose of this present description is to provide context and to identify implications of the decision of the Council of Bishops to propose a conciliar resolution to the current gridlock. Seeking to resolve great debates by acts of council have a strong history and tradition in the church. There are the grand examples such as the Council of Jerusalem, the Diet of Worms, or the Council of Trent. There are also the host of lesser councils that have shaped and reshaped our faith traditions and denominations over the years on less grand scale. As I will argue below, a conciliar response is one among several strategies to

deal with issues of change, and not, by far, the easiest path. For the people who make up the Commission, and for the people who await the product of their work, some description of what can be seen may give reason for patience, and give context for the necessity of slow, deliberate and courageous work.

There is no answer in a description. While we are waiting for the Spirit of God to move through our church in its own time we will remain being able to only "see in a mirror dimly," using St. Paul's words. As Paul continued in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." Until then, it is difficult to do more than simply describe what can be seen.

1- The United Methodist Church is in the midst of competing strategies of change.

To begin the description, it is important to recognize that the conciliar intervention of The Commission on A Way Forward is, in fact, one among a number of strategies currently being employed for change (or for stasis) in the church. The Commission on A Way Forward does not do its work in isolation. There are at least five different strategies currently being employed, or being awaited. Each strategy has its own legitimate history within the church. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses; it's pluses and minuses. Each has its own attractiveness to its particular audience because it favors their position in the larger denominational system or favors their own preferred outcome. Each has its own timeline and pace by which it will move ahead; some quicker and some much more deliberate.

As I offer these descriptions let me be clear that I have sought a neutral language that, nonetheless, has proven to be either incomplete or insensitive to the way in which participants in any of these strategies might understand themselves. While I have been aided by conversations with colleagues on The Commission on A Way Forward, any insensitivity remains mine. The purpose of these descriptions, however, remains. It is critical to recognize that there are multiple competing strategies within the church and that, of the various strategies, the conciliar approach of The Commission on A Way Forward is the most complex and difficult. In brief, following are the five strategies:

A- The Conciliar strategy: The Commission on A Way Forward

This strategy:

- is slow and tedious because it is required to respond to a wide array of competing constituencies that hold differences already proven to be difficult to negotiate;
- requires a representation of constituent voices either by participation as a member of the council or by a process of listening to voices not present among members of the council;
- is accountable to the institution that created it, and therefore must address the institutional issues created by any change it recommends;
- requires the safe and private working space that will encourage trust and risk among its members, but also requires attention to transparency to the wider church in order to solicit trust and understanding from that wider audience for its results;
- requires the approval of the larger church to implement any changes that it recommends.

B- The Movement strategy: for example- The Wesleyan Covenant Association

This strategy:

- begins quickly, being both agile and responsive, because it begins with a singular constituency and does not need to negotiate competing differences in order to gather and begin;
- does not need to satisfy external expectations as it gathers, beginning with a wide invitation shaped around a set of principles or understandings of its preferred reality in the church;
- is constituted by multiple subgroups that agree on main points, but have preferences or differences of outcomes within those main points;
- needs only to negotiate its actions and decisions within a small leadership circle while claiming to represent the larger group;
- was not called forth by the institution, and therefore is not accountable for implementing changes or challenges that it presents to the institution.

C- The Obsolete / Invalid strategy: for example – post-General Conference declarations of non-compliance by individual Annual Conferences, and the Western Jurisdictional Conference election of a gay person to the episcopacy based on assumptions that restrictions to do so are obsolete or invalid

This strategy:

- is immediate;
- acts directly on its preferred outcomes, claiming justification based on recognized principles that are in conflict with the norm;
- represents non-negotiated change that comes by ignoring rules and norms currently in place;
- was not called forth by the institution, but is accountable to the institution for ignoring the established rules;
- uses unilateral action to force a responding action from the institution that will either change or further clarify the status quo.

D- The Localization strategy: for example – annual conference and local church self-determination and self sufficiency

This strategy:

- is employed by leaders who use their local jurisdiction (i.e. within an annual conference or a local church) to determine their own response, or non-response, to larger changes;
- operates within, or at the edge, of the larger institutional norms and rules so that it is unlikely to be challenged and therefore free to escape the gridlock that operates beyond its boundaries;
- minimizes the impact of larger changes and challenges by claiming a local position that allows it to return its attention and resources to purposes and outcomes outside of the difficult gridlocked issues.

E- The Application of Law strategy: for example – The Judicial Council

This strategy:

- is slow and deliberate, holding action on disputed issues to its own timeline for consideration and response;

- is a normative institutional response, using current rules and legislation as well as past practices to respond to change;
- undergirds the status quo;
- is accountable to the institution as an agent of the institution, and appropriately fulfills its given purpose using the tools of the institution;
- does not lead change, but responds to change.

While there are at least these five strategies currently operative within the church, they are not equal in any manner and cannot be appropriately measured against each other as if there is a "right" or "best" strategy. The different strategies serve different purposes and different constituencies. However, because all strategies are operative simultaneously, the landscape feels more complicated and the work of any one strategy is complicated by the actions of the others.

- 2- The church does not have agreement on where to start the conversation, and therefore, what results to expect.

With even a cursory overview of the newsletters, blogs, statements and articles produced by the agents, agencies, caucuses, and constituencies of the church in response to the formation of The Commission on A Way Forward, it is clear that different voices within the church have very different hopes and expectations of the work of the commission.

Among the various outcomes expected from the work of the commission are:

- unity of the various factions of the church in a newfound agreement;
- the terms and requirements of a new connection by which all parties will, or will not, recognize one another as United Methodist;
- the resolution of social justice by an admission of some part of the church that they have sinned;
- the terms of either full or limited inclusion of homosexual people within the ministries, rituals and leadership of the church;
- resolution of scriptural understanding and theological fidelity among disagreeing parties.

Once again, each of these outcomes, like the strategies of change noted above, has its own legitimate history and purpose as an expectation of the people of the church. Each has

its own part in our Christian heritage. However, for those who hope for agreement, the work of the Commission will be faulted if it cannot heal divisions. For those who seek social justice, the work of the commission will be seen as a failure if blame is not assigned and some positions not named a sinful. For those who seek scriptural purity or theological fidelity, the Commission will have failed if lines are drawn too broadly or interpretation is not succinct.

Because of the variety of expectations already announced concerning the work of the Commission, three further observations seem appropriate.

The first is that this earliest positioning around the various possible outcomes of the work of the Commission is an expected byproduct of the nature of the work of a conciliar strategy. Note that it is only the conciliar strategy of change, of the five strategies identified above, that is held responsible for listening to and is accountable for responding to multiple, competing constituencies. This one difference about the conciliar strategy may be the most critical to understand. Other strategies either represent singular or limited constituencies, or choose not to recognize competing constituencies. Because the conciliar work of the Commission is expected to respond to the wider span of competing voices, it is the most complicated and most fragile of the five strategies. It is natural that there be competing expectations about the outcome of the work of the commission because there are so many different constituencies interested in the results of the work. To an extent, this is simply the nature of conciliar work. Each voice that seeks to be heard quite naturally and quite rightly, has a conclusion in mind – a preferred outcome. The work of the Commission will naturally be evaluated by each constituent voice based on whether the outcome(s) recommended by the Commission satisfies its position.

The second observation that can be offered at this early stage of the work of the Commission is that it will be regularly criticized and faulted for how it goes about its work. Again, such criticism is a natural and normative expression of people with competing expectations.

This ongoing criticism can be easily understood from the perspective of systems theory. In a most basic model of a system there are three related components needed to produce

any outcome: Input, Throughput, and Output. This simplistic model is overly linear, but it differentiates between:

- what goes into the system: the input – in this case, the people named to the Commission, their charter, the information given to them, etc.;
- the process followed by the system: the throughput – in this case, the conversations held at Commission meetings, the strategies used to listen to constituent voices, the internal and external communications used to move the work ahead, etc.; and,
- the product produced by the system: the output – in this case, the recommendations for a way forward, the insights and necessary learnings for the church to understand itself in a new way, etc.

It is important to understand that all systems that produce outcomes of any kind must be "built" in reverse. That is to say, that in order to achieve a desired outcome, the system must be constructed starting with the end in mind – then worked back to the beginning in order to identify what resources and processes are needed. An automobile manufacturer needs to start with a clear idea of the car to be produced, and then work back to determine what skills, people, facilities, and raw materials (inputs) are needed, and what processes from design to assembly (throughput) are required to achieve the production of the new car. Understanding the "backward nature" of constructing systems makes it clear that if you want a particular outcome, the appropriate resources and processes must be chosen to get you there.

If different constituent voices in the church have particular and different preferred outcomes in mind, they also have clear expectations of the particular "resources" needed and "processes" to be followed that are appropriate to their preferred outcome. Naturally the Commission will be faulted by some for not having the "right" persons named to the Commission since the "right" people (resources) are necessary to get to the "right" outcome. Likewise the "right" processes of information gathering, listening, deliberation and communication are needed to get to the "right" outcome. If the different competing outcomes all have their appropriately different configuration of resources and processes needed to get to their anticipated outcome, it then becomes obvious that the work of the Commission will be examined and critiqued according to the standards of each of the

competing outcomes – and each step of input and throughput will be critiqued and challenged along the way.

Which, then, leads to the third observation related to the outcomes of the work of the Commission. In the midst of such competing expectations of the work of the Commission, the Commission will serve the church best if it is able to clearly name its own anticipated outcome(s). The Commission should be evaluated on its work in addressing the charter that formed it, and the identified outcomes that are actually within the scope of its capacity – not on the hopes or desires of the competing outcomes of the different constituencies that surround it.

3- A way forward cannot be an extension of the same path that got us here.

Albert Einstein is to have famously said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them." An additional description of the present moment is the fact that our current denominational gridlock is, in part, a product of being constrained by our own assumptions, polity, and normative practices. Surely there are major external forces at work ranging from past and historic debates over the appropriate use of Scripture in the life of faith, to the present culture wars that shape not only the church but politics and presidential elections as well. However, much of the constraint experienced in the church in response to the changing forces around us stems from the limits self imposed by looking at new situations through the perspective of older established rules, practices and assumptions.

To move ahead will require careful re-examination of what is expected from even the most familiar ideas and words. For example, in an earlier time of great cultural consensus such as the American post World War II era, the word "harmony" meant agreement. Life was in harmony at that time when individuals sublimated their differences, large and small, in order to participate in a consensus dominated by specific gender roles, traditional family values and behaviors, and uniformity defined by employment and membership. Now, no longer in a time of cultural consensus, the meaning of words such as "harmony" necessarily shift. "Harmony is not everyone singing the same note," observed humorist Wally Armbruster. "That is monotony. Harmony is when everyone sings their own

note and then listens closely enough to others the blend their note into a song." Where once harmony meant being alike, harmony now means being respectfully different. In a similar way even the most familiar words such as "connection", or "representation," or "community" that have been used in the past to define ourselves must be re-examined to see if past definitions are sufficient to current challenges, or whether old definitions constrain new opportunities.

Similarly, along with careful attention to our language and our assumptions, the Commission will need to carefully consider its relationship with church polity – out of which the Commission was formed, but by which the work of the Commission will be constrained. Again, considering the five different strategies of change noted above, only the conciliar strategy (the Commission) and the application of law (the Judicial Council) are constrained in their response by the polity of the church that is already in place.

Polity, like civil legislation and organizational human resources policy, is commonly retrospective agreement. Legislation and policy define already understood conditions or seek to solve already experienced problems. Legislation, it is often noted, responds to change. It does not lead change. The value of polity, policy, and legislation is that it regulates and standardizes practices to establish certainty and define terms of agreement. The limiting nature of polity, policy, and legislation is that it constrains and limits options for responding to changing circumstances.

Interestingly, the Commission on A Way Forwards was called into being using the structure and polity of the church. It must report and recommend to the Council of Bishops and the General Conference which are bodies defined by the structure and polity of the church. But it is unlikely that the work of the Commission will be productive if it is limited by the current structure and polity of the church. Strangely, the future General Conference, to which the Commission will report and recommend, will find itself in the dilemma of needing to think outside of its own box in order to respond to what it, itself, has initiated.

If the way forward requires a path different from the one that got us here, there are initially at least three places that we will need to give attention in order to shape the work in a different and more appropriate way.

#1 - Redefining Representation

In the letter to the Philippians Paul took pains to offer his credentials:

If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the law, I am a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the law, I'm blameless.

Philippians 3:4-6

In order to be heard, there are times when one must be credentialed. Not just another voice, Paul was a fully credentialed Jew who came speaking of Jesus. He had lineage and experience that gave him authority. His credentials gave the Philippians both the reason and the perspective with which to listen to what he had to say.

Diversity among the members of the Commission on A Way Forward is such a necessary credential to do its work. If the Commission is to be heard with any authority, it must be a representative body that, to the best of its ability, reflects a global church that is richly diverse in gender, age, race, ethnicity, geography, gifts and needs. The diversity of the United Methodist Church has been hard won, and in most people's eyes, is still incomplete. In such a diverse, global democratic church, decisions cannot be simply pronounced from leaders in top positions or by powerful subgroups. Because the conciliar strategy to address ecclesial gridlock is the singular strategy of the five noted in this monograph to be held accountable to the wide range of constituent voices that make up our diverse denomination, one of the most critical credentials necessary to be heard is its own diversity.

However, there are times that once credentialed, a leader must be very careful not to be captured by his or her own credentials. Taking a step further in Paul's letter to the Philippians, in the very next verse Paul goes on to say,

These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Philippians 3:7-8

Having credentialed himself in order to claim authority to be heard, in the very next breath Paul threw his credentials away because they interfered with the message of Christ that he wanted to bring to the people. There is a bit of a paradox when leaders need to be fully credentialed to lead, but cannot then use their credentials because the credentials actually interfere with the work that must be done.

I suggest that this is descriptive of a paradox the Commission faces in its work. It must be a representative group, or it cannot expect to be listened to by the wider church. But once constituted as a representative group, its members must take care not to represent. Historically, to be invited to represent meant to be invited to the table in order to represent the issues, needs, and preferences of the subgroup of which one is a part. By definition that means that people who are asked to represent are not expected to advance the purpose of the whole, rather they are expected to advance the agenda and preferred outcomes of the part of the whole that they represent.

Over the past number of General Conferences the various constituent voices of the church were increasingly caught in gridlock because the multiple agendas and preferences of the competing parts of the church could find no way ahead for the whole. It would be folly for the church then to gather, at great length and at great cost, a very small representative group and give them the task of finding a way forward by repeating the same contest with one another over the same differing agendas of the parts of the church that are paralyzed by gridlock in the larger body. Surely "representation" must mean something different than the contesting over different expectations and outcomes. Like the word "harmony" that shifted its use and meaning in the culture over several decades from sameness to difference, the church now needs to consider what use and meaning is expected of representation.

Let us be clear that our common assumptions about representation, meaning contesting to advance the needs, preferences and outcomes of one's own subgroup, has a rich and appropriate history in the church. The United Methodist's lineage rests too steadily on the shoulders of older, white, North American males. It is a lineage that does not capture the richness of the full kingdom of God. Too many of our congregations still have hallways lined with portraits of white, male pastors uninterrupted until only recent

years, if at all, with portraits of women or people of color. In the merger of 1964 that brought both different traditions and different races into one church, representation (i.e., a place at the table) appropriately meant access to shared power – a share of the resources and a share of the decision-making. As other races and distinct groups joined the larger body, a place at the table through representation and through caucuses was both a tool of the community that people were seeking to build and a tool of social justice that had previously been missing. Clearly, at that time, representation meant the opportunity to claim attention to the needs and preferences of one's subgroup and to negotiate to favor one's own perspective.

Representation in the service of the whole body, however, needs different definition. In this case, the need is not to find a place for missing voices at the table. That is work that gives necessary and on-going attention to our competing parts. In this case the church is trying to give attention to the whole. How do we all find a way forward together? Representation that serves the whole needs to begin with different assumptions. The Commission needs to understand that each representative voice holds its own partial truth that is needed by the whole. One is invited to the table – not to argue for one's own preferred outcomes – but to bring one's own truth to the conversation in the service of the whole body. In this redefinition, representation calls more on a careful listening rather than forceful talking. If all who come to the table acknowledge that they only hold their own partial truth, then discerning next steps for the whole community requires careful listening and learning to complete the picture.

This new understanding of representation is captured by a meeting room used by the Board of Directors at Haverford College, a small liberal arts school outside of Philadelphia PA. In the middle of the board room in this Quaker institution is a non-weight bearing pillar that partially blocks the view of trustees who are trying to listen to their colleagues seated directly across the room on the other side of the pillar. The pillar is not structurally needed, but serves as the constant intentional reminder that in order to fully hear one's colleague it is necessary to shift out of one's own comfortable space to get the complete picture. It is the hard work of listening for what one can't understand from one's own comfortable position.

In a global church, with multiple millions of members and participants spread over several continents, it is virtually impossible to invite all differences to the table – especially if the membership at the table is limited to 30 or 35 people. Yet to expand the table to a size reflecting all nuanced differences in the full church would be to assemble a group too large to function any differently than the full General Conference which has proven unable to do the necessary work of discernment and decision-making given its own constraints of representation, time and cost.

Again, the work of the commission on A Way Forward calls for new and different understandings. If representation is not a contest over outcomes but a shared discovery of truth, if listening is more critical than talking, then a representative body like the Commission must also be willing to listen to voices not at the table. The work of a small representative group must go beyond its own borders to listen for the other partial truths still not present in the room. Processes of listening, by engaging other groups not invited to the table, by reading, by individual conversations, by prayer and by discernment, expand the function of representation in a search for the fuller portion of partial truths that can lead to a new way forward for the whole body.

For those who remain passionately constant in their contest for their own preferred outcomes it will remain difficult to understand that being "heard" is not the same as "being agreed with." For some, being heard will never be satisfied until their preferred outcome is achieved. Such passion, undoubtedly, is a measure of the importance of the issues to those individuals. Such passion, though, makes it difficult for those so committed to a specific outcome to understand that even the clarity that drives them is only a partial truth. However, the task of a representative group is not to measure the greatest passions within the parts of the church but to discern the most faithful path ahead for the whole church.

#2 - Listening for Interests over Positions

What then does a representative group listen for if their task is to search for a way to weave partial truths into a new future for the whole? It is a careful listening, not for the most powerful positions, but for the quieter interests that lie beneath those positions.

In an earlier monograph, I described the current contest within the mainline church over same-gender marriage and the ordination of gays as a positional argument in which, on any proposition, one vocal cohort will say yes while another equally vocal cohort will say no. I noted there that:

One of the most helpful propositions guiding efforts to resolve conflict and negotiate agreements is the "truth" coming out of the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project that people do not negotiate their positions in a fight. A position is a conclusion. By whatever path, once we come to our conclusion about what is right or what is wrong, we do not negotiate further because whatever is negotiated is, by definition, no longer our established position. If our position is that Scripture says a lifestyle or behavior is right or wrong, that position cannot be abandoned, and any negotiation toward agreement with others constitutes an abandonment of that position.

"Be Strong and of Good Courage", 2016 p. 18

In support of any position, there are interests, which are the underlying reasons that a person claims their position. Positions are not negotiated, but interests can be. In the report on the Harvard Negotiation Project, authors Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) use a simple story of a librarian quietly watching two men working at the same table in a library. As she watches, one man gets up and opens the large window at the end of the table. After a few minutes the other man gets up, moves to the window, and closes it. The two men have established their positions. One man's position is that the window should be open, the other man's position is that the window should be closed.

After a few minutes the first man moves back to the window and opens it again, but only half as wide as the first time. Shortly, the second man gets up again and closes the window - - all the way. (When I tell this story to groups I commonly ask people to predict what the second man will do with a half opened window. The most common answer is that he will close the window a quarter of the way, anticipating compromise as a solution to the situation. But a quarter-open window is still an open window. The second man's position is closed, not open. Positions are not negotiable. A partially open window is still open, and that is not acceptable to the second man who wants the window closed.)

At this point in the story, intrigued, the librarian moves to the two men at the table and begins to explore their interests underlying their positional contest about the window. When she asks the first man why he wants the window open, he explains that he is working on a project with a looming deadline and that he feels sleepy from the warm, stuffy library air. He wants fresh air. The librarian now has a better idea of the interests this man is trying to satisfy. Turning to the second man she asks why he closes the window. He reports that he is also working on a project and each time the window is open his papers blow about and he is distracted. Behind both positions lie interests that justify the contested positions.

Positions are not negotiable, but interests are. After careful listening for the interests, the librarian can now suggest multiple ways forward for the two men. She can suggest that one man move to another table. She can offer to turn on the air conditioning. She can open the window from the top rather than from the bottom. She can tell the drowsy man where to get coffee. In fact, the alternatives for moving ahead multiply when anchored by the interests of the two men rather than by their positions.

After more than several decades of working as a consultant with congregations in conflict I have encountered many positions and I am fully aware of how difficult and laborious it is to uncover the interests beneath those positions. In fact, the interests are often hidden from the very people who hold a position because it is their position and their preferred outcomes that capture most of their attention.

However, lying within this difficult work is both the possibility and the problem of the Commission on A Way Forward. The problem is that many people in a conflicted situation do not agree to engage a consultant (or a Commission) in order to explore their competing interests and to learn new ways of being community or to be reminded of their spiritual discipline of regarding one another with open hearts. What many want from a consultant is the naming of winners and losers in their contest, and a "good" consultant is one who agrees with their side of the argument. The problem faced by the Commission is it faces a similar challenge with the most positional voices in the current contest.

The possibility that lies within the works of the Commission is the opportunity of escaping the zero-sum game of winners and losers by treating interests as a reflection of a

more authentic community – one that has greater room and tolerance for both one another's hopes and pains. Those who have studied both the function and the meaning of community (for example: Peter Block, Parker Palmer or Scott Peck) are clear that authentic community is achieved only through deep structured dialogue that makes it safe for people to risk engaging their differences. Such dialogue often happens best when managed carefully in the midst of a crisis. Those that resist the deep dialogue by clinging to politeness, denial, or the contest of winning and losing, do not venture beyond the earliest stages of pseudo-community. They get to talk about themselves as community without experiencing it.

#3 - Escaping assumptions about structure and policy

Which brings us to the third of the places that the Commission will need to give its attention in order to shape a different and more appropriate way forward. Once again the Commission will need to consider the paradox of needing credentials only to be limited or constrained by the very credentials required. It is safe to assume that a person would not be named to the Commission on A Way Forward unless that person has established himself or herself as a leader in some part of, or in the larger, church. Commission members are, indeed, credentialed people. Such leadership within the church requires familiarity and facility of working with both the structure and the polity of the church, as it is, in order to be credentialed. Such familiarity builds assumptions in normative practices about "how things should be" regarding structure and polity. Yet, it is likely, that as Einstein said, we will not be able to solve our current gridlock and contests with the same thinking and assumptions that were used to get here. We are caught by the paradox again – unless Commission members intentionally set aside their credentialed assumptions as they do their work.

To deepen the dilemma, consider that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church is likely the most credentialed of groups given leadership in the church – people vetted by vote in their own annual conferences and people in required or ex officio roles because of their position and experience of working in the church, as it is. It might be hard to find a decision-making, representative body of leaders more schooled in the structure and the polity of the denomination. And yet, it is this highly credentialed body that is to receive the report and recommendations of the work of the Commission through the Council of Bishops. It is not difficult to imagine that a General Conference would reflexively

begin to examine any report of learnings or recommendations from the Commission through their credentialed, normative filter by looking for conformity to the established structure and polity of the church, as it is. The paradox is encountered again -- unless the Council of Bishops and the General Conference are intentional about setting aside assumptions hard earned as credentialed people.

For example, organizational theory has long noted the pendular swing that all types of organizations (governments, military, businesses, schools, religious denominations) regularly go through between behaving in centralized and decentralized ways. A centralized organization is bureaucratic. It is orderly, operating with a top-down, chain of command system of decision-making and communication. Centralized organizations take advantage of divisions of labor. The advantages of centralized organizations are order, control, alignment and efficiency. The disadvantages of centralized organizations are slowness and rigidity, competing silos, organizational expense, and an inability to change.

When organizations experience too much of the disadvantages of their highly centralized ways, they "correct" by pushing their pendulum in the opposite direction. They begin to decentralize. More decision-making is given to the leaders at the edges of the organization and is no longer reserved only for those at the top. Interdepartmental or interdisciplinary teams are formed to break through silos. Uniformity is sacrificed for contextual appropriateness. The advantages of decentralized organizations are quickness and agility, responsiveness to the customer / client / mission, more nuanced decision-making by those closest to the work, and the ability to change while on the move. The disadvantages of decentralized organizations are lack of order and alignment, miscommunication, competing decisions made in different parts of the organization, and a lack of certainty among the members/employees of the organization.

Again, when organizations experienced too much of the disadvantages of being decentralized they begin to "re-correct" by pushing the pendulum in the opposite direction, back toward centralization. (For a helpful and popular examination of centralized and decentralized organizations see The Starfish and The Spider by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, 2006.)

The swing between centralized and decentralized modes occurs in both major and minor cycles. The minor cycles happen with great regularity as organizations correct, adjust, and problem solve. Rigidity is replaced with flexibility until confusion mounts and new rules or old standards are imposed to bring things under control again.

The major cycles are more historic in proportion, often spanning multiple decades or even centuries. The most recent major cycle that captured much more than just the past century has been dominated by centralized organizations. An anthropologist once observed that the first "computer" invented was the British Empire. British education heavily prioritized reading, arithmetic and handwriting. The British insight was that if all of its people could read, do math, and read one another's handwriting, then order, consistency and control could be maintained even in the farthest flung corners of the Empire. More than a centralized organization, it was a centralized empire.

The application of systems thinking, of the sciences, and the behavioral attention of Taylorism increased centralization as the dominant mode of organization in the 20th century despite its growing disadvantages experienced by the end of that century. Recent decades give evidence of the pendulum now beginning to swing to preference more decentralized organizations that give decision-making to micro powers rather than to bureaucracies and that favor fluid global economies over the controlling constraints of national economies. Nonetheless, our dominant experience is of highly centralized organizations.

All of this is to say that one of the contextual realities facing the church is that it's credentialed leaders have all been born into, and developed their leadership during, the most pronounced cycle of centralization of the past centuries. It has been noted that the Book of Discipline has expanded in size and complexity at a rate similar to the United States IRS tax code. The Book of Discipline is both a product of and the tool to be used by a highly centralized organization. Despite the limitations of rigidness, complexity, and inability to change, leaders nonetheless defer to our assumptions of centralization assuming new forms must be tested by past regulations. Like case-based public law, the church still tests new questions and challenges using judicial or legislative decisions made in the past. It is hard to remember that the bulk of our current assumptions, structures, polity and practices have

largely been in place for less than one quarter of the history of our denomination. It is hard to escape this influence when the full 100% of the life and experience of our current leadership is so fully grounded in that same most recent one quarter of history.

If a way forward cannot simply be an extension of the same path that got the church to this point, then the work of the Commission may need to hold loosely, or even challenge, the very assumptions upon which their credentialed leadership is based.

4- The Search for the One-Footed Rock

The final description to be offered here is related to one of the central contentions facing the United Methodist Church today, which several of the strategies of change noted above are seeking to negotiate. It is the question of what does it mean, today, to be United Methodist. It is the question of identity. What purpose must one hold, what must one believe, what must one do or not do in order to be United Methodist?

All living organisms (plants, animals, and organizations) must have permeable boundaries in order to exist. Nothing living is fully self-sufficient unto itself, or can escape a vibrant, on-going interchange with the very environment that sustains it. Plants need constant connection with their environments so that sun, soil, and water can provide nutrients across the plant's boundaries – and so that oxygen can be respired and seeds can be thrown back across the same boundary. Similar statements can be made about people and organizations. Local congregations have to be able to allow new people and ideas into their fellowship and to release them to leave – back and forth across a permeable barrier. As the environment shifts, living organizations change and adapt. In order to remain vital plants learn to leech water from the air when there is too little in the soil. In order to remain vital, congregations learn to invite and include new generations of people and to accommodate cultural and demographic shifts – always seeking to bring new people, energy, and ideas in, while knowingly releasing the old and outlived. A permeable boundary is more than a strategy for vitality, it is a prerequisite for life. Without a permeable boundary all living things – plants, people, and organizations – quickly shrivel and die.

However, over long periods of time what may have felt like small accommodations to changes in the environment can accumulate until the organism itself is changed by what has come in and what was released. Since the beginning of Methodism the environment in which this spiritual movement has lived and thrived has changed in both modest and radical ways so that what is now common experience in the church, and the people who now make up the church, could not have been conceived at the beginning. The passion and the inventiveness of the Methodist movement/denomination have constantly managed its permeable boundary through the changes. The cultural, global, generational, and demographic shifts of the past decades have proved to be truly significant environmental changes that may be more challenging, even threatening, than other times. Nonetheless, changes – both internal and external – make an ongoing conversation of "who are we now?" both mandatory and life-giving. From the most historic councils to the host of ongoing daily "healthy" conflicts within vital congregations, the continual life-giving conversations of "who are we now?" keeps the Spirit of God connected to an ever-changing creation. The current conversations in the United Methodist Church about the essentials of the faith, and conversations about morality of behavior are necessary and life-giving. Such conversations will help the church once again to remember its identity and to remember its purpose as a community of faith. Such difficult questions will help us to reorient ourselves in a way forward in a continually changing environment.

However, it matters how we negotiate our conversations about our identity and purpose. Drawing hard lines to establish clear boundaries is not healthy. Drawing lines about belief and behavior too strictly will not make the church more vital. It may comfort some to know who is in and who is out. But very strict lines close permeable boundaries. Non-permeable boundaries threaten life.

The opposite of strict boundaries and beliefs is not a loss of identity and purpose – it is neither people who believe in just anything, nor people who simply behave as they will. The opposite of strict boundaries is the careful management of permeable boundaries in which there is a clear and shared center; there are shifting distances from that center; and there is a porous boundary in which the culture is welcomed in and the gospel of grace is released out.

One of the images that I have used as a consultant for many years as I worked with conflicted congregations is the "one-footed rock." The question prompted by this image is what would it be like if everyone in a congregation had to keep one foot steadily anchored on the rock-hard center of the purpose of the congregation, but were free to dance with their other foot to follow the passions and discipleship of their own lives? The image of a one-footed rock was often a healthy and faithful image for people because it invited them to pursue at least two necessary conversations:

- "What makes up our central rock?" What are the essential beliefs, convictions or priorities that everyone, no matter who, must steadily support and be connected to in order to share identity and be one of "us"? One-footed rocks are best only when kept small. They do not hold long laundry lists of beliefs, behaviors and priorities or they cease being central, they become constraining. Room must be left for the other foot to dance – or else we have lost our connection to the environment.
- "How far can we dance?" If a church (or a denomination) can clearly define the rock-hard center of purpose and identity on which all must anchor their one foot, then it can begin to measure the distance to the outer edge of our boundary – the dancing distance that would allow people to faithfully place the other foot in disparate places even if there are those in the community who disagree. Healthy community is not defined by agreement. Healthy community is defined by shared purpose and identity.

One of the central conversations that has become gridlocked in the United Methodist Church is this question of our one-footed rock. There seems to be strong consensus about our purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ and transforming the world. It is a broad purpose that easily accommodates differences and diversity. There are disciples to be made and communities to be transformed in God's kingdom, no matter how near or far, no matter how same or different. The contested part of United Methodist identity that is being challenged is what United Methodists believe and how they behave. It is the question of the one-footed rock. Where must all United Methodists stand together at the center, and how far can any individuals or subgroups dance with the other foot – even if some in the community disagree?

It is often noted that the American experience has over time prompted an homogenized Christian theology in which theological and worship differences have been increasingly muted and distinctions lost across all of our denominations. The period of cultural conformity that began in the Depression and the Second World War and continued through the postwar period contributed heavily to this homogenization. Theological distinctions were lost in the pews and it became increasingly difficult for a Presbyterian, Lutheran or Methodist to articulate a particular understanding or conviction that made one different from the other. Particularly during a time when white, mainline Christianity increasingly served as the *de facto* "established religion" of the United States anything that reflected "mainline" melded into a larger picture with fewer and fewer distinctive edges. The great ecumenical movement of mid-20th century provided additional energy to the search for sameness among Christian faith traditions.

In any community or organization, once sameness has been pursued it is quite natural to need to understand differences. Like the pendular swing between centralization and decentralization in our organizations and communities, there is a similar polarity between sameness and difference – between that which makes people alike and that which makes people different. Similar to the in and out of respiration, the back and forth of sameness and difference provides health by keeping a balance between connection and differentiation. It is understandable then, following a time of cultural homogenization, that the church is now poised for a necessary exploration of political, regional, communal, theological and global differences.

To explore differences one needs to know what makes one unique among others. Increasingly I have been reading books and articles naming the need to reclaim the essentials of what it means to be Methodist. Interestingly what is written either names the need for essentials without providing the essentials, or provides the essentials from the perspective of one author representing one constituent voice within the whole. It is a far more difficult task to name the central distinctions – the hard center of the one-footed rock – that represent the whole denomination with its multiple competing constituencies.

One of the more interesting and concise statements that I have found that attempts the articulation of the rock-hard essentials comes from the document on ecclesiology

entitled "Wonder, Love and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church" from the United Methodist Committee on Faith and Order that was established in 2008. A part of the purpose of the document appears to be the need to know the markers of United Methodist identity in an ecumenical world of communities of faith. The three markers suggested are:

- 1- The scope of grace (in two senses)
 - God's love extends to all of God's creatures and not just to some... Among other things, this accounts for the emphasis placed in the United Methodist Church upon full inclusion in membership and ministry, so that the church might be a faithful sign of the scope of God's grace. (lines 851 – 857)
 - It is the affirmation that as God's grace is received in the freedom that it creates, it is transformative. It leads us, as Wesley said, to a "real change" within the recipient. (lines 860 – 862)
- 2- A second marker of United Methodist identity – related to the third distinctive conviction of our heritage, dealing with the community-forming intent of the love of God – goes by the name of "connectionalism." ... Our "itinerant" ministry, the superintendency, and the system of conferences are intended as instruments of connectionalism. All three are intended to focus an ethos and practice of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight... and of the strengthening of all by the gifts of all. (lines 890 – 900)
- 3- The third mark of United Methodist identity to be offered is closely related to the first two, and might be seen as an implication of them. It is a commitment to theological reflection as the task of the whole church. (lines 911 – 915).

Part of what is being tested within the current controversy in the United Methodist church is whether such concise statements of identity are sufficient. Is such a sparse but hard center of the one-footed rock sufficient to keep all feet grounded together in shared connection? Does such a hard center allow freedom for the other feet to dance into divergent mission fields that have very disparate, even contradictory, needs of the Gospel of Christ? If more is added to the hard center, how much more can be added until our identity is a constraint on mission instead of a foundation for it?

Methodists have always lived in the tension between what is central and what is peripheral, what is constant and what is changing. This tension is affirmed and included in our Book of Discipline by addressing both our doctrinal standards (our one foot on hard, central truth) and our theological task (our capacity to "dance" more freely for missional purpose). These two parts of a shared tension are presented together in Part II, paragraphs 101 through 104. Consider this portion of paragraph 104 in the Book of Discipline:

The theological task, though related to the Church's doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

The Commission on a Way Forward is one of several of the strategies noted in this monograph which seeks to reformulate again this tension between what is constant and what is changing, what is our doctrinal standard and what is our theological task. It will not be the last time our church will have this conversation. But managing this tension can never be a search for winners and losers, for those in and those out. It is a search for health and faithfulness, the respiratory inhaling and exhaling that keeps the church's purpose connected to its environment, which is the mission field in which it has been placed.

Conclusion: Is the work of the Commission possible to do?

Descriptions such as this monograph don't seek to direct, and they certainly don't predict. This description, however, seeks to make clear that the work of the Commission on A Way Forward will be difficult – constrained by assumptions, structures and norms already in place, and subject to the concerns and criticisms of the multiple competing constituencies that will watch and wait for results. The results of the Commission will dually depend upon the skill and courage of Commission members, and also upon the grace, patience and support of the larger church for which the Commission does it work.

What is clear is that the Commission is one of at least five active strategies that seek to change, clarify or stabilize the church. Such multiple efforts together usher the church into an unfrozen time.

The ebb and flow of frozen and unfrozen stages is a recognized characteristic of healthy organizations and cultures alike. Frozen times are when rules are in place, practices are standardized, assumptions are shared and purpose is constant. Calmness and stability rule the day. Because all is steady and familiar, it is a time of performance, productivity and efficiency. But, it is also a time in which leaders find it most difficult, perhaps impossible, to introduce real change at any depth. Because of the lack of deep change, over-extended frozen periods make both organizations and cultures brittle and vulnerable. Continuing unchanged for too long, they are left behind in an environment that is constantly shifting and adjusting. No organization or culture can live in an extended frozen, stable, comfortable mode.

By contrast, the unfrozen stage is exemplified by questions and discomfort. Rules are questioned, efforts and experiments of new practices are surfaced, and assumptions are challenged. This is an uncomfortable stage of not knowing and of not being sure. Nonetheless, good leaders look for and welcome the unfrozen moments, recognizing the opportunity to introduce questions that can reposition and repurpose the organization for the future.

Spiritual wilderness experiences are unfrozen moments in which that which we once knew of ourselves no longer holds, but the new promise has not yet been discovered. Unfrozen spiritual moments are not pleasant, but they are productive. Leaving Egypt, the Israelites went into the wilderness with the identity of slaves - and came out of the wilderness with a new identity as a nation. There is much to be learned in the wilderness, and much to be endured. But the wilderness is where God shapes and reshapes people and where new chapters of faithfulness are formed.

With prayer and with courage, the church has formed a commission to explore the next spiritual wilderness. The church does not yet know how to read all of the signs in that wilderness – being easily overwhelmed by the swirl of the present tense. But, in the past God reshaped both the church and the people in such wildernesses. May it be so again.