

**Navigating Uncharted Waters**  
**Episcopal Address**  
**June 4, 2018**  
**Pheasant Run Resort**  
**St. Charles, IL**

***<sup>3</sup> ...suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.***



How many of you have ever gone whitewater rafting? It's a thrilling experience to say the least. At one of the churches I served in EOH, we had an annual whitewater rafting trip on the Youghiogheny River in Ohio, PA. There are a couple key principles to a successful (i.e. you live to tell about it) whitewater rafting experience.

One is that it's a quicker and less treacherous trip if the river is full and therefore flowing fast over large rocks. When it's low, there are more protruding rocks to get around or over.

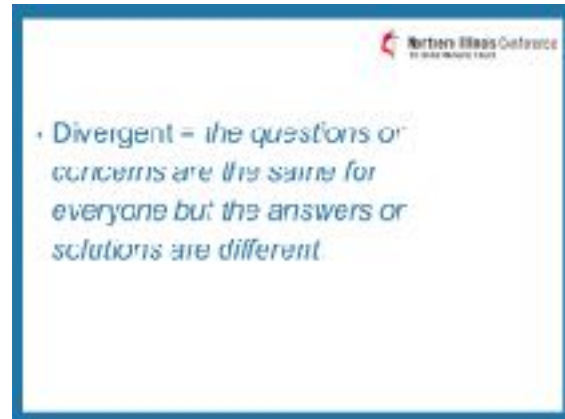
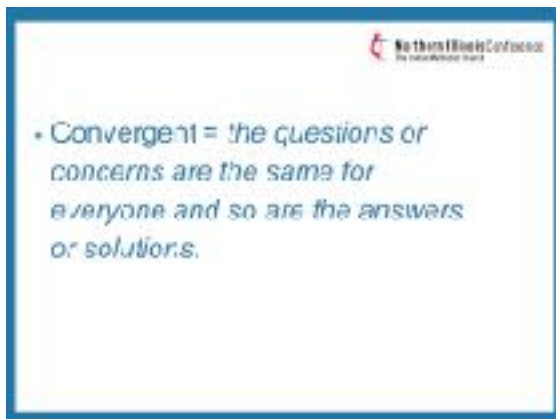
Which leads me to the next principle: lean into the rocks. If you don't lean in toward the rock itself—which is a little intimidating since they are usually towering way over your head—you will get caught up in a hydraulic of water that can upset or throw you out of the boat (i.e. not a desired experience).

If you do get thrown out of the boat (and this has happened to me), make sure you had someone in the boat who stays in the boat and plucks you out of the water!

Finally, listen carefully to the instructions given to you as you approach a fast, moving hydraulic so that you can remember to lean into the rock, not get thrown out of the boat, and therefore, won't need someone to pluck you out of the river.

It seems like in many ways—in our culture and especially our church—we are trying to ride the rocky rapids of reality. The waters of hope seem low and the obstacles loom large. Leaning into them is intimidating. As a result, it feels like we're in a rubber raft church, swirling around in the hydraulic created by the pressures of our reality. We fear that our church will be upset or we will be thrown out, wondering if anyone will be there to help us ride successfully through the rocky rapids of our time.

In almost every aspect of our lives these days, we find ourselves navigating uncharted waters or territory. Things that worked in the past don't work anymore. Frustration at not having the answers or solutions (or at least frustration that our leaders or pastor don't have them), grief at the losses we experience in our communities and churches, and fear at what will happen next can overwhelm us.



What makes this such a rough ride? No longer do we live in a **convergent** culture. Our nation, communities and churches have become so divergent. A convergent situation is one where ***the questions are the same for everyone and so are the answers.*** In

fact, in a convergent culture people don't really need to voice the questions or concerns, like "who is that person over there?" or "what is your name?" because everyone knows everyone. Or, "what does our family do on Sunday morning?" The answer throughout the community was: "we go to church." Or, "what are the normal stages of adult life?" "First comes love, then comes marriage, then living together, and finally comes you with the baby carriage!" Again, the questions or concerns are the same, and so much so, that they are just assumed and rarely expressed out loud: convergence.

But we don't live in a convergent culture anymore! We live in a divergent culture. **A *divergent culture is where the question or concern is the same for everyone but the answers are different.*** For instance, we're all concerned about stopping gun violence! But we don't have one answer or solution as to how to do that. Or, we are concerned about the declining number of people in our churches. But we don't have one answer or solution that works for everyone. Or, pretty much everyone is weary of the impasse on human sexuality in the UMC. I asked the clergy the other day at the clergy session who wants to move beyond this impasse and I think everyone raised their hand! How about you? Do you want to move beyond it? The question or concern is the same, but there are definitely different ideas about the solution or answer.

What we've learned about our impasse on human sexuality is that we all hold very divergent values or positions that lead us to our understandings of the solution. So for some, this impasse is

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Deeply held values  
on human sexuality come from:

- A position on scriptural understanding
- A matter of social justice
- One's identity (LGBTQ) or a loved one's

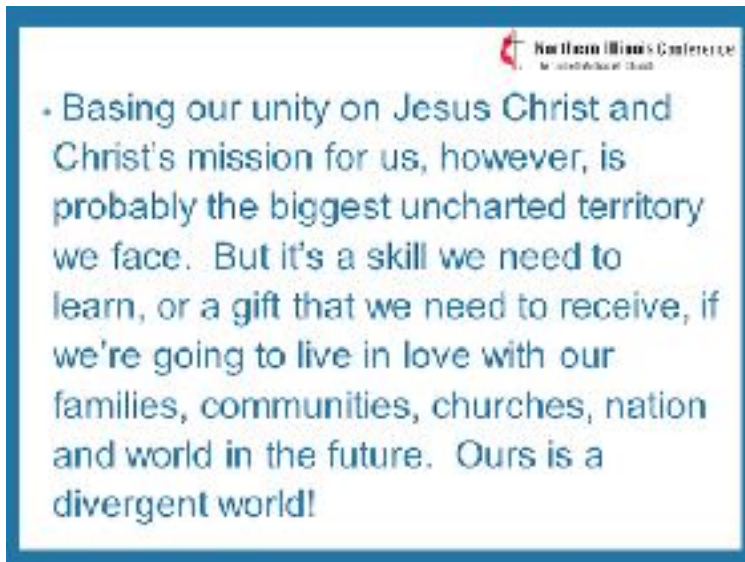
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- A pastoral conviction that makes people feel that some or all of the services of the church/denomination should be offered to all people or withheld from some people in their community

- A position on scriptural understanding
- A matter of social justice
- An issue of identity (LGBTQ)
- A pastoral matter that makes people feel that some or all of the services of the church/denomination should be offered to all people or withheld from some people in their community

There are probably more divergent positions than this and we may hold more than one of them at the same time! Each one of these positions is deeply grounded in each one of our systems of beliefs and values so trying to change each other's minds (and hearts) hasn't really moved us much; just made us mad at each other.

Convergence works for uniform: we all agree on one answer or solution for everyone. Divergence recognizes that we're not (ever) going to agree or be convergent (again) and so seeks unity based on something greater than agreement. If unity isn't based on agreement or uniformity, what is it based on?



Our unity is based on Jesus Christ and Christ's mission for us. And learning how to live with that kind of unity instead of agreement or uniformity is probably the biggest uncharted territory we face. But it's a skill we need to learn or a gift that we need to receive if we're going to live in love with our families, communities, churches, nation and world in the future. Ours is a divergent world!

Once when I went whitewater rafting, there was a young woman who was a friend of someone so I didn't know her. I ended up sitting next to her in the boat. The guide would give us these graphic instructions about what was going to happen as we went into the next hydraulic of water and how we could smash up against the rock and get turned around and around like going down a drain and probably die (okay, I don't think he said that) but after a couple of these descriptions, I realized that she was actually crying in her fearful anticipation of this ride. Undoubtedly she was wondering why she had ever come along this trip. So I told her to just do what I do and she stopped listening to the hysterics and focused on the ride itself.

In that spirit, I want to give you an overview of what the uncharted waters ahead of us might bring, based on the work of the COTWF and the recommendation of the COB a few weeks ago. While the actual report isn't being released until after it's translated, I believe that it has created more hysterics, rumors and rumors of rumors because people don't know, or just some people know.

Describe the work of the COTWF and Plans from the PPT

**Timeline** Northern Illinois Conference  
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2016

- Impasse at General Conference
- COB asked to "pause for prayer" and form a commission to explore options to maintain and strengthen unity of the church
- Recruit and guide Commission On The Way Forward (COTWF)

2017 - early 2018

- COTWF meets
- 2 feedback sessions with COB

**Mission of the COTWF**

- "...that matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition."
- i.e. we interpret scripture differently, historically and culturally

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## Vision of the COTWF

"...to design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but our affirmation in the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition."



## Scope of the COTWF

- New ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse
- New ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions

## Scope of the COTWF

- Consider "new forms and structures" of relationship
- Give greater freedom and flexibility to the future UMC

## Scope of the COTWF

- "If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways
- If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God's steadfast love and faithfulness
- Trust that "God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!"

## Timeline

COB meeting April 29 May 4, 2018

- Heard, studied and discerned COTWF's report and made a recommendation to GC19: the One Church Plan

Judicial Council met May 22-25, 2018

- Determined that there can be petitions in "harmony" with the Call to GC19

## Timeline

Full report to be released no later than July 8, 2018

- Allows report to be translated in all UM official languages
- Includes description of all 3 models and the COB's discernment of each
- Includes the COB's recommendation of one model: One Church Plan

## One Church Plan

- Based on cultural contexts and "vital churches need room to thrive depending on their mission field."
- Removes restrictive/prohibitive language about homosexuality but doesn't insure acceptance of LGBTQ persons across the church
- Provides a "generous unity" that gives conferences, churches, and clergy flexibility
- Upholding unity of mission without uniformity of practice

## One Church Plan

- Voting is kept to a minimum except where helpful
- Ends the threat/division/expense of complaints and church trials
- Clergy independently decide if they want to do same-gender weddings or not
- Local churches establish wedding policies which may include or not same-gender weddings



## One Church Plan

- No annual conference, bishop, congregation or clergy is compelled to act contrary to their convictions — protections provided for all
- Doesn't impact central conferences
- No need for constitutional amendments



## One Church Plan



- Each jurisdiction provides episcopal support for its own bishops and offices
- Doesn't change the restriction on use of apportionment dollars "to promote the acceptance of homosexuality" or violate the commitment "not to reject or condemn" LGBTQ (Par. 806.9)

## One Church Plan



- Each BOOM, in discernment with bishop and cabinet, can or not recommend LGBTQ persons for ministry
- Few financial or pension implications unless significant numbers of clergy and local churches leave the annual conference
- Clergy or local churches can leave annual conference for another if desire to do so

## Traditionalist Plan




- Retains the present language of the BOD on homosexuality and adds significant and mandatory accountability processes
- Mandates that any just resolution of a clergy performing a same-gender wedding agrees to not do it again

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## Traditionalist Plan

- Requires every annual conference to certify that they will uphold, enforce and maintain the BOD's standards on LGBTQ ministry and marriage

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## Traditionalist Plan

- Annual conferences, local churches and clergy that don't certify and/or agree to the BOD would be encouraged to leave, joining an "autonomous, affiliated or concoccat church." No longer UMC.
- Little support for this plan at COB but there are several bishops and other groups promoting it.

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## Connectional Conference Plan

- Almost no support for this at the present time
- Requires 28 or boiled down to 9 constitutional amendments
- Serious implications for pension
- 3 different "branches" of UMC
  - Traditionalist, Unity – we're not of one mind (much like ICP), Progressive


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## Timeline

- Delegations meet to study and discuss the report and recommendation in the summer and fall 2018


NIC conversations about TWF

- October 6 - Rockford in a.m./DeKalb in p.m.
- October 20 - CED in a.m./CNW in p.m.
- November 10 - Elgin in a.m./Aurora in p.m.
- Feb 23-25, 2019 - Special Session of GC in St. Louis

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## What unites us?

- "You are one body and one spirit; just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all who is over all, through all, and in all." Eph. 4:4-5

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## How then shall we live?

"I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that lies you together." (Eph. 4:1b-3)

Table talk:



**Table Talk** 

How have you experienced a shift from convergence to divergence in the church (local church, annual conference or denomination)? How does it make you feel?

1. How do you experience a shift from convergence to divergence in the church (local church, annual conference or denomination)? How does it make you feel?

**Table Talk** 

After briefly hearing about the 3 plans, what's the best one in your estimation?

- One Church Plan – big tent
- Traditionalist Plan – present language with mandatory accountability
- Connectional Conference Plan separated into:
  1. One Church Plan
  2. Traditionalist
  3. Progressive

2. As you heard these plans, which one makes sense to you, your church and this annual conference?
  - a. One Church Plan – big tent
  - b. Traditionalist Plan – present language with mandatory accountability
  - c. Connectional Conference Plan – 3 separate(d) churches
    - i. Traditionalist
    - ii. One Church Model
    - iii. Progressive



3. What is your hope for the church? (write one sentence on the card on your table)

As the UMC, we continue to “pray our way forward.” This whole journey was a “pause for prayers,” and I encourage you to pray. Some will be praying from 2:23 to 2:26 each day, reflecting the dates of the special GC. A weekly prayer post has just been put up: [UMCPrays.Org](http://UMCPrays.Org). You may use your “hope for the church” as your prayer from now through next February.

Let me shift gears now.



A few weeks ago Ken and I went on the brocation. Brocation is where the three brothers and their wives get together. This time we met in SLC where one of the brothers lives. Early one morning, I ran through their lovely neighborhood at the foot of the beautiful mountains, with blossoming flowers and trees. Children were going

to school. I noticed quickly that many of the children were with another sibling or friend or two; many with no parents, no adults. Some rode their bikes. Only an occasional child was with a parent. It caught my attention: you don't see that in my neighborhood! But more surprising to me than that was that almost all of them that I met—even if they were across the street from me—said hello to me. They initiated it! Now I suppose that in SLC even the children just assume that everyone is “one of them,” i.e. Mormon. (Talk about convergent!) So you say hello. I mentioned this to my sister-in-law who raised 4 “free-range” boys, as she calls them. Not that bad things never happen, but the kind of freedom to explore and grow and relate makes for a healthy, safe, and happy childhood that positively impacts the children for life.

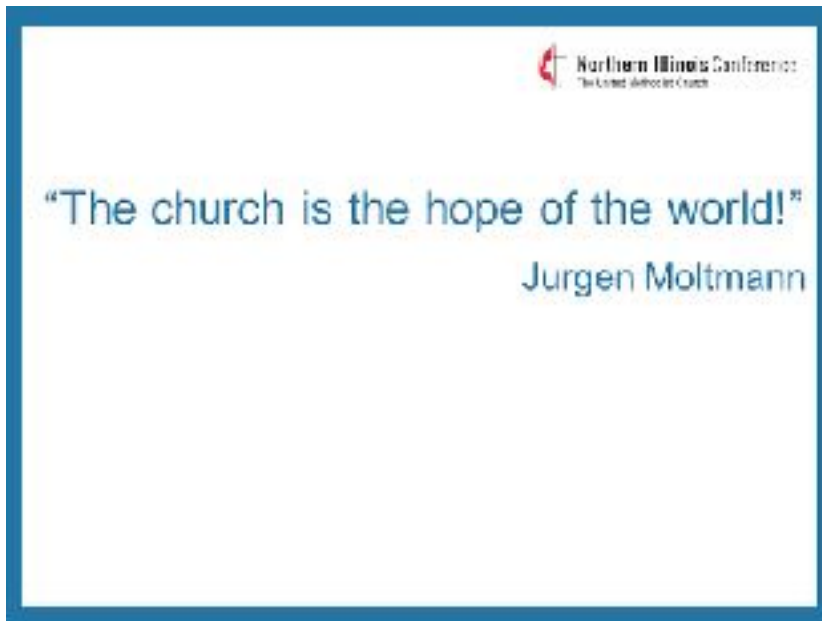
I reflected on this a bit and realized that the idea that children could be “free range” in just about any community seems like an impossible dream. Later that day was the Santa Fe, TX school shooting. I realized that I had become resigned to “the way things are” for most if not all children. I was in a place of resignation and not in the geography of hope for a better world...for me, you, and certainly hope for children.

And I didn't like it...I didn't like where I was. “Hope does not disappoint,” the scripture says. Had the river of reality overwhelmed my hope...a hope that is necessary in order to continue to work for a better world for all, not just for some? Have you felt that...lately?

Do we have to give up the dream that at least in some places, more places than now, there can be “free-range” children who can walk to school, or play outside without fear?

Do we have to give up the dream that schools, theaters, nightclubs, places of employment, churches (what have I missed?), crowded streets can be places where we can enjoy ourselves, learn freely without giving over a portion of our minds to fear, worship God without looking twice at a stranger who enters our place of worship, have fun whether at a playground, a park or a nightclub, and walk down the street all without fear?

For that matter, do we—or have we?—given up the dream that people will have enough food to eat, that everyone will have a place to live, that people won't be judged by the color of their skin (or threatened or killed), that we'll discover how to fund our schools and eliminate violence in our communities? Do we have to give up the dream that we will yet have a comprehensive immigration plan and that families will stop being separated, especially from their children? Do we—or have we—give up the dream?



No, I'm not willing to give up the dream! I'm not willing to abandon hope. There are rock-like obstacles, but those call us to endure, be gritty in our persistence, insistence and resistance to anything that keeps us from hope...like our resignation that "this is just the way things are!" The ordination class at our retreat a couple weeks ago repeatedly referenced the theologian Jurgen Moltmann. One quote was: "the church is the hope of the world!" If we become resigned to the way things are in our world, what hope is there?

And part of persisting, insisting and resisting is that we come together to be the hope for our communities and the world. That's why I believe that the UMC is better together than split apart, separated by a lack of agreement, and divided in its mission. We need to be the hope for the world and for Illinois.

Friends, we can't be inwardly focused from now until GC19! We have work to do! A calling to fulfill!

People still need to know Jesus!

We need to continue to grow in our faith through worship, Bible study, and prayer!

We need to be hope for Illinois!

Illinois will be tempted to solve its financial problem by latching onto the recent Supreme Court ruling that allows each state to legalize sports gambling.

The governor has indicated that he may bring back the death penalty.

We still need sensible gun control laws.

We have a state budget—woo!hoo!—but we always need to be on the alert as to how a state budget impacts the most vulnerable among us.

The world needs us to put our faith into action; to be hope for the world!

Praying, calling for and working for peace in the Middle East with Syria, Iran, Palestine and Israel, and North and South Korea, just to name a few places that should be in our prayers.

Will you join me in resisting the temptation of resignation and instead supporting each other to be the hope for the world?



The clergy know the answer to the question but what is it that we're going to do on February 27, 2019, the day after the special GC?  
We're going to...

Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world