

Today, we are having a break from our "The Story" Sermon Series to deal with "the Elephant in the Room," particularly "the Elephant in The United Methodist Church." I have not talked about this "Elephant" officially anywhere so far because I felt no need to do so. However, upon the request, I am bringing this "Elephant" talk today to clear the air. So, we can move forward with the mission and vision of the church without any distractions.

Let me start by naming this "Elephant" first. The United Methodist Church is headed for a major division. The church is fractured. Over the past years, we have experienced a lot of division among United Methodists at the levels of networks and denominations, but also inside local churches and among friends, too. The United Methodist Church is not united but fractured. That's "the Elephant in The United Methodist Church."

Many of us have heard that our division, this "Elephant" we have just named, is caused by homosexuality. Well, there is some truth to that, but that is a misleading way to view this "Elephant." The reality is that our division has been a long time coming. The impending split results from an extensive history that dates back long before the present debates over sexual morality. We have a history of breakdown in our discipline. Division and merging have been parts of the DNA of The United Methodist Church.

Let me explain my view of this "Elephant" by framing it with **the Wesleyan Quadrilateral**, which is a methodology for theological reflection we, the United Methodists, use. It has four components. The first is the **Scripture**, which is the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine. The second is **Tradition**, the experience, and witness of our ancestors. The third is **Experience**, which is the experience of our own and others. And then, we use our **reasoning** mind to discern in prayer.

The first is the **Scripture**. From the Old Testament, particularly from the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, we can notice that two and a half of Israel's twelve tribes decided to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan, not like other tribes. They lived apart, but they came together with others to fight against any

tribe's enemy (Numbers 32). From this, I may say that it is okay to have separate denominations but work together for God's mission. We can be ecumenical.

In the New Testament, we see how Jesus interacts with Samaritans. Jesus accepted the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Jesus used a parable of Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Samaritans were Jews who had interracial marriages. From this, I may say that Methodists can accept each other as Jesus did if we become true followers of Jesus Christ.

How about Paul and Peter in the New Testament? They are the two major witnesses of faith from the early church. When they met, their meeting, however, was not one of jolly unification but of stern confrontation. Paul was for the non-Jewish people, so-called "Gentiles;" Peter was for the Jewish Christians (Galatians 3:8). Some Methodists can work for the LGBTQIA+ and their supporters; some can work for the "traditional" believers. Maybe we, Methodists, need to see God at work in many different ways, not only the ways we, individuals, prefer.

Now, through the lens of **Tradition**, let's examine this "Elephant." Division and merger have been parts of our tradition. The formal organizations of Methodist churches started by walking away from the Church of England in the 1780s. About 100 years after the formation, Methodists had splits based on race. Colored Methodist Protestant Church was organized in 1840. Radical abolitionists left Methodists to form Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1842 as they demanded the immediate and full emancipation of all enslaved people. Methodists North and South in America split over twin issues of slavery and episcopacy in 1844.

After a century of splits, mergers occurred. Methodist Church was formed as the union of the Methodist Episcopal Churches, North and South, and the Methodist Protestant Church in 1939, which was 95 years after the split. The merger of the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ occurred and formed the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1946. The union of Methodist Church and Evangelical United Brethren Church happened and began The United Methodist Church in 1968.

From this, we can see we have this historical pattern of splitting and merging. It is our DNA to be a church through splitting and merging. So, do we need to be concerned about the possible split of The United Methodist Church? Personally, I don't. This leads us to frame our talk with **Experience**, which is personal.

When we had the reformation of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church did not die out. The Catholic church still serves many people all over the world. When Methodist Church started, the Church of England did not disappear. It is still active all over the world. When The United Methodist Church splits, in the formation of Global Methodist Church, The United Methodist Church will still serve people all over the world.

The **Reason** to say all of these is we need diverse churches to serve various people. How many different restaurants are out there? How many different genres of music do we hear? We, humans, are basically diverse. No one size fits everybody. Our reasonable expectation is that we need various expressions of faith which we already have in The United Methodist Church.

We do not need to make other people agree on every point. We can still work together for the benefit of all humanity. We can also work separately to benefit specific groups of people. We are The United Methodist Church, not The Uniformity Methodist Church. “The Elephant in The United Methodist Church” was created because many United Methodists think and behave as the Uniformity Methodists. If this “Elephant” gets out of hand and jeopardizes the organizational core belief, which is stated in the Apostles’ Creed, and its main Theology of Grace, maybe splitting might be the best option. If any of you are going to leave The United Methodist Church because of whatever reasons, please know that you are loved. God bless you. But please also know that I will not let you burn the house down on the way out the door<sup>1</sup>.

As the Spirit of God descends upon our hearts, we, the United Methodists at Kona United Methodist Church, accept all people as our loving God accepts us all as we are. Let all people come to the House of the Lord and let them listen to the Word of God, which has the power to penetrate the souls and transform people. Let the Word of God work in people's hearts as we continue to welcome all to God's family. Where love lives, where our God is. Where our God is, heaven is there. In Korean, 주 (ju) 예수와 (ye-su-wa) 동행하니 (dong-haeng-ha-ni) 그 (geu) 어디나 (eo-di-na) 하늘나라 (ha-neul-na-la)! May the presence of our God be known to us wherever we are so that we will not be forsaken nor dismayed by this “Elephant” in The United Methodist Church today. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Like Bishop Thomas Bickerton of the New York Annual Conference, who recently became president of the denomination’s Council of Bishops said at the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Annual Conference 2022, I would say the same thing.