

Foreword

Conversations Matter

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Conversations matter, especially faithful conversations, and that's what this book is all about. It contains a series of chapters that formed conversations March 9–12, 2017, at a Colloquy on the Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality, sponsored by the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) and the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools (AUMTS) at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Most of the participants were faculty of the thirteen official seminaries of The United Methodist Church (UMC). Most of them teach history, doctrine, or polity—or something close to those subjects—in those seminaries. Their expertise was especially relevant to this particular conversation. The conversation also included a faculty member from Asbury Theological Seminary, which educates about 12 percent of those ordained in The United Methodist Church; as well as international participants, one from Mozambique and one from Denmark. Others were welcomed as observers to listen to the insights of the learned scholars who have studied, taught, and lived out the Wesleyan heritage for many years.

The Association of United Methodist Theological Schools, the chief executive officers of the denomination's official thirteen seminaries, was delighted to be a co-sponsor of this Colloquy with GBHEM and is grateful to the Rev. Dr. Kim Cape and her staff for the inspiration to hold such a conversation, as well as the invitation to nominate most of the faculty participants. GBHEM staff worked hard to plan a program that helped all the participants learn new insights about our Wesleyan history, doctrine, and polity and the lessons they hold for us. As one of the three co-chairs of The UMC Commission on the Way Forward, Bishop Kenneth H. Carter gave his strong support for the Colloquy, and participants were grateful for his engagement throughout their time together.

Candler was delighted to host the Colloquy on its campus. Some of the history of Emory University and Candler School of Theology provides a rich context within which to hold this discussion. In 1992, Emory opened a Gay and Lesbian Student Life Office, and in 1995, Emory joined a growing number of universities in the country to offer domestic partner benefits. Emory was among the first universities in the South to recognize the rights of lesbian and gay employees by providing healthcare, retirement, and other benefits for their partners, basic benefits that are due all employees. Thanks to the creative and courageous leadership of the Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, dean of the chapel and religious life at the time, Emory opened its chapels to same-sex unions in 1997, for those very few denominations that have established rites for such, notably not The United Methodist Church. Candler's dean at the time, the Rev. Kevin LaGree, argued in numerous UMC arenas that these policies were fully in keeping with United Methodist law as contained in the *Book of Discipline*—which they were and are, especially in relation to paragraph 161.G (*Book of Discipline*, [2016]). This legal basis has been reinforced by a number of other United Methodist affiliated institutions adopting similar policies in subsequent years.

Nonetheless, the Southeastern Jurisdiction of The UMC passed a resolution disapproving of these actions in 1996, as did several annual conferences, at least one of which threatened court

action against Emory. The Rev. Dr. Russ Richey, my predecessor as dean at Candler, and others worked hard to repair relations with the church without compromising Emory's courageous stance, but there's no doubt that Candler felt the heavy brunt of negative church reactions in subsequent decades. While Candler School of Theology fully abides by church law on all matters, the school is proud to claim this heritage of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) persons' civil and human rights. Moreover, as is befitting a university, this campus and this school are no stranger to controversial conversations.

I am an unlikely person to lead a school of theology because I am a layperson with a PhD in political science/international relations. I have no degree in theology. For many years, I taught courses in world politics at the University of South Carolina and eventually joined the department of religious studies, too. In the summer of 1985, my husband, Peter, and I taught courses on international relations and comparative politics to civil servants enrolled at Somalia National University in Mogadishu, six years before Somalia became a failed state and began its descent into war.

During our stay in Somalia, our normal mode of transportation across the city of Mogadishu was by minibus, thirteen-seat vehicles that were often crammed with eighteen or more passengers. We once had a terrific beach outing north of town thanks to the charity of US military personnel based in the city driving us in their jeeps. They, like US diplomats and aid workers, normally had access to cars. We, however, rode minibuses for a variety of reasons, including our relatively short stay in the country. The buses were sometimes quite an adventure and often a good way to get to know the city and some of its people.

One day on a minibus ride, we struck up a conversation with a passenger who spoke English. He asked us why we were riding the minibus. "Is your car being repaired," he asked? "No," we said. "Did someone borrow your car?" "No," we replied, "we don't have a car." "Why don't you have a car," he asked? "We don't need one," we said. "We ride the minibus." He looked completely puzzled and then asked, "Are you Canadian?"

Conversations matter. They can reinforce or dispel stereotypes about people from radically different cultures like ours and the Somalis. Conversations can be pleasant or unpleasant. They can be engaging or boring. They can reveal new insights or mask reality. They can contain powerfully meaningful exchanges when the participants are listening deeply, or they can be fairly meaningless because participants talk past one another.

Conversations can help you get to know people in all their multidimensionality, which is the only way that people exist. Whether we like it or not, each person God created is multidimensional, complex, and often quite a mix of feelings and other attributes. One Cuban idiom states that "Every head is a world." Whether or not we like what we discover about one another during a conversation, having it matters to the fullness of our human experience.

When people stop talking meaningfully to one another, it's sometimes hard to know why. Is the hiatus a pause for the parties to catch their breath and regroup in order to cope with the hardship of discussing difficult topics? Maybe the gap is to overcome boredom because we've heard it all before—or because we're talking past one another—or we genuinely don't like anything about what we've heard. Or maybe the parties have wounded one another too deeply. Or simply lost touch. Or maybe the hiatus is a prelude to serious conflict, even war. War often occurs when governments stop talking to one another, or when governments stop listening and responding to their citizenry. Damaging conflicts—usually short of war but nonetheless deeply destructive—occur when churches and Christians stop talking to one another, or stop conversing with God. Conversations matter.

I represented The United Methodist Church on the board of directors of the World Council of Churches (WCC) from 1975 until 1998, and worked thereafter until 2006, as a volunteer with several special projects. The WCC continues to be the largest and most representative ecumenical organization in the world, with membership of 348 different denominations from over 110 countries.

From 1983 to 1991, I chaired the social justice unit of the WCC board and was a vocal defender of its programs, including the Programme to Combat Racism, an initiative that took an early, bold stance against white minority rule in southern Africa by providing direct humanitarian aid to liberation movements like the African National Congress. Many in Western churches found the program to be very controversial, but it was a powerful signal to many African, Asian, and Latin American Christians that their partners within Western churches might strive to uncouple themselves from their historical association with colonialism and racism. The program began with a \$100,000 grant from The UMC General Board of Missions (the predecessor body of the General Board of Global Ministries) in 1969, but The UMC gave little or no money thereafter because of the periodic debates surrounding the program.

Because of this work for racial justice, WCC staff and others associated with the organization were barred by the apartheid regime from visiting South Africa. In 1994, however, after the negotiations for a peaceful transition to democracy—or what everyone hoped would become democracy—the South African churches invited the WCC to hold a meeting of its board of directors in Johannesburg. We convened there in January 1994, and were welcomed by jubilant crowds and grateful churches, as well as many saints of the struggle, like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude, Brigalia Bam, Barney Pityana, Peter Storey, Alan Boesak, and others.

To my great surprise, organizers of the Johannesburg meeting asked me to preach at the closing worship service. I preach quite regularly now, but in 1994, my response was “Why me?” The meeting was packed with ordained church leaders who I assumed could probably preach in their sleep; and I was terribly unpracticed and timid about trying to speak a “Word from the Lord,” particularly in those quite intimidating circumstances. After some days of meditating on the request, I finally agreed.

One of the things I preached about in that closing service was my own personal definition of Christian unity. It emphasizes process more than outcome. I define the quest for Christian unity as dialogue despite the offense. Many Western Christians had been offended by the way in which the WCC worked for racial justice in southern Africa. Many churches in other parts of the world, however, understood this work as a beacon of justice, hope, and light. Race and work for racial justice had divided us, sometimes quite deeply. The dialogue had been difficult. This WCC program was a good illustration of an ongoing reality: when Christians engage their deepest convictions across starkly held differences of denomination, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, or other contentious matters, we often offend one another.

Indeed, sometimes we may not realize the depth of our differences as Christians until we have offended one another. These offenses are most often not intentional. Sometimes they even come as a big surprise, and they may occur—often do occur—as a consequence of fully revealing who we are as we seek to embody our faith in Jesus Christ. On the occasions when we offend others deeply, it is extremely difficult to remain engaged across completely contrasting perspectives. Sometimes we continue the dialogue but change the topic to something much more amenable to polite tolerance. But sometimes we end the conversation; sometimes we end the relationship altogether. Sometimes as Christians we even go to war with one another.

Across time, churches that embody deeply held differences among their leaders and members have given up on dialogue and resorted to “divorce”; that is, they have split over a wide range of topics where sincere, conscientious members held widely divergent perspectives on how to understand and embody their faith. And why not? Why not end the struggle of striving to stay together across starkly contrasting perspectives? It’s easier, more efficient, and for some, much more faithful to break away and move on—perhaps with a smaller but more unified group that understands a common purpose and commonly agreed set of beliefs and practices.

Having a common identity and mission is important. It seems a bit comical now, but when I was growing up in lower Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, we worked hard to be known as Methodists because we really didn’t want to be mistaken for Southern Baptists. At that time, we understood Southern Baptists to be biblical literalists and defenders of segregation. And, although I have learned a great deal from profoundly important conversations I have had with Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholic Christians, I’m grateful to belong to a church that embodies the belief that God calls women to be ordained ministers.

So we Christians, including we Methodists, have struggled with one another across time over our differences. We have even resorted to splitting our churches over divisions about slavery, race, national identity, biblical interpretation, divorce, the status and role of women, war, and many other consequential disagreements that seemed absolutely insoluble at the time when the rupture occurred—and often insoluble across time. Our varied but conscientious Methodist ancestors, whom we can only assume strove in earlier centuries to be as faithful as they knew how to be in their time and place, sometimes genuinely offended one another quite severely, often profoundly wounding one another figuratively and literally. No doubt Methodists killed Methodists during the United States’ Civil War as they remained loyal partisans to their particular causes. No doubt Methodist slave owners bought and sold Methodist slaves as they pursued profits for their businesses, which supported their local churches.

But time passes, and we look back to ask ourselves, *was that necessary? Was that split over that deep division worth it?* Do we want to try to bring these churches from this great tradition together again, or simply be captive to this history that tore us apart? If Christians aren’t asking such questions—the concern at the heart of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21—we are not, in my view, working hard enough to be faithful to the gospel. Rather, we’re taking the easy, convenient, and, in the short term, efficient path that is all too familiar these days in the United States and elsewhere.

When looking only at the United States rather than any of the other countries represented at the Colloquy or within the United Methodist connection, we find some familiar cultural patterns. We Americans inside and outside the church have become deeply segregated racially, politically, economically, and in a number of other important ways. We are too often extremely polarized. Our long-standing cultural and religious pattern in the United States, both inside and outside the church, is that, when we don’t like where we are and the people with whom we find ourselves, we either pick up and leave or kick somebody else out.

In recent decades, we have developed highly refined institutional and informational silos that perpetrate and reinforce our societal divisions both physically and digitally. The escalating acrimony in the 2016 election has bred—and continues to breed—doubt about what we as Americans have in common and indeed what we Christians have in common. We are a deeply fractured nation, frequently tempted to offer no respect and no quarter to those with whom we disagree. Indeed, no matter who won the election, it was clear that the task of establishing some civility and sense of common purpose would require great effort from us all. I fear the

opportunities for such are fading fast. Perhaps those from other countries within The UMC can teach us about civility and civic well-being from their experiences in their places.

These deep divisions across the United States, however, are all the more reason that the churches must be countercultural places where dialogue is highly valued, perhaps even held sacred. In this season when Christians are deeply divided and when divisions are rife across this country, churches must be the place where we strive to bear with one another in love—being humble, gentle, and patient. Bearing one another in love, as Paul admonishes us to do, may be one of the most courageous commitments we can demonstrate to one another and to the world. For me, bearing one another in love means staying in conversation and deep exploration with those with whom I disagree most, sometimes even with those who offend me the most. In other words, dialogue despite the offense.

If the church really is the body of Christ, as we claim it to be, the conversation matters, even when it's offensive. According to Paul, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Moreover, "if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (1 Cor. 12:21, 16). What a terrible dilemma! If we fully claim our salvation in Christ and thereby become a member of the body of Christ, we cannot opt out just because we don't like the diversity and the differences. Furthermore, we cannot say to someone else, you have to leave. We can't kick anyone out of the body of Christ!

Therefore, the conversation really matters a lot! I do not know if The United Methodist Church will remain intact as a denomination or if it will split, becoming one or more successive denominations. The Colloquy and this book were not designed to provide a conclusive answer to that question. What I *do* know is that whether The UMC splits or not, conscientious, faithful Christians *must* remain in dialogue with one another, even across deeply held differences like the one about the full inclusion of LGBTQ Christians. We really have no choice but to be in conversation if we are to fulfill our calling as faithful members of the *one* body of Christ. Church ruptures come and go; but if we are loyal members of the body of Christ, the dialogue must continue.

The mission of seminaries, like the official thirteen of The UMC, is to provide theological education to form leaders who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Theological education offers the very special gift of creating and resourcing rich, tough, engaging, challenging, and ultimately loving conversations about crucial topics, a pivotal contribution to the formation of faithful and creative leaders. As one who leads a school of theology, it's a great joy to put our talented and committed faculty on display in this book to explore the conversation, that is, what scholars have to say to and with one another; where they will agree and disagree; and where they will discover new insights and interesting revelations.

Welcome to the conversation! I pray you will find it faithful.