



Discipleship Adventure

Written: 11/21/2007

Invoking grace

For United Methodists, church meetings are never just meetings. Rather, when United Methodists gather, we become church, not by the things that each of us brings, but by the miracle of grace that God works among us through the raw materials of our words, our actions, our music, our prayers, our greetings of peace. This grace is not irresistible. We can erect all sorts of barriers against it by the choices we make about how we use our time, by nurturing selfish hurts, by dwelling upon our disappointments, by failing to embrace the strangers who gather with us. Or we can exercise our individual wills and decide that what each of us brings to the conference is far less important than what God is going to do with each of us through what others bring.

Then we are open to the meeting as a means of grace. And it will become a transforming moment of holy time in sacred space.

– Rev. William B. Lawrence

Enabled by holy conferencing

By TERRI S. COFIELL

"Tis the season of charge conferences, budget setting and evaluations — the time when our Staff-Parish Relations Committees fill out their advisory forms to indicate their congregations' desires regarding the 2008 appointment year. As United Methodists, this busy time is a most appropriate time to ask ourselves: "Just how holy is our conferencing?"

Serving a congregation in one of the fastest growing areas of our conference, I bring into membership an increasing number of people by "transfer from another denomination."

Often, these new United Methodists bring snippets of their former structures and practices into meetings, forgetting how "methodical" our denomination is in its polity. Just as often, those born and bred on the Methodist or Evangelical United Brethren sides of our United Methodist family forget how central the understanding of holy conferencing is to our identity. We forget that our polity reflects our understanding of who we are in light of the lordship of Christ.

We are not creedal: Those seeking membership in our congregations aren't required to ascribe to every tenant of a particular creed (though we do use the church's historic creeds as affirmations of our faith).

We're not congregational: Our churches are not autonomous; our congregations are not self-governing (nor do we take every issue before the entire membership for its resolution).

We are connectional. We are covenantal. And we are conciliar — we come together in counsel to seek God's will for our life together. That's why we elect members and not delegates to annual conference.

I have heard our polity defined as a "constitutional democracy." While we do vote on issues and elect people to particular positions, our polity is not based on the principle of one voice/ one vote or majority rule. We come together in worship, in praise, in prayer; we come together asking God to guide us in our life together.

Don't think Independence Day; think Pentecost! The body of believers gathered, and the power of the Holy Spirit equipped them for the mission and ministry they would be given in the name of Jesus Christ.

From the General Conference that speaks for our denomination to the Jurisdictional Conference that elects and appoints our bishops to each UMW circle or trustees meeting, we are called to seek God's will.

Several years ago, the Berkeley County cluster of United Methodist Churches gathered to discuss the possibility of building a Habitat for Humanity House. We listed the pros and cons; we worried about costs and the commitment of labor, we didn't think that we could do it. The only "pro" on our list? God was asking us to do this. The vote was unanimous, and next year we will begin our fifth house.

That's holy conferencing. And the vote doesn't always have to be unanimous — as long as we intentionally and prayerfully place ourselves under the power of the Holy Spirit and commit to remaining in fellowship and community regardless of the outcome of one decision. No one of us knows God's mind, but together we can discern the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

How do we become more holy in our conferencing? We need to understand that sometimes our voice will not be the prevailing voice; we need to accept that. We also need to forget about letter writing campaigns, phone chains and petitions to garner support for our personal agendas. Holy Conferencing doesn't happen in a parking lot after the meeting has ended.

So don't go into your next administrative council loaded for bear. Go with a heart open to others and a spirit open to God's will. Go to spend time in Bible study and in prayer for discernment. Go to listen. Go to hear. And if you feel yourself becoming angry, don't whisper to your neighbor. Whisper to God: "Thy will be done."

The Rev. Terri Cofiel is pastor of Hedgesville UMC.

What would change at your next church committee meeting if ...

- You spent the entire first half of the meeting involved with in-depth Bible study and sharing?
- There were no votes, and decisions were made by consensus?
- Each person around the table was spoken to and treated as if he or she were Jesus?
- If you, as chairperson, decided to run the meeting as you imagine Jesus might?
- If the Holy Spirit was invoked and people sensed the presence of the sacred around the table?
- The agenda was abandoned and people were invited to spend the time doing something that delighted God?

What is 'holy Conferencing'?

By DOUGLAS M. STRONG

Today, when we hear the word "conference," we usually think of a business meeting — a long and boring business meeting. But the word "conference" literally means "bringing together," a gathering for consultation where everyone contributes to the conversation, for the benefit of all.

John Wesley appropriated this deeper meaning when he referred to the various kinds of early Methodist groups as "Christian conferences" or "holy conferences." These were gatherings where there is holy conversation, a coming together for the purpose of communal edification in order that each person could grow more fully into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

For Wesley, the foundational type of holy conferencing was the class meeting, a weekly gathering of Methodists who were engaged in mutual accountability through the use of personal testimony and interactive questions such as: "How goes it with your soul?" and "How does your soul prosper?"

This type of Christian responsibility for one another developed because it became evident that no one can cultivate a mature spirituality alone. We need the community of other Christians who are "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2).

Wesley felt so strongly about the essential role of Christian conferencing that he included it (along with prayer, fasting, the devotional reading of the Bible, works of mercy among the needy and the receiving of Communion) as one of the "instituted means of grace." These were practices which Christ established as being necessary for the spiritual wellbeing of all Christians. That is, every Christian should make it a priority to have regular opportunities for structured holy conversation with fellow believers.

Along with the weekly class meetings (small groups for shared spiritual accountability), Wesley believed that Christians should engage in other types of holy conferencing (or conversation) on a regular, but less frequent, basis.

Thus, Wesley gathered all of the Methodist preachers together once a year for a "Conversation." These conversations eventually came to be known as "annual conferences."

The first of the preachers' gatherings was in 1744. The preachers had been through difficult times in their various pastoral ministries and so the annual conferences became occasions for precious fellowship and spiritual renewal.

They asked themselves (in the words of the Charles Wesley hymn): "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face? What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fighting without, and fears within, since we assembled last!"

Historian Russell Richey comments that the conference became "a family of preachers ... held together by affection, common rules, by a shared mission and by watchfulness of each member over one another; it functioned as a brotherhood of religious aspiration and song; (and) it was a body which pooled its resources to provide for the wants and needs of its members."

In short, "it served as the spiritual center of Methodism." In 1747, for instance, the conference members asked themselves the following question: "How may the time of this Conference be made more eminently a time of prayer, watching and self-denial?"

Their answer was that "while we are in Conference, let us have an especial care to set God always before us ... and give ourselves unto prayer for one another, and for the blessing of God on this our labor."

In the same way that the weekly conference (the class meeting) centered around certain questions ("How does your soul prosper?"), the designated agenda for the early annual conferences also centered around certain questions.

These were: first, what should we be teaching in our congregations?; second, how should we be teaching these beliefs about the way of salvation most effectively?; and third, as a result of these teachings, how should we "regulate our doctrine, disciplines, and practice?" That is, how do we practice what we preach?

The programmatic ministry of the church grew out of a common evangelistic and missional purpose.

Throughout Wesley's life, the annual conferences of preachers (and the weekly conferences/ class meetings of all Methodist laypeople) continued in the same manner.

After he died, the class meetings continued for several generations. In 19th century America, many of the annual conference sessions became occasions for holding rousing camp meetings — multi-day revivals of preaching, singing and praying, in which thousands of women and men came to faith in Christ and were challenged to commit themselves to holy living.

The fervor of the old type of holy conferencing remained among some Holiness churches, African-American Methodists, the Evangelical Association, the United Brethren and eventually in newer missionary communities, such as in Korea — where the class meeting (or cell group) concept is still thriving.

But in 20th century mainstream Methodism, annual conferences increasingly became more like business meetings or political gatherings — events in which various factions would win or lose — instead of occasions of mutual edification for the sake of spiritual renewal.

The challenge for today is to re-capture the original concept of holy conferencing in order to invigorate 21st century United Methodists, so that they will be empowered once again by the Spirit to reach out in ministry to a hurting world.

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Guidelines for Holy Conferencing – What God Expects of Us

- Every person is a child of God. Always speak respectfully. One can disagree without being disagreeable.
- As you patiently listen and observe the behavior of others, be open to the possibility that God can change the views of any or all parties in the discussion.
- Listen patiently before formulating responses.
- Strive to understand the experience out of which others have arrived at their views.
- Be careful how you express personal offense at differing opinions. Otherwise dialogue may be inhibited.
- Accurately reflect the views of others when speaking. This is especially important when you disagree with that position.
- Avoid using inflammatory words, derogatory names or an excited and angry voice.
- Avoid making generalizations about individuals and groups. Make your point with specific evidence and examples.
- Make use of facilitators and mediators.
- Remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God – not by the flaws we discover, or think we discover, in their views and actions.