Forty years ago in 1964, I attended the Methodist General Conference held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a member of the Boston University Seminary Singers. It was at the height of the civil rights movement and at the beginning of the feminist movement in the United Methodist Church.

I remember being appalled at the insensitivity and racism I witnessed as I listened to the debates and watched the voting of the delegates. The Methodist Church was segregated, and no matter how loud the protest about the injustice and inequity—or how contrary segregation was to the nature and purpose of Christ’s Church—the leadership and members of the General Conference were so afraid of change, and so wedded to the status quo of segregation—that they refused to confess their sins, change their ways, and respond to the Holy Spirit that was at work in the world. It was a sad day in the life of one of our predecessor denominations. The church refused to be the church—the inclusive Body of Christ for all people. Instead it chose the path of exclusion and racism.

I thank God I was not a delegate consumed by fear of the future, and unwilling to respond to God’s kairos moment in history. Hopefully God will show more mercy—than does history—to those who failed to act prophetically and pastorally at a critical moment in the life of the church and world.

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But before I become too self-righteous, let me admit my own complicity in sinful structures at that Pittsburgh Conference. As I said, I came to the conference to sing. Those who have heard me attempt to sing, may think I’m confessing to my inability to carry consistently a tune. But as bad as that may be, what was really wrong was that I was participating in a seminary sponsored choir that only allowed male seminarians to participate. We didn’t even have segregation at Boston University! The women in seminary weren’t even allowed a choir! Only we men were allowed to participate and sent to General Conference to officially represent the seminary.

As a visiting seminarian, I too was unaware of God’s liberating mission to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women in the church and world. In a kairos moment I was insensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully God will show more mercy on me—than does history—to those of us who failed to protest prophetically and pastorally at that critical moment in the life of the church and world.

Forty years later—when the 2004 General Conference meets again in Pittsburgh—thank God we are no longer a segregated denomination and listen appreciatively when the women & men of the Boston University Seminary Singers sing for our worship.

**Responding to the Kairos Call of God**

I begin my remarks with these two examples, as a reminder of how easy it is—despite our prayers and professions—to fail to discern God’s call and “mission dei.” (God’s mission in the church/world). We can become so encapsulated in church politics, budget deliberations, episcopal elections, and caucus matters that we fail to respond to the kairos moments in history, those times of opportunity that demand a response.
Those *kairos* times when, as theologian Robert McAfee Brown has noted, “God offers us a new set of possibilities and we have to accept or decline.” In the words of Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry: “The *kairos* is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Let me so bold as to suggest there are several critical issues facing the 2004 General Conference that impinge on the nature of the church and must be addressed in this *kairos* moment of history. Time allows me only to speak briefly to three of these matters.

First and foremost, this General Conference must face the issue of the budget. The major theological document produced by the upcoming session will not be the Discipline or the Social Creed or the Book of Resolutions, but the budget. Will it be written in fear or faith? Will it reflect our hopes or our hesitations? Will it be a document reflective of what God is calling us to do, or illustrate a negative mind-set of pessimism and defeatism?

Having served on the Committee on Finance and Administration, I know that sometimes members become totally fixated on dollars and cents and fail to see the theological implications of their work. In forty years of attending General and Annual Conferences, I am always amazed that despite Charles Dickens' phrase, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," the conference budget planners typically say “these are the worst of times” and no increases can possibly be permitted. Fortunately, this year the General Council on Finance and Administration recommends a 7.33% increase, pointing out that the economy is getting better, not worse, at the present time. Over the
past 40 years the naysayers have not always won, and we have been able to be the Church triumphant in mission, ministry and service to the world.

Just a few years ago the demise of the National Council of Churches was predicted. Its budget appeared bankrupt and its future seemed bleak. But the problem of the National Council of Churches, says Bob Edgar, United Methodist pastor and now General Secretary of the NCC, was not so much a problem of budgets, but a problem of lack of vision and mission. In the past year it has given brilliant leadership for the whole church in opposing the war in Iraq and calling America to new levels of ethical responsibility in the world community. And in the process they have balanced their budget the past two years, and an anonymous donor gave them a $7 million gift in order to build up their reserves. Why? Because this person saw the NCC now was serious about being involved in Christ’s mission in the world.

This leads me to the second issue: what new mission and ministry will this General Conference authorize? Will we simply focus on the past, massaging our beloved structures that are aching and hurting? Restructuring has yet to bring in the Kingdom of God! Or will we ready to rally our resources and our people to make a difference for Christ in the world?

Personally I believe that the church faces a *kairos* moment in regard to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. United Methodism is essentially on the sidelines, doing almost nothing, at a time when the United Nations has declared AIDS a “global emergency” and requested faith communities to join in the worldwide battle against discrimination, stigmatization, and prevention.
The administration of President George W. Bush is far ahead of United Methodism on the issue of global AIDS. Groups like World Vision, Samaritan’s Purse, Church World Service, the Lutheran World Federation, and others are constructively engaged, while United Methodism has failed to appropriate even one dollar of our “sacred” general church apportionments to combat the worst health crisis facing the world in the past 700 years. It will do us little good, for example, to build churches and universities in Africa, if we fail to become involved in saving the lives of our United Methodist people in the Central Conferences, who are highly susceptible to the ravages of this pandemic.

Beware of just adding additional resolutions to our Discipline or saying we will handle this only with an “Advance Special.” That is simply another way to duck responsibility in a time when 46 million persons worldwide are infected, and 16,000 new infections occur daily. The Global AIDS crisis is a critical test of the nature of the United Methodist Church in the 21st century. How will God and history judge us?

This leads me to the third issue that hovers over the 2004 General Conference: do we truly affirm the “inclusiveness of the Church” that is mandated by the Constitution of The United Methodist Church? (Article IV).

The very being (esse) of the church of Jesus Christ requires the inclusion of all God’s people at every level of the life of the church. The church as koinonia is violated when some Christian believers are excluded, stigmatized, and discriminated against because of the church’s teachings and actions. The very essence of the church is at stake when United Methodist polity persists in excluding homosexual persons from the ordained ministry and denying same-sex persons liturgical rites of holy union.
Inclusiveness is not an optional “extra” or “political correctness” for United Methodists—it is at the heart of the Gospel and fundamental to the doctrines of our faith. Inclusiveness is the precondition for the church’s distinguishing marks as set forth in the Nicene Creed: “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

Historically, United Methodism and its predecessor bodies have tried the ways of exclusion, suggesting some persons in the community were not worthy of membership, ministry, and leadership because of race, gender, nationality or other status. Biblically sanctioned prejudice has been used over the years to justify exclusion and sometimes even violence against persons of color, women, Jews, and homosexual persons. Through painful struggles of segregation, discrimination, and disunity, we have come as a missional people called United Methodists to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ to have an inclusive heart.

The exclusion of homosexual persons from the life, leadership, and liturgical rites of the church threatens the very nature of the church itself. It not only causes irreparable harm to the children of God but also to the Body of Christ itself. Each time a person is rejected or ejected from the koinonia fellowship of United Methodism, a new wound is inflicted and the Body of Christ is broken again.”

Both heterosexual and homosexual United Methodists can and do affirm the fundamental doctrines of our faith—such as the Trinity, Christology, justification by faith, salvation, and sanctification. Together we can be united in affirming in the Discipline “The Articles of Faith,” “The General Rules of The Methodist Church,” and “Our Theological Task” that draws upon tradition, reason, experience, and the primacy of Scripture.
What we cannot accept is a policy of prejudice. We love our church too much to allow it to remain an exclusive, discriminatory body when it has the potential of truly being the inclusive Body of Christ in the World. We truly believe, with H. Richard Niebuhr, that the purpose of the church is to “increase the love of God and neighbor,” and we will never abandon our brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian. We have friends and family with whom we want to share Christ, and we do not want The United Methodist Church to be a stumbling stone in the path of their salvation and sanctification. We are evangelical in our belief that Jesus Christ lived and died for all, not just privileged heterosexuals, and in faithful obedience to God we are called to teach and preach this message.iii

**In Conclusion**

I believe that these three issues—the quadrennial budget, the global AIDS crisis, and the challenge of inclusiveness for gays & lesbians—reflect the *kairos* we face. They are not a great problem for the 2004 General Conference, but a grand opportunity for our denomination to rediscover its heritage and its hopes, its scriptural bearings and theological moorings, its nature and mission as the inclusive Body of Christ in the world. “For such a time as this,” United Methodism has been called to model inclusive Christian relationships and reconciliation, provide a winsome evangelical witness to the world, and to reach out in loving service to those Jesus called “the least of these.” (Matthew 25)

Unlike the delegates who came to Pittsburgh 40 years ago, pray that we will act prophetically and pastorally at a critical moment in the life of the church and world. Be not afraid to vote your conscience—you will never regret it! Remember the words of President Woodrow Wilson, on learning the United States Senate had defeated the
League of Nations: “I would rather go down in defeat in a cause which will eventually triumph than to triumph in a cause that will ultimately go down in defeat.” Go forward in faith!

ENDNOTES


ii From "Tale of Two Cities" (1859) by Charles Dickens.