

Musing a Methodist Mulligan: Reflections on General Conference 2019
by David E. Woolverton

I've been a church pastor for over thirty years; consequently, there's still a lot that I have to learn. Yet, there's one thing I do know: *Church conflict makes good people do stupid things*. Why? In my experience, it's usually because we either forget who we are, we forget why we're here, or we forget where we're supposed to be going. I know because I'm one of them.

Conflict leadership fundamentally is not about the resolution of disagreements. It's about leading people through a *discipleship process* that helps them remember who they are in Christ, why the Church exists, and what the mission of the Church actually is.

Developing a Kingdom of God mind-set is critically important for conflict leadership. The local church was never intended to be the *end* of the process of discipleship, but rather a *means to an end*. The church is a *movement* of God's Spirit, a *vehicle* by which God accomplishes God's mission of multiplying disciples for the transformation of the world, through divinely-empowered acts of *self-sacrificial love* invasively perpetrated by *lives changed by Christ*.

Clearly, the best way to navigate through conflict situations is to work harder on the front end in creating a normative culture in our churches built around the Way of life that Jesus modeled, and then to reinforce that culture within the day-to-day relational connections of the congregation. Why? In simple terms, *we become what we allow*.

The language of the Kingdom of God communicates – in multiphasic ways – the values that Jesus Himself espoused. Learning that language comes best by immersion in real time – living out and living into the cultural expressions of community life under the leadership of Jesus Christ. Those values are seen first in the mandates that Jesus brought to the table of fellowship with the Twelve. It was as they journeyed together, ate together, laughed together, learned together, prayed together, did life together that Jesus taught them the most basic qualities of life in the Kingdom of God... and then challenged them to live out those values with each other as a testimony to the world: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

All those values create a visual image of how the Body of Christ, the Church, is to be *different* from the rest of the world. The Church thrives best when it is living out those values, representing Jesus in the world by how it treats those within its fellowship. When conflict arises, the Church has the opportunity to represent itself differently than the human condition would warrant, so that its witness is consistent with the values of the One who gave His life for the sake of its mission, as well as with the sanctification processes wrought by the Spirit embedded in His people.

It would seem that the problem with conflict is that we humans tend to think and respond way too often within a linear worldview – when, in fact, reality calls us into seeing life and all its complexities more as a *mosaic*. A mosaic is a "picture or pattern produced by arranging together small colored pieces of hard material, such as stone, tile or glass."¹ Most often, the best view of a mosaic is from a distance – so that one may see the full expression of the visual image that the composited tiles are to represent. For me, the mosaic is a powerful way of looking at different facets of the life of a disciple – from grief and trauma, to conflict and contrition, to forgiveness and reconciliation.

My theory is that when a "significant" event occurs – aka, a conflict, a trauma, a loss, an offense, a violation, a birth, a marriage, a divorce, an affair, a suicide, etc. – that event becomes imprinted on a tile in the greater masterpiece God is rendering out of our life story. Our emotional response to that event creates a framework for how that event is catalogued and interpreted by our mind, coloring our experience of its expression within our day-to-day life.

The more “traumatic” the event, the more intense becomes the emotional reaction and the more focused we become on that event as defining our reality. Trauma – or more specifically, intense emotional pain – restricts our view to the individual tile representing that significant event, preventing us from seeing the larger picture of how that event contributes to our life story. Additionally, it blinds us from seeing how God could possibly redeem that pain.

As we proactively empower a mosaic view of our life together, we nurture a communal perspective of the redemptive capacity of God for all experiences in the lives of Jesus’s followers, both individual and corporate. For Jesus’s followers, God reframes our experiences of brokenness, inviting us both to trust Jesus’s redemptive work on our behalf, as well as to learn how to mediate and moderate our responses to our own feelings of offense for the sake of the greater mission.

There is an over-arching rhythm to the Kingdom of God’s discipling culture that anticipates conflict and invites us to harness its energy towards transformation and growth. That rhythm is based on the all-encompassing value of self-giving love – and *followers of Jesus are called to live that love better than the world does*.

As John 13 begins, Jesus is spending His last hours in the Upper Room with His closest friends. He knows what’s coming towards Him: betrayal, arrest, abandonment, severe beating, a mock trial, scourging, humiliation, crucifixion, an agonizing death. He knows He has limited time to equip His disciples with what they will need to endure not only the darkest night of their souls’ journey, but a mission that will become bigger than they would ever know. As an expert carpenter, He must whittle down all that they saw Him do and heard Him teach into one main lesson, something they will never forget. So, He takes off His garments, wraps Himself with a servant’s towel, grabs a bowl and a pitcher of water from near the entry door, and proceeds to wash the disciples’ feet. Each and every one of them. Including the one who would betray Him. In spite of Peter’s protest, Jesus embraces this act of self-denial for it visually implants into each of their memories the profound illustration of that one lesson.

When He finishes, Jesus takes off the towel, puts away the bowl and pitcher, puts His garments back on, returns to His place at the table, and asks a critically important question: “*Do you understand what I have done for you?*” (v. 12).

Back then, feet were dirty. Literally. And they smelled. Those guys did a lot of walking. Upon entering a home, foot washing was the house servant’s job, or the homeowner’s, if they could not afford a house servant, as a sign of hospitality. But it also served a very practical purpose: It improved the *atmosphere* of the home. Hold on to that thought.

Jesus’s act of humble service demonstrated that *genuine love is willing to get dirty*. It’s willing to shed rights and privilege for the sake of someone else’s best. It’s a willingness to assume that another person – *any* person – is more important than you.

“*Do you understand what I have done for you?*”

Then Jesus explains His object lesson. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for *that is what I am*. Now that I, *your Lord and Teacher*, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them*” (John 13:13-17, italics mine).

Notice that Jesus sheds His positional authority (i.e., He took off His garments and donned a servant’s towel) to demonstrate His object lesson, and when finished, He “returns to His *place* [of authority]” (v. 12), and then uses that same positional authority to tell His disciples *not* to use *their* positional authority. Now, *that* is leadership.

In the Kingdom of God, typical values are upended, lessons are paradoxical, and disciples are challenged to live... and lead... differently than those in the world.

Meanwhile, back in the Upper Room, in the face of betrayal (Judas, in John 13:18-30) and denial (Peter, in John 13:31-38), Jesus downloads into them the main idea of His object lesson: “A *new command* I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples*, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, italics mine).

The anxiety in the room is rising. The reality of Jesus’ departure is getting more palpable. Judas exits. Peter is prophetically confronted with his pending denial. Jesus is losing the disciples to their fear. So, He speaks words of peace and promise (John 14) and invites them into a new metaphor, a vine and branches (John 15). Then, like a master-teacher, He repeats the main lesson:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* Greater love has no one than this: *to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.* You are my friends *if you do what I command*” (John 15:9-14 NIV, italics mine).

The model has been demonstrated, explained, reinforced and encouraged. It has to be enough... for now. Their destiny is about to unfold. They leave the Upper Room and go to the Gethsemane garden where, in John’s Gospel, Jesus prays – for Himself, His disciples, and for all of us who are yet to believe.

The core framework of conflict leadership is learning to dance the rhythms of love – the self-giving kind of love that Jesus embodied. It is *the* over-arching language of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it must be *the* priority of the local church. As leaders, we must model, disciple, reinforce, encourage, and pray for that kind of love within the culture of our congregations. Without it, conflict leadership will be moot.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, especially within conflict situations, we need to lean into the redemptive love of God – a commitment to what *can* be, not just what *is* – based on the covenantal markers of the Cross-Event of Christ. A price has been paid for this special relationship – the relationship experienced between congregation members, but reflective of the bond between the Church and Jesus.

That price was intense and intentional – and its commitment must undergird the process that mediates our personal and corporate brokenness. Our individual pain and offense must be brought under the umbrella of our corporate missional witness and our corporate mandate of covenantal, accountable love. In doing so, God redeems our pain and uses its story as an embodied, prophetic testimony to God’s greater mission. Through it, God connects God’s long-suffering call to faithfulness with our willingness to submit our pain to a larger mosaic of global healing and redemption.

On purely human terms, this is not easy, of course. We must navigate through the powerfully inclement storms of our feelings – of violation, guilt, shame, justified anger, self-righteous indignation, unchained and recurrent emotionally traumatic memories, entitlements, the need to avenge, the need for revenge, rage and outrage, hatred, isolation, alienation, bigotry, fear, terror, to name but a few – in order to arrive at even the possibility of healing. On purely human terms, this does not make logical sense, when all our sympathetic impulses cry out for therapeutic intervention – the validation of our feelings and individualized treatment plans... and

our perceptions of justice. Offense, by human nature, often compels us to push away from one another, not lean towards each other, unless, of course, we are trying to justify our victimization through collusion of shared misery.

Yet God is not defined by our human need for life to make sense. And the Lord of Life has issued a command. What will we do with that?

Regardless of whether one considers the General Conference decision an ecclesial victory or a reflection of theological heresy, the entire process, in my opinion, was a no-win scenario. From the prospects of obtaining unity around the issues before us, I believe the specially called General Conference Session was already doomed to fail before it began. Approaching any significant conflict from the standpoint of *positional* negotiations automatically structures the resolution process into a win-lose arrangement. We began with options - a Traditional Plan, a One Church Plan, a Simple Plan, etc. – and dared our representatives to find enough voting ground to choose. Each leg of the journey, as item after item was chosen by “yes” or “no” vote, the weight of the win-lose arrangement became palpable. Win-lose within the Church always carries with it the ramification of abuse of power, layers of filial abandonment, and missional decay... even when we believe we are defending “doctrinal purity” or “social holiness.” Is there truly a “winner” when we must bear on our actions – however righteously intended they may be – the separation of those who are part of our fellowship? Would we not genuinely grieve at the prospect of significant portions of our Body exiting; or would we rejoice with relief? What if the proverbial shoes were on the other foot?

It is the aftermath of any conflict, the “wake,” that always reveals the character and life-doctrines of its participants. Stress always exposes both our strengths and vulnerabilities. Win or lose, what does our wake reveal about our own discipleship? Our own character? Our own value integrity?

Additionally, “unity” – a term used by both “sides” of the conflict – was significantly defined by standards only supported by each party: “Let us come together and be united as you support what is the most obvious way forward – ours.” This was not simply a clash over doctrine; it was a clash of perceived irreconcilable values and identity. And in spite of all of the years of *a priori* dialogue, no movement towards each other could be found to prepare the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the gathering in St. Louis. Mediation is only possible when both parties at least are willing to look for a mutually agreeable solution. Mediation did not take place in St. Louis. Doing the work of conflict leadership is laborious and emotionally draining, and thus we resort to parliamentary procedure to define our course.

Rather, from the perspective of its perceived goals, the General Conference session was doomed to fail – at no specific fault of any particular participants, and regardless of whichever plan was to be chosen. The stage was set long before anyone set foot onto the floor of the Conference, longer even before anyone was elected to be a delegate, and longer than before the bishops gathered to commission the Way Forward. No-win scenarios in conflicts occur when we focus on what we see solely in front of us, in linear terms, and thus fail to ask the most important questions. In my opinion, we did not ask the right questions.

For example, if genuinely we are wanting to create a solution to our long-embedded impasse, would we be willing to draw an end to the United Methodist Church as we know it? Would we, could we, fathom an act of self-sacrificial love so radical – for the sake of the mission that we proclaim – that we would sacrifice intentionally the very Parent-Church that gave birth to our present circumstances? The pattern of Abraham sacrificing Isaac as a test of faithful trust may seem antithetical to our 21st century mind, perhaps even reprehensible. Yet woven into the biblical meta-narrative is the invitation to “take nothing with you” as we go on the mission field

of the gospel (cf. Mark 6:6b-13). When the Apostle Paul says that “nothing shall separate us from the love of God” in Romans 8 he is issuing both a declaration of assurance as well as a missional mandate.

Even if such an action was not what we in fact would perpetrate, asking the question and being willing to move into that direction has the power to set us free to value the mission greater than the vehicle designed to achieve it.

Rather, we sent our delegates into this special session each with the goal of preserving the “unity” of the Body of Christ, which we inevitably and mistakenly and perhaps unconsciously assumed meant the denomination and its doctrine – into which everyone had to fit, preferably agreeably.

What if preserving the denomination was not necessarily the only option? I’m not talking about shutting down the denomination, as some had proffered, as an act of conflict avoidance or as an act of resigned anger. As followers of Jesus, we are not called to *tolerate* one another, but to *love* one another. Love also demands that we step into the dirty places of interpersonal challenge. Rather, I’m talking about an act of *radical* love from a Parent on behalf of a Child for the sake of a greater mission. Would we do that?

It would seem to me that after a gestation period of over 40 years, nurtured by often vitriolic debate, the labor pains are finally announcing that a birth is about to take place. And in the womb of the Parent are two – maybe three – newborns that have been grabbing at each other’s heels trying to see which will emerge first and receive the birthright... when in fact, the Parent, to model its own Upper Room object lesson, is needing to give its life “as a ransom for many.”

Lest we miss this, the United Methodist Church is in transition...whether we like it or not. In order for us to enter into the “new beginnings,” as William Bridges has so wisely taught us in his classic book, *Managing Transitions*,² we must go through an “ending” phase. And the season we then must enter into is the “neutral zone” of high anxiety and high creativity. God is transforming *us* on our way towards transforming the world for Jesus Christ. Would we be willing to engage the creative parts of the neutral zone within which we find ourselves – in spite of the high levels of reactive anxiety we feel? The United Methodist Church as we have known it is going to die regardless. Would we not want to end it with eulogy rather than unresolved bitterness that reflects the very image of what we, on both sides of the debate, have preached and taught against. If our Wesleyan values of scriptural holiness and social holiness are indeed to be embodied with integrity, and if indeed we espouse the underlying mandates of call and love intertwined within ordination and marriage, then for the sake of our witness to the world, our unique faith in Jesus Christ must compel us to lead through this conflict differently.

Using a golfing metaphor, I believe it’s time for the United Methodist Church to declare a mulligan, a do-over. It’s time for “both” sides to come back to the Table, realize in love that they are God-bearers of an important legacy that is far more important than each is individually, and celebrate in eulogy their Parent as it willingly dies for the sins of its children in order for them to have Life. Of course, I would suggest a much smaller group – perhaps consisting of Adam Hamilton, Rob Renfro, their counterparts in Africa, Europe and the Philippines, and a few others who also would be willing to handle the deeper, tougher realities that prophetically are before us. Definitely they should be persons who have the maturity to ask honest questions and make honest decisions apart from the vitriolic need to justify or save face. Handling this with 860 delegates is further illustration of the muddled adage, “Wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus’s name... there’s bound to be a fight.”

It’s never too late. Never. Nothing that happened at St. Louis was a surprise to the Alpha and Omega. Perhaps what happened needed to happen in order to set the stage for more honest

interactions. What spurred on John and Charles Wesley, Martin Boehm, Jacob Albright, Francis Asbury, Philip William Otterbein, Barbara Heck, Sojourner Truth, Sophronia Farrington, Clementina and William Butler, Fanny Crosby, Anna Howard Shaw, Charles Albert Tindley, and the many, many others towards creating a next step for the Kingdom of God, was not the preservation of a denomination, but a movement of God's Spirit in reaching people – all people – for Christ. We must remember who we are, why we're here, and where we're going.

Ultimately, each Child of the Parent will show itself as being "of God" by the fruit that is borne from their labors.

God is not defined by our human need for life to make sense. And the Lord of Life has issued a command. What will we do with that?

~~~~~

David E. Woolverton has been an ordained elder in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church for over thirty years. Currently, he serves full-time as Lead Pastor at St. Paul's UMC, Elizabethtown, PA. Additionally, he is the United Methodist Student Advisor, Affiliate Professor of Leadership Studies, and Program Director of the Masters of Arts in Leadership at Evangelical Theological Seminary, Myerstown, PA. David also is a doctoral candidate in conflict leadership, a Spiritual Care Professional with the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, a church conflict consultant, a clergy mentor, and a workshop leader for clergy and congregational transitions. He is the 2011 recipient of the Harry Denman Award in Evangelism. Portions of this article are taken from his book, *Kingdom Rules: What I Wish I Knew About Church Conflict Before I Became a Pastor* (soon to be published) copyright © 2018 by David E. Woolverton. All rights reserved.

---

<sup>1</sup> "mosaic," New Oxford American Dictionary Online, Version 2.2.1 (194), Apple Inc., 2005-2006.

<sup>2</sup> William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

Copyright © 2019 by David E. Woolverton. All rights reserved.