Facebook Live Conversation with Bishop Trimble
following the 2019 Special-Called General Conference
Sunday, March 3, 2019
Official Transcript

Serena Acker: Good afternoon! My name is Serena Acker, and I’m the Communications Officer for the Indiana Conference. I’m here with Bishop Trimble, and we’re here at the lovely Trinity United Methodist Church in Evansville to talk all about General Conference. As you may know, General Conference gathered to discuss the three plans presented by the Commission on A Way Forward. It was a time of prayerful discernment, as we sought to bring unity to a topic that we are not of one mind: human sexuality. As we begin, Bishop, we would love to hear your overall impressions of General Conference. In particular, where did you see God at work?

Bishop Trimble: First of all, Serena, I want to give thanks to God for this opportunity to speak directly to United Methodists of Indiana and those who have watched the most recent Special-Called General Conference. There were some highlights and there were also some very painful moments that still have repercussions even as we are doing this live stream now. It’s always a highlight when Methodists get together and sing, and it is always a highlight when Methodists, clergy, and laity are able to hold hands together in times of prayer. There was a significant amount of prayer and singing at this Special General Conference. There also was a significant amount of deliberations and pain that was experienced as the various plans were presented by the Commission on A Way Forward. We proceeded with the legislative process to try to deal with this long protracted debate and division we had around human sexuality in The United Methodist Church.

Serena Acker: While the One Church Plan was backed by many bishops and was hard fought for, it was the Traditional Plan that passed with 53%. Could you just briefly explain that plan for us, high level?

Bishop Trimble: Well, the Traditional Plan that was passed was also passed with some additional petitions. The Traditional Plan essentially says that what is currently in our Book of Discipline remains in our Book of Discipline plus some additional penalties associated with it. Our Book of Discipline states that while all people are of sacred worth, all are loved by God, that we as United Methodists believe that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. It also states that those persons who are self-avowed, practicing homosexuals cannot be ordained in our church, nor can our ministers perform same-gender weddings in our churches or perform same-gender weddings. That language that is currently in the Book of Discipline, which was put in the Discipline in 1972, essentially remains the same. But, the painful part is not only does it remain the same, and for many people who fought for the Traditional Plan or argued for the Traditional Plan, there also were additional petitions that were passed. Some of which will have to be sorted out with the Judicial Council. So, the full implementation of what was passed at this General Conference, we will know for certain or not at the end of April after Judicial Council does its ruling. But, additional things to the Traditional Plan, we’ll petition 90032 clarifying definition of homosexuality. It passed with no amendments. The definition of a self-avowed, practicing homosexual includes: people living in same-
sex marriage, domestic partnership with civil union, or is a person who publicly states that she or he is a practicing homosexual. If this is ruled to be constitutional, and previously it has been tested to be constitutional, that would be inserted into the Book of Discipline. The other one I want to lift up is Episcopal responsibility. It passed with no amendments. Bishops, meaning me and other bishops, are prohibited from consecrating bishops who are self-avowed homosexual, even if they have been elected. Bishops are prohibited from commissioning or ordaining those on the deacon or elder track if the Board of Ordained Ministry has determined the individual is a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. There were additional petitions passed, some of which had already previously been ruled unconstitutional, so those did not come before the body. But, petitions related to the complaint process and also penalties if pastors should be found to have violated the Book of Discipline. I'll stop there. So, you can imagine how people who had hard fought for the One Church Plan, and even those particularly the Commission on a Way Forward, that did not have the opportunity to present the Connectional Church Plan. That was attempted to be brought before the body. Basically, we were running out of time and the body chose only to reject the One Church Plan and to adopt the Traditional Church Plan.

Serenaa Acker: Many people are asking right now, “What is next?” Can you explain a little about our next steps moving forward?

Bishop Trimble: Before I talk about next steps, Serena, I’d like to talk about some other powerful things that happened at the Special-Called General Conference. Sometimes these are things that we overlook. I think one of the most powerful moments for me, and I’ve been ordained for 35 years and in the Methodist Church all of my life, was a statement from young people at the General Conference. Young delegates who went to General Conference made a statement, drafted and crafted a statement, these were young people from across the globe, who crafted a statement essentially pleading with the General Conference to consider and adopt the One Church Plan. The reason they made that argument, was because amidst their diversity - all of them were not on the same page about whether homosexuality is compatible with scripture or not - they so love the church that they felt the church was at its best if we stayed together amidst our diversity even as we continue to have conversation. The young people drafted a statement to be read at the General Conference. It was read at the General Conference, and within thirteen hours of them drafting the statement, over 15,000 people from around the globe, young people from around the globe, had signed onto the petition, pleading with the United Methodist Church to remain united even as we were wrestling over this division. The One Church Plan was not adopted, so there was great disappointment about that, but there were two other things that the young people asked. Well, one other thing that the young people asked specifically in that petition, in that resolution. They asked, they pleaded, with The United Methodist Church, for annual conferences at their 2020 Annual Conference, to elect at least one young person to be on the delegation, to go to the 2020 General Conference. Because they felt that they did not have a voice, they often do not have a voice, in the very church in which we are expecting them to carry on for many, many years after most of us have gone onto the Church Triumphant. It’s a powerful moment in the history of The United Methodist Church. I think it went under reported, Serena, because often when our young people speak, we don’t pay serious attention to them. These weren’t young people who all agreed around the various plans, but they pleaded with the church that we have a stronger witness with Jesus Christ if we remain together and if we continue. So, we are still together. The church is not split, we didn’t vote to do away with The United Methodist Church, but there are people hurting. I’m still
grieving. I lost a brother-in-law last year in October and I still miss him. I thought about him the other day. So, I think it’s unrealistic for me to expect, for us to expect people who are grieving over such a painful experience at General Conference to get over it in a few days.

**Serena Acker:** We have received some feedback that it is a little bit difficult to hear, so I am going to ask both of us to project a little bit more as we are talking. We’ve been hearing a lot of talk about churches potentially wanting to leave the denomination. What does it mean for churches who choose to stay, and likewise for churches who choose to go?

**Bishop Trimble:** I think the big question for The United Methodist Church, for all of us, is, “Where do we go from here?” I have already stated publicly and privately that I’m not leaving the church. You don’t have to leave the church. I think the vast majority of United Methodists want to stay, do ministry, they love their local congregations, they love our mission statement of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. I think any of the petitions related to this affiliation, or separation, if those have become clear after the Judicial Council clarifies those. Then I think churches will have an opportunity at some point if there’s a desire for people to leave, or churches to leave, then to work through that process. I would encourage churches not to worry about doing anything anytime soon, other than preparing for the season of lent and a time of prayer and preparation for the holy season of Easter. Where do we go from here? I think people are wrestling with what it means for us to stay and maybe have to stay, for some people, stay differently. At the installation service of the new president of the University of Evansville, just an hour and a half ago, President Pietruszkiewicz shared a quote from the Power of Moments. He said, “In times of certainty, we are most comfortable. It is in times of uncertainty that we are most alive.” So, for the first twenty-four hours after the Special General Conference, and I want to share this from my heart to the United Methodists, I considered retiring and leaving the church myself in that sense. But, forty-eight hours later, I thought about it: I love Jesus way too much, I love The United Methodist Church way too much, to leave. But, I do recognize there are people hurting. And for me to pretend as a bishop that some people are hurting and some people are pleased because for them this brings about a certain amount of certainty. This means that we have again decided that what is in the discipline is in the discipline, and that if we are to live in covenant according to the discipline, then this brings certainty and comfort for some. But, for others, it brings a great deal of pain because it means that again, we are saying that if I have a call to ministry but I am not a heterosexual, I can’t fully answer that call to ministry. Or, we’re saying that there are certain penalties that are awaiting me if I choose to not abide by the Book of Discipline in this way. So, I would encourage people to hold on, to keep doing ministry as you’re doing ministry, to give space for your pain and for your grief and to recognize that we can’t honestly say, I can’t honestly say as a bishop, that I have not done harm. Even though I embrace the three simple rules as we all have. To do no harm, to do good, and stay in love with God. But there may have been times, and I know there probably have been, where I have used words or said things that have done harm to people or have not taken people seriously. When they have embraced and tried to express their understanding of scripture, or their understanding that God has made them who they are. And if my parents can love me and my local church can love me, why can’t The United Methodist Church love me just the way I am? So I feel the pain of others and I think we ought to give space for people to voice that. And then maybe people, I’m sure there will be people, who will say, “I just can’t stay with the church.” Or, there will be people who will say, “I’m going to wait and
see.” I think it’ll be a good thing that we can wait and see how we stay together and maybe continue this conversation, paying more attention and really listening to one another, and do what the young people said. Let’s elect some people and send some young people to the 2020 General Conference, not just the old folks like me, I’ll speak for myself.

Serena Acker: Well, you really paved the way for one of our next questions by acknowledging that some in our denomination really rejoice at the outcome of General Conference while some, particularly members of the LGBTQ community, are really hurting and angry and feel really rejected. So, what would you want to say to them right now?

Bishop Trimble: I often say, and Cabinet hears me say this, that there are no bad people in this story. But I think the United Methodist Church demonstrated that there can be bad outcomes when we try to legislate our way to a better future. I think our process for making decisions that are of this paramount, we really have to find another way of being the church and coming to a decision. Because, if you look at the way in which votes are taken and the way the votes went down, that would mean that out of a twelve million member denomination, that you have about seven million people who may believe that the traditional language we have in the discipline is sufficient. And then you have maybe as many as five or six million who also believe that we should have changed it and allowed for more flexibility in our local churches and for our pastors to determine how they will do marriages in places where it is legal. So, we continue to wrestle with what it means to create space for pain and anger. I would say that if you’re angry, do like I did. Think about it for a period of time, decide what it is you have to do, and give it some space. Sometimes, time and space, Serena, can allow for a different perspective. After I was forty-eight hours removed from the General Conference, I was able to think about the good things of the United Methodist Church and the good witness that we do in Indiana and all across the globe. I would not want that to be sacrificed. I don’t want anyone to feel that they need to leave the church. Between 1844 and 1968, people of African American descent were segregated in The Methodist Church. My family has long been members of The Methodist Church. Before 1968, many black people, most did not leave. In 1816, the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Church, was established because Richard Allen and others were made to get up from their knees while they were praying in St. George’s Church. And later, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was established. But, from 1844 to 1968, people stayed in the church even though the church was not perfect and we had not resolved the issue of segregation based on race. Several years ago, I was teaching at a Methodist college in Ohio, and my mother, I invited my mother at the time who was 81 years old. She is still alive and she is 96. To come and speak to the class about what it was to grow up in Montgomery, Alabama and to ride on segregated buses. She told the story of being a middle school student getting on the bus, putting in her nickel to pay her fare, and as a colored child having to get off the bus and then go to the back of the bus and get on the bus. One of the students asked the question, “Is it true that sometimes the buses could actually leave black students if the bus was full?” She said that was true. So, how was she able to make it through that period of time and the question was raised. She said because she believed that what was would not always be that way. And that her family had taught her that it’s always better to live life with dignity and to stay, than it is to quit and give up. She said her faith taught her that that which is, is not always going to be that way because God loves you. No-one can take that away from you. So I would say that to those who are hurting and those who feel they have been pushed out. I know it doesn’t help for us to say that people, or everybody, is of sacred worth if we can’t also say that we really do believe in open doors,
open minds, open hearts. I do believe that that's the best of the United Methodist Church. When all people can feel welcome, when you can feel welcome, when I can feel welcome, regardless of what my political or religious perspective might be. I can treat everyone as a precious child of God.

**Serenan Acker:** One question that we keep hearing is, “What does this mean for our local church?” Can you speak to that for us?

**Bishop Trimble:** It means, from the perspective of this bishop, it means that your local church should continue to focus on being missional. If you’re a church that welcomes everybody, and I hope all of our churches are that way, then continue to welcome everybody. There’s no requirement for any voting to take place immediately on the part of local churches. If there’s any requirements needed for the annual conference, that information will be given to local churches right away. I would say continue to focus on the mission of your local church, continue to create the kind of local church that you would be proud of, that you want your children belong to, your grandchildren to belong to. So, it doesn't mean anything. You don't have to next week vote on anything, but you do have to create space. I would suggest we continue to create space for some honest listening and continued conversation around what does it mean for us to be a United Methodist Church and what does it mean for us to stay. If we are staying, stay differently. Or, what does it mean for us to stay in a way that we can do it with integrity, and do it in a way in which we can continue to proclaim the gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Serenan Acker:** As we face the days ahead, how might you encourage us to respond to and process the outcomes of General Conference?

**Bishop Trimble:** I have read a lot of postings on social media, and everybody, we aren’t all on social media, but we often tell our children, “Write down your feelings.” I would encourage people to give voice to their feelings about the work of the Special General Conference. One of the painful feelings I’ve tried to give voice to is the fact that we spent three million dollars to have a meeting to try to legislate something that I think three million dollars we could have spent building habitat homes like we do here in Evansville. We could be feeding hungry children; we could be addressing the opioid crisis. We’ve got to find a better way to make space and welcome for all of God’s children in our churches. I supported the One Church Plan, but I’ve said over and over again that I believe that people ought to be able to affirm each other regardless of where they are on the theological perspective. If we can look at the Bible in a new way, that might be another opportunity for us to have what I call a hermeneutic of hospitality. Looking at the Bible, and not just quoting a few scriptures, but reading the whole of the gospel, and looking at the Bible through the eyes of Jesus Christ.

**Serenan Acker:** What would you like for us to keep in mind as we determine a way forward and look toward the season of Lent?

**Bishop Trimble:** I think this is a ripe opportunity for pastors to really do some preparing on how they will preach and what they will invite the congregations to engage in during this season of lent. Often, we give up something for lent like chocolate or Facebook or sarcasm or something like that. Rather than giving something up, what might be something we can take on for lent? I want to take on the opportunity to create more spaces to hear from people who often feel like they have not been heard. Again, I go back
to the statement from the young people at General Conference. There was a clear cry there for us to make more space in our church for people who don’t feel heard. They aren’t a member of the delegation, they don’t get to vote on things, and so how to we create space for that? I think this is an important time for those who are preparing to preach during this season of Lent. This may be a good time to consider what kind of preaching series you might do to focus on the person and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation ends not with what does the Bible say to the church. It ends with what does the Spirit say to the Church. I think we need to create space to hear from the work of the Holy Spirit and recognize that we can’t continue to do harm to people by simply putting in more rules and more rules and hoping people will still come and join our churches.

Serena Acker: Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

Bishop Trimble: I’d like to share to all of the United Methodists in Indiana, that I believe that God is still at work in the state of Indiana and the United Methodist Church. God is not going to leave us alone. I’d love the United Methodist Church. It’s not perfect. That makes it a good fit for me since I’m not perfect. You’re not perfect. I love the United States of America. Our country’s s not perfect, but I love this country. I love the people called United Methodist. I know that people are hurting, and I want to say specifically to the LGBTQ community, particularly young people who are often skipped over and looked over. We want to make space for you not only to give voice to your pain but give you permission to help us make the church you would want us to have in the future. I’m not leaving the church. And I would invite you stop ay with me. I thought leaving for about 24 hours. But I decided that I think this is the best place for us to be. Even in times of certainty, there’s a sense of comfort. But times of uncertainty make you kind of alive. So I really feel alive right now that this is a good time to give witness to why people need to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ but not a private relationship with Jesus Christ.

Serena Acker: Thank you, Bishop, for your words of encouragement and for making time to chat today. I would encourage you if you still have questions for Bishop to reach out to him directly.
Thank you for tuning in with us here today. Until next time, God bless.