

GIL RENDLE PRESENTATION TO THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS – February 26, 2018
“A Starting Place for Conversation”

Good morning. How are you? The answer is good.

It is a pleasure to be here and have opportunity to talk to you about the work that is before us.

My time is meant to set a context for your working on what you have received from the Commission on a Way Forward. This work is different and it asks of you to do different work.

It has been a privilege to be involved in the Commission on a Way Forward. It did not feel like a welcomed invitation at beginning. I was on way to retirement when I was asked to be a coach and consultant for the Commission. I prayed and then said yes. My life has been changed because of it. Isn't that always the way. My faith has been deepened in ways that surprise me. My sense of appreciation of colleagues has been so deepened by the risk I have seen people bear with one another. I am now clearer on the issues of the church than I have ever been.

I do not share these personal thoughts with the Commission. My role with them is to try to help them do their work from the perspective of the purpose of their task with an overview of organizational and systems issues. I bring what I can to the conversation to enable the work that has been given to them.

I want to begin the conversation with you today to talk about what are the issues for you and the church as we enter into this conversation.

A Starting Place

I want to make an argument with you **that this is a different kind of report, it is a product of a different kind of work.** This is not normal institutional work that leaders commonly do.

Because of that **it asks for a different kind of response**, more one of conversation, discernment, and teaching each other. Did you hear yourself say that you had a different perspective yesterday when you were talking together in small groups? That you had learned some things? That things had shifted? That is not the normative work you do your work.

I want to make the argument that the work that you are doing with the Commission could **potentially lead to a different kind of story and future** for our UMC.

Let us discuss: **The importance of those differences.**

We started with this quote with the Commission (see below). The assumption that if the church has been in conflict for 50 years over human sexuality and the meaning of marriage and if that contest in the church has been exasperated by people taking oppositional views and exasperated by arguments over scripture and by decisions made by governmental bodies and by parliament procedures. If all of that has made this difficult then we need to remember Albert Einstein quote: **“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them.”**

We have to find a different way to be with one another before we can move forward.

We knew this all along. **“No one sews a piece of new, unshrunk cloth on old clothes ...” “No one pours new wine into old wineskins ...”**

The lesson from Matthew is that if we are to live under new law of love we cannot use customs and patterns from the past. We know this but it is a matter of finding our way.

I do want to raise the issue that what you are looking at might look familiar but it might be different.

Why is this knight different from all other knights? This is the kind of humor I like the most. What did the queen say when she was presented with the first candidate for knighthood who happens to be Jewish ... **Why is this knight different from all other knights?**

The fact that this is the level of my humor should be of great concern. But the other observation is ... it plays off the first line of the Passover Seder meal in which the youngest child is asked to raise this naïve question. If the family has sat at that the table so many nights, if this is common practice, if it is familiar, then why is this night different?

The question precedes the importance of the evening. Which raises the question, if this is a COB meeting in which you gather together like you have so many other times and if you are receiving work that others have done, and if you have a leadership question like you have had so many times then why is this work different than all other work?

A DIFFERENT KIND OF REPORT

You started to rehearse this yesterday. This is the 32 people you chose ... it is your Commission. This is not from a caucus group, a constituency or agency. You are not looking at work that comes from a group that has an agenda other than your own agenda. You are not looking at work that comes from a group that wants something from you. This is work from a group that wants to help you do work you need to do.

This is very different work. This is a diverse group. **32 people. 9 nations. All jurisdictions., 15 states. Men and women. Straight and gay. Laity, elders, deacons, bishops. Full span of generations** (and thanks to Casey Orr now includes the unborn as Casey has shared her pregnancy with us).

Importantly, around that table are **all the theologies and positions** shared and opposed that bring you this work. One of the people around the table said that in his whole experience he has never sat with such a diverse group of people trying to work on a common purpose.

Bishop Torio refers to the group as an **unlikely team**. As unlikely as the table tennis team of **Hyun Jung-hwa/Rhee Boon-hee** who won the 1991 World Championship of Women's Table Tennis Association (doubles). They did not only come from different nations (North and South Korea) who opposed each other, they also knew each other as rivals, as someone who was to be defeated. They had to learn from each other, work through complex situations and multiple misunderstanding in order to fulfill their purpose. A movie was made *An Unlikely Team*.

The report that you receive from the Commission on a Way Forward is from such an unlikely team ...

A report that ... does not come from like minded people ... it is not from a group of people who already have some sort of agreement.

It is not the product of debate and parliamentary procedure.

It has **angered and upset people - they did not leave table or stop contribution.**

It was work of **conversation, study, prayer, listening, transparency and trust.**

In 20 days at no time did they ever take a vote.

Think about that in terms of implications. You are not looking at work from a diverse group that has a minority report. You don't have a report that people are actively opposing. Some on the Commission are not happy as it doesn't match their preference but they too bring it to you.

Think about what this calls from you when you take the work further on

When the first word from Commission came out people said they had seen it before. You may have seen it before but you have not seen it produced this way before.

It is a **different kind of work for the COB as well.** You come together quite often to **solve problems.** This is the normative approach to work for any leadership group like yours. You know how to do problem solving and do that well.

Think about what you are doing about **vital congregations.** What are we going to do about churches in US where churches are in decline and we are closing? You formed the problem, you asked what problem solvers do - what does research say? You collaborated and communicated and asked how we could do something within our conference. You went into problem solving to turn the trend around.

You did the same thing in **global church** ... you recognized that our areas of growth have shifted, our resources are not distributed equitably? You framed this as a way of saying "What we are we going to do as we look ahead without being patriarchal or colonial."

Then you come up with this third question of how we do we **find a place for homosexuals in the church.** The temptation is to see this as another problem to be solved.

There are people who want you to do that and will reward you if you try and will condemn you if you fail.

I am going to quote from WCA, not because they are unique but because they represent so many other voices out there who are looking to you to solve a problem.

October 2016 when WCA was forming they offered a Chicago statement ... You as a COB are to "bring forth a recommendation that would definitively resolve our debate of the UMC's sexual ethics and its understanding of marriage."

They want you to definitively resolve the debate. Have you not heard that from almost every quarter? How many other groups or constituencies are waiting for you to resolve this that the church has not resolved?

They are inviting you to again approach this as a problem solving group ...

However, there is no solution to this. As much as you and I may wish that the Christian faith in any form would influence the way our people live in the culture, the reality is that the culture determines how our people live in the church.

Do you not know that we have UMCs in every **blue state and red state** in the nation? We have a **UMC congregation in 95% of counties of the US** with all the differences you read about every day in the papers.

Do you not know that beyond our borders, there are **nations in African that have laws that say homosexuality is illegal** and if churches take a stand the ministry and the clergy are at risk?

Do you also recognize **congresswoman Geraldine Roman in the Philippines** who was recently elected as a transgender woman with no consequences.

Western Europe has few issues about this and you have been hearing more and more about **younger generations** for whom many would say this is an active non-issue.

There is no place you can point on this map where there is a solution that can satisfy every place where the UMC already is ...

There is no definitive answer, except for those people who have their own definitive answer.

And in any kind of contest (and I know this in 25 years of conflict work in churches ... the same was true ...) if someone has a definitive answer, their voice will be louder than any other voice because they do have a definitive answer for themselves.

So, **if you want to approach this as a problem to be solved, there is no solution other than picking which side you want to be on.** That is the history of 50 years of conversation so far. That is why tucked down in right hand corner of this PowerPoint slide is the word **humility**.

Humility is the conversation I have been having with more and more people. Humility that recognizes that which is true to me and the way my faith is formed is the fact that makes me a disciple. Other people have had other paths and other formations that has brought them to the same discipleship. Do I have enough humility to hold on to that which has formed me without assuming to take away that which has formed others?

This is part of our Wesleyan tradition. John and Charles Wesley were happy to have Calvinists preach on the early American circuits. They were not happy if they preached Calvinism. But in humility they said ... if you are carrying the gospel of Christ and you want to take it to our people let us help make the way. The differences, with humility, did not hide what they had in common with the Calvinists.

It is knowing who you are to be humble to be open to others.

Wesley said, "If your heart is with my heart ... Then give me your hand."

This is not problem solving work or familiar work. We need to think about in some other way.

You are not here to problem solve but to make a couple of choices. It is the choices you make that will help move the church ahead.

When you are making those choices, I want to remind you again of **the mission, vision and scope**. You rehearsed this yesterday. It has been a touch stone for the Commission. Every time we have come to a problem or question whether we were doing the right thing we would bring this out and ask how are our efforts aligned with this charter.

To find a way forward ...

- Connected and unified as possible
- Can be as agile, responsive, and contextual as possible
- That can live in and address the widest global and cultural mission field as possible

Does that not feel aspirational? I am about to demonstrate how difficult it is. Huge issues here.

Before we get on to the issues lets touch one other point. One of the messages the Commission has heard from the COB, including what Bishop Ough has brought to the group as Council President, is that the church should not be in pursuit of correcting something, instead **we need to be in pursuit of a passionate story of the church in the future.**

This work is not about trying to make people happy but it is about making the church authentic in the new liquid culture we all live. If there is not some passionate story drawing this then why would we be doing it?

Friends, as the COB it is much of your responsibility to help share that narrative. One of the most powerful things leaders do is shape story. They form a better story that the people can live.

I am not sure what that new story will be but I do know you might be at beginning of it. The beginning of the new passionate story is one in which **we learn to be global UMC that is as connected and unified as possible, as agile, responsive, and contextual as possible, able to live in and address the widest global and cultural mission field as possible**

Part of the choosing you are here to do is whether or not that is the kind of story this denomination will move to. Part of your work is to shape the story and to help people see it.

This is where it gets difficult. Here we are going to take a sidetrack and follow a rabbit trail and explore a systems theory or systems perspective.

Introduce the idea of **polarities** ... By definition in systems dynamics, **a polarity is two equal truths that cannot be easily held together at the same time.** One is not true and the other false. They are two equal truths. However, even though they are both equally true they contradict each other and are oppositional to each other.

Let's start with an example that a number of you are aware of ... it is one of the polarities almost every organization is facing (government, business, institutions of education, etc.) It is a definitive tension – whether an organization should be centralized or decentralized.

Each holds an organization truth.

Should a church or institution be well organized, have clear communication, with all leaders knowing what they are doing? Does that not sound like a good idea? So yes, organizations should be centralized?

Should the church be creative, agile, and responsive to local needs where it does work? Even if that distorts some general rules, should it not have freedom because it is responsive? IS that not a good thing to do? The answer is yes. Organizations should be decentralized.

Can an institution be **centralized** and **decentralized** at same time? Can they be fully ordered and creatively free at same time? The answer is no.

A choice has to be made. When you are working with polarity and you are in leadership position and you are making a choice, it needs to be an informed choice.

How do you put this on a map so you know where your organization is?

On this polarity map Centralized is on one side and **decentralized** is on the other. There are four quads, two position and two negative.

If you live on the centralized pole you will have an **orderly organization, with clear communications, and a clear division of labor** and things will move head. (+)

But we know if you live too close to that pole for too long, if you have been orderly and clear for too long in a changing environment you slip from the top quadrant to the lower negative quadrant where you become **rigid, siloed, difficult to change.**(-)

Any organization that experiences too much of one polar side begins to look at the upside of opposing part of the polarity. If you are too centralized and too rigid you begin to ask how do we balance this? Become more **agile**? What you do is you **decentralize** control so you become **agile, responsive and creative. You move to the positive pole of the opposing truth.**

However, If you spend too much time over there as a decentralized organization, or commit too deeply, you slip into the negative and become **chaotic** and **confusing**.

One of the tasks of leadership is to do the diagnostic work to know where your institution at any given time. Along which pole are we too much aligned and in which direction should be leaning. **This is not a choice of picking that which is right over that which is wrong.**

This is about which way we should lean into this time, like a pendulum. Which is it appropriate way to lean for the institution of the UMC at this time?

Polarities are essential in life. They keep us connected to the environment in which we live by providing necessary balance.

You and I know other polarities – the tension between **law and grace**. Should faith be disciplined? Of course that is part of discipleship. There are some requirements of faith but is not also the loving relationship with God an act of grace no matter who we are. This is why we baptize infants so God can claim them before they think they did something to earn it. We have tension between law and grace and faith and works. The book of James is trying to work that last polarity last out.

We know about this stuff.

Are you ready? Tom Locke would say ... “I told you those so I could tell you this ...”

In the work of the Commission, and now the work of the COB, you are facing deeply into the polarity of the future of the church you want.

Unity and contextuality. We want to learn how to be a global church of Jesus Christ that is as unified as possible and as contextual as possible. This is actually a polarity. Unity invites us to be closer and to be

the same as each other. Contextuality always asks us to claim the freedom to move further away and be **different** from each other in order to fulfill our purpose.

We want a church that is as **same** as it can be as long as it can be as **different** as necessary. Each of these hold a truth that can contradict the other.

If we spend too much time on unity side, we will have people who have **shared** unity and passion, express an identical **belief**, with the same **practices of ministry**. We will have full **agreement** and **clarity**. But if we spend too much time, we will become a people who are **exclusive** and **rigid**.

But if we are fully contextual ... we have **shared identity** and **purpose** and will be more **inclusive**, but if we spend too much time we could lose ourselves and **lack clarity** and value.

Do you hear this? Some of the voices you are hearing are urging you and me to move to one pole or the other? We are asked to choose which truth is the right one.

They are saying to you [please take us to one site or pole and explain to everyone why this is right and they are wrong.]

You have some choices you have to make in this work - a decision you have to make but not problems you have to solve. You need to decide how far ...

The Choices for the COB:

1) Which side of the polarity must the UMC now lean into in order to live into its next guiding story?

The denominational models from the Commission on a Way Forward that you are looking at are not opposing solutions. They are different descriptions of how much space is needed to allow unity and contextuality to live together for people who share our purpose. You are choosing a way the organization can live into the future.

Because we are an established institution with generations and centuries of history, we have the thought we are choosing structure, priorities, and identity for the next many hundred years. That is weighty work.

But if you look at any organization that operates in our current liquid culture, even multinational corporations who are committed to strategic planning – they are planning in terms of changes needed in next 24 months (not years), and assume they will have to redo the work in the next 18 months because of all the changes that will happen internally and externally during that brief time.

You are not being asked to choose the shape of the UMC for the next hundred years or for generations. Your work is to identify only the next step of the church's faithful pilgrimage. Which way do we have to lean now?

Please be aware that whichever way you choose there will be unhappy people. That cannot be escaped because we have lived with this as if it was a problem for too long. People have already come up with their solution of which polar truth is right...

Now, Here is the more dicey choice that you have to make.

Which mission of the church are you going to pursue? Who are you choosing for?

Robert Quinn, in his formative book *Deep Change* says that in any established institution it develops a **public and private mission**. We are not just talking about the UMC as if we have done something wrong. Quinn is referring to any established institution (schools, institutions, etc.) which over time develops both a public and a private mission.

The public mission is what we tell the world we do. The private mission is the satisfaction of the strongest of the constituent voices within the organization.

Over time, in established institutions, it is the private mission that captures our attention more than anything else.

Quinn uses the example of the public mission of an elementary school which is to educate children to be good citizens and become good leaders.

The private mission, however, is the satisfaction of the strongest constituent voices in their system – the teachers, parents, community, and local government. Guess who didn't make the list – the children.

Over time, in long established institutions, the private mission subverts the public mission.

Now there are many constituent voices in the UMC over this issue of human sexuality. Even more difficult is the issue we had to raise with all the people on the Commission, as they came to the table of the Commission that is not their only membership commitment. They come with multiple memberships. They are part of the Commission. But many of them are also members of a constituency with clear ideas about what the Commission should do.

As Bishops you also come with multiple memberships. Nothing wrong with that. It is definition of culture. We are parts of multiple groups not all of which are aligned with each other. You are a member of the COB. But, many of you are also a member of some other consistency who wants a specific outcome out of this work.

Friends this is the way life is conducted and there is nothing wrong with it. You may not even have a formal constituency but you have a preference or spirit or theology that brings you to the conversation with a preferred solution.

We were clear in the formation of the Commission that people with multiple memberships had to make a choice. They needed to be clear that they were there to serve the public mission, not a private mission.

If we are the people who want to make disciples of Jesus Christ, who is speaking for the disciples that are yet to be made, not just measuring the satisfaction of the disciples already in the house. Who is speaking for the transformation of the world that awaits, not just the changes that people have already agreed on.

I don't want to push it too far, it is possible to think of you as board of directors for the UMC (note: a very limited metaphor). Chaitt, in his research on governing boards asks that when a governing board holds an institution "in trust" (the fiduciary responsibility of a board), for whom is the organization held in trust for you? If it is a for-profit organization, it is very clear, the governing board holds it in trust for the owners or shareholders? You hold the organization in trust for some other people. However, If you

are a governing board of a non-profit that has missional purpose, it is clear that the board holds the organization in trust for the mission of the organization, not for the people. For the public, not the private mission of the organization.

Why this work is so hard ...

One of the reasons this is not going to be easy for you is that you know too much. Many of you know **Malcom Gladwell's** work where he takes complex things and makes it simple to understand. In his book on Outliers, he raises the question about those people who seem to be natural born leaders. There seem to be some people who just have natural gifts of leadership. He point out that you may not really be looking at a natural leader. You may just be looking at the person who has put in enough time and has enough experience to make it look easy. Research suggest that it actually takes about **10,000 hours** of practice before anyone can operate at that level.

For example, when the Beatles came to the Ed Sullivan show in the 1960s, everyone thought they were perfect. What everyone missed was that they had already spent 10,000 hours in Liverpool in some of the worst venues learning how to cover mistakes and make it sound good no matter what. They were experienced and credentialed.

You have the same problem the Commission had. You are credentialed and experienced. When you called together 32 people you did not pick them randomly. These are 32 people highly credentialed and highly experienced. They put in their 10,000 hours. And, if they are, then what about you on the COB?

The COB is the most credentialed, experienced group of leaders in the UMC by education and training, by mission and ministry, by institutional experience.

May I suggest to you that one of the reasons this work is going to be so hard is that you know too much. You know too much history, too much institutional history, too much Wesleyan history, you know too much about the BOD. (That is a sad thing.) You know too much about all the competing constituencies out there and what they want.

You know too much about how things already are and it would make it appear that is the way things should be. It is hard to bring things down to the very essentials when you know so much. Fair?

Have you ever played Pictionary ... Pictionary is a game people play, one person on a team is given a word and their task is to draw a picture of the object and the other members have to guess what the picture is within 60 seconds. Have you ever played that?

My wife and I played with a team of folks recently against two other teams. At one point the drawing partner of each team got the same word, all they had to do was draw a desk – whichever team drew it first and guessed it right within the 60 seconds won.

The guy who drew the picture on our team was credentialed. He was an architect. And for 55 seconds we watched him think about what a desk is and what constitutes the nature of a desk and what is necessary to represent a desk. His pen was moving the whole time, but it was nowhere near the paper. After 55 seconds he did not get much done. Guess who lost? He knew too much.

IT is hard to do fresh work when you know the old work so well. IT is hard to lead in new ways when you are so practiced in leading in ways that got us here to this point.

So ...

A couple question for you to consider ...

What must I still learn in order to lead?

How will I lead by listening?

Thank you for listening to all this stuff about organizations and systems and the Commission you pulled together. You are a group that is practiced leading by talking. Are you willing to learn how to lead by listening?

You are a group who is practiced in coming to the meetings with answers in hand ... are you willing to still learn in order to lead?

Are you willing to ask **what part of the church am I representing in these next few days?** Public mission or a private mission?

How must I work with my colleagues for the purpose of the whole church in these next few days?

What are you willing to work differently even if it is uncomfortable? How might you do it?

While we are moving to transition ... turn to one other person and ask: What is it that you hope to be able to do? How will you lead differently? What will you find most difficult?