

# Compassionate. Commissioned. Courageous.

## Values for Abiding Together

Prepared by That We May Be One (TWMBO)

A Group within the Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

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### VISION

The question is not, “*What is the Texas Annual Conference to do in preparation for General Conference?*” Instead, the core question is, “*What kind of people must we become?*” The church can only “serve the present age” if it intentionally engages the sanctifying work of shedding fear in order to be made perfect in love. So, then let us be a people who abide by these biblical values – Compassionate, Commissioned, and Courageous – so we may honor God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and love one another in this wilderness season.

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THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH REMAINS the strongest Wesleyan expression of the body of Christ. However, it is no secret that the UMC is in a season of reformation, and the question remains as to how exactly this reformation will take place. Will it truly lead to a better ecclesial “shalom?” Will it make our congregations better? Or will it lead to yet more dysfunction, even if by a new name?

As the UMC prepares for a potential “grace through separation” into at least three divergent paths, the Texas Annual Conference has a unique opportunity to establish a value-centered process by which we might compassionately and courageously commission each other into faithful ministry, trusting the truth we profess:

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (EPHESIANS 4:4-6 NIV)*

And again, as stated in the introduction to the Baptismal Covenant III found in the *United Methodist Hymnal*:

*The Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time... All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.*

So then, how are we to offer the means of grace to the world – and each other? This document doesn't approach that question with a proposal of new policies for the denomination. Instead, this document offers a character to which we may aspire, a character for people who wish to abide together in a spirit of grace and truth. The narrative here is not, "What must we *do* now?" Rather it is, "What kind of people must we *become* now?"

Therefore, we offer three distinct biblical values for the people of the Texas Annual Conference.

## **COMPASSIONATE.**

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*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

MATTHEW 9:36-38 NIV

Having surveyed the crowds within each city and village throughout Galilee, Jesus is filled with compassion for how "harassed and helpless" they seem to be. It's worth noting that the Greek here conveys the sense that the crowds are utterly dejected, weary and scattered – a reality that is shared even now throughout all of our communities by both the religious and the non-religious, the church and the non-church, the rich, the poor, the young, and the old. Over and over again, we bear witness to the exhaustion and frustration borne by our friends, neighbors, parishioners, colleagues, and all who long for a peace and wholeness that seem to lie just beyond reach.

As it was then, so now Jesus surveys each of our communities and no doubt sees our distress and is moved again with compassion. Jesus' compassion compels and propels him forward in mission, not singularly but through and within community. And so, Jesus turns to his disciples and invites them into a compassionate response for the sake of engaging and expanding ministry, so that none of his sheep might be lost, but all may be saved.

As the church today considers again the call to "send out workers into the harvest field," let us recommit ourselves to view the world and each other through the compassion of Jesus.

Jesus' compassion calls us into an unshakable conviction of the need for both repentance and sanctification by grace, both individually and collectively.

Jesus' compassion calls us into an unwavering posture of grace and mercy even while administering accountability.

Jesus' compassion calls us into an undaunted mission to heal, to liberate, and to proclaim the right-now, in-breaking of God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' compassion calls each of us – his disciples – to recognize each other as co-laborers in Christ, even when we disagree and are sent in different directions to different mission fields. As we, the members of the Texas Annual Conference, discern how God is calling us into the mission field, let us hold fast to Jesus' compassion as the grounding principle of our continued common life.

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves traditionalists and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for spiritual revival, for evangelistic fervor, for biblical literacy and fidelity, for a commitment to covenant community and covenant keeping, and for spreading "Scriptural holiness over the land."<sup>1</sup>

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves progressives and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for spiritual formation, for missional fervor, for biblical responsibility and justice, for inclusion, for a commitment to seeing the reign of God made manifest in every life, and for the expected transformation of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves centrist or moderate and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for the unity of the Spirit, for integrity to Scripture, for repentance and peacemaking, and for reconciliation through the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The world needs the compassion of Christ, maybe now more than ever. Dr. King summarized what compassion looks like in his final sermon. He preached on the Good Samaritan and said, "And so the first question that the priest asked—the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"<sup>2</sup>

For too long, we've been the priest and the Levite, more concerned about what will happen to us if we take one stance or another on sexuality, and while we debate, the people of our mission fields remain in the ditch, half-dead from hunger, poverty, loneliness, and hopelessness. Our church battles have done nothing to help them. What if we stopped asking what will happen to us? What if we were more concerned about them?

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley. "Large" *Minutes*.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop."  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/02/us/king-mlk-last-sermon-annotated.html>

The world is watching. How can the world trust us to be compassionate to them if we're not being compassionate to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ? Instead of a "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18), we have shown the world a ministry of estrangement as the only way to deal with each other. And so, we've slipped into the bad habit of exempting people in the body of Christ from our compassion. Church, that must end. Compassion doesn't measure a person by whether or not they agree with us. Rather, compassion is simply the affirmation of their sacred dignity and their experience of the world.

Even though our concerns and disagreements may be significant and should not be glossed over, may Jesus' compassion so ground and center our work and conversations together that we can no longer help but see each other as co-laborers who have been sent by the Lord of the Harvest to do what only we can do for the mission field. We must offer the means of grace as God has uniquely called, equipped, and sent us to do – without malice, bitterness, or hostility toward each other.

## **COMMISSIONED.**

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*Proclaim the good news: "The Kingdom of heaven has come near."*

(MATTHEW 10:7 NRSV)

Jesus not only invites his disciples to share his compassion, but he commissions them into the mission field. He sends them as agents of grace: proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:8). This commissioning becomes the pattern by which the in-breaking of God's kingdom and the proclamation of the gospel is multiplied for the salvation of the world.

We see this affirmed in the Gospels with the sending of the Twelve and the Seventy, in the Great Commission, and in the Acts of the Apostles, particularly with the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. Here, Paul and Barnabas are active within the large, strong, and mixed church community in Antioch, a city of both Jews and Gentiles. The church in Antioch modeled for the church and the world a "big tent" mentality. As the Bible geographer and scholar John A. Beck has remarked,

Antioch of Syria served as a model for Jewish-Christian relationships. ...Problems could easily have developed in this mixed community, but the city itself played a role in diminishing any frictions between Jew and Gentile. ...Luke includes this Christian church in Antioch because it sets an example of a culturally mixed church whose members get along.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, in Acts 13 we find that the Holy Spirit sees fit to set apart Paul and Barnabas from within this "big tent" church. Not everyone in this "big tent" is called to go or to stay, but the Holy Spirit sees an opportunity to multiply and expand the good news throughout the world. And so, obedient to the Spirit, the church in Antioch commissions them after much fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands. Of course, by the end of Acts 15 we learn of a sharp

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<sup>3</sup> *Discovery House Bible Atlas*, 2015.

disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that neither negates nor nullifies their commission, but simply sends them in new directions for the sake of the gospel. Paul and Barnabas may never do ministry together again, but they each do ministry in the power of the Spirit, nonetheless.

As we wrestle to discern what the Holy Spirit is yet saying to The United Methodist Church – and particularly, to the Texas Annual Conference – could we through compassion for one another re-orient our conversations about *separation* to focus more on how we might *commission* each other to fulfill the work to which God has called us?

Can we honestly and unstintingly bless one another in the name of our Risen Lord to go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to do the works of God?

Not all of us are called to stay in the “big tent.” Not all of us are called to go into a different mission field. But all of us are called.

All of us are gifted with God’s grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be co-laborers in the ministry of the gospel for the salvation of the world. All of us are responsible to the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20).

So let us commission each other – with fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands – to go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to bless the world in Jesus’ name.

## **COURAGEOUS.**

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*When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’*

(MATTHEW 14:26-27 NRSV)

Some translations simply translate “Take heart” as “Courage!” When the faith of the disciples was failing, when they didn’t believe that Jesus could do the impossible by walking on water, what Jesus *didn’t* do was tell them to have more faith. He told them to have more courage.

Imagine Jesus walking through the storms of pandemic and schism with a word for us, the people of The United Methodist Church. “Courage, UMC! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

The UMC is in a wilderness season. There’s a general sense that we’re not who we used to be, but we haven’t settled into a new identity, either. We’re unsure, unsettled, and unsteady.

We’re not alone. The world as we know it is in a wilderness season. The author Gil Rendle calls it an era of *divergence*: when the circumstances that fostered a time of prosperity in the mid-twentieth century, at least for some, have ended, new social norms are arising, and we

can't agree on which are correct.<sup>4</sup> Divergence is what you feel when it feels like we're pulling apart at the seams. We know this feeling well.

Divergence isn't a matter of diversity. People can be diverse theologically and politically and still go in the same direction. Rather, divergence is a matter of departure. We're departing from one another at a faster rate than we're coming together. Divergence assumes the best solution to disagreement is to pull away from one another.

Gone is the time of *convergence*: when there was a shared sense of national purpose that transcended religious and political lines. Convergence is what you feel when it feels like we're coming together.

The United Methodist Church was born and came of age in a time of convergence. Buildings were easy to build, weekly worship attendance was the expectation rather than the exception, and businesses were closed on Sundays because we could all agree on what was most important in life. But now the UMC is middle-aged, and the world of our youth is gone. Divergence is the game of the day now, and nothing in our upbringing could have prepared us for it.

But there is another way. We can choose convergence again.

We can be a "city on a hill" that demonstrates for the world what convergence looks like. We have the opportunity to model convergence to generations that have known mostly divergence their entire lives. Too long have we been the followers in a culture that says pulling apart is the best solution to our problems; now we have the chance to lead the world into a courageous future where we hold each other in covenant grace while also giving plenty of room for people to remain true to who they are. We can show the world what it looks like to come together on what makes us *one* while respecting each other for what makes us *different*. This can be our witness to unchurched people who long for a better way to resolve conflict.

Consider the situation in the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church was falling apart because the people were pulling apart. One group followed Paul. Another followed Apollos. Another followed Peter. These groups disagreed. They fought. They took one another to court over property disputes (and that was before the trust clause). But what was common was the shared assumption that the solution was in pulling away from one another. "We're better off the more apart we are." The Corinthian church wasn't a church in disagreement; it was a church in schism. Again, we know the feeling well.

What Paul doesn't do is suggest a new structure for the church, or form a committee, or write legislation. Instead, he calls the Corinthians back to a core principle of the body of Christ – love, and not just any love but *agape* love, love in action. Paul writes 1 Corinthians 13, not as a description of marriage, but as a praise song on one of the core principles of the church. It's a love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things – a love that never ends.

We must not miss how important this is. In the Corinthian church, each faction had their own policies on what you could or couldn't eat at church meals (1 Cor. 8), what you could or

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<sup>4</sup> Gil Rendle. *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*. 33.

couldn't wear in worship (1 Cor. 11), and who you could or couldn't marry (1 Cor. 7). None of these factions would budge on their policies. It wasn't out of stubbornness; it was out of conviction, just as the various groups in the UMC today speak from a conviction born of serious interpretation of Scripture.

Paul doesn't ask the Corinthians to compromise their convictions, and neither does he ask them to agree on policy. He asks them to come together on the core principle of love.

That is the path of courage. Courage overcomes divergence because courage calls us to come together on our core.

Courage separates the *core* from the *contextual*. The core is who we are; that which makes us, us. The core is a set of principles that define our enduring identity. The contextual, however, is the infinite ways in which we live out the core.

As United Methodists, the core of who we are is found in our fidelity to Jesus Christ; the primacy of Scripture, as interpreted through tradition, reason, and experience; the historic creeds of the Church; and the heritage of John Wesley. The contextual is *how we make the core happen* in our mission fields around the world. The contextual will look different across cities and nations, but the core will remain.

It is when we can name what our core principles are, and what they are not, that we can come together and enjoy the fruits of convergence. There's a shared sense of who we are. Courage protects and stays true to the core, while allowing the contextual to be contextual.

Courage names the fundamental dangers to our church as those that threaten the core of who we are – they include the mutual distaste for one another in the body of Christ, the departure from one another, and the obsession with what makes us different rather than a celebration of what brings us together.

Courage recognizes the disagreement over human sexuality as what it is – a disagreement. This disagreement is over the interpretation of Scripture, not the core principle of the authority of Scripture. Courage allows disagreements to remain disagreements when they do not belong to the core of who we are. We may continue being *different* on this disagreement and be *together* on mission.

Now is a moment of choice for the UMC and, closer to home, the people of the Texas Annual Conference. Will we choose courage?

Will we choose courage in evangelism, as we innovate new ways of reaching our mission fields with the saving love of Jesus Christ?

Will we choose courage in worship, as we experiment with new formats for a generation that knows nothing of our Sunday customs?

Will we choose courage in justice, as we defy evil and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Will we choose courage in our congregations, as our local churches reinvent themselves from the ground-up?

Will we choose courage in governance, as we dismantle the parts of our denomination that simply aren't working and try something new?

Above all, will we choose the courage to love one another?

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## C O N C L U S I O N

Compassionate. Commissioned. Courageous. These are how we abide together in this wilderness season. These are how we build up instead of tearing down. Come what may, when General Conference gathers in 2022, if we can remain true to these values, all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love*.