CONTENTION, CONTRITION, CELEBRATION, CAUTION: 
THE 2000 GENERAL CONFERENCE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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I never dared be radical when young. 
For fear it would make me conservative when old. 
—Robert Frost

The General Conference of 2000 opened a window for observing the United Methodist Church in early middle age. Just as men and women in their thirties often veer toward conservatism, so United Methodism at age 32 showed signs of caution when dealing with issues such as homosexuality. One indicator of the increasing influence of evangelical United Methodists was the growth in the antigay vote from roughly 60 percent in 1996 to approximately 66 percent in 2000. Not quite counterbalancing the conference’s rightward tilt were a few left-leaning actions such as calling for a ban on the private ownership of handguns.

Another view of United Methodism at age 32 was provided by the episcopal elections of 2000; six White men, four Black men, and three Black women were selected. The fifty members of the Council of Bishops from the United States shifted from 1996 to 2000 as follows—

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<tr>
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<th>1996</th>
<th>2000</th>
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<tr>
<td>White men</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>White women</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black men</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black women</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic men</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian-American men</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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However you choose to interpret the membership of the Council of Bishops in 2000, one thing is clear: It did not reflect the racial/ethnic/sex breakdown of the denomination as a whole. Using approximate figures, these were the statistics for United Methodists in the United States—

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,472,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>7,974,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>382,300</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Asian-American  
Hispanic  
Native American

56,200  
40,700  
18,800

It is a good guess that women accounted for more than half of the membership of the United Methodist Church in 2000, yet only 11 of the 50 bishops were women.\(^2\) Fifteen of the 50 bishops were Black,\(^3\) yet only about 380,000 persons out of a total membership of 8.3 million were Black.\(^4\)

All of which means—What? That United Methodists do not use “mirroring the membership” as their criterion when voting for bishops. Instead, episcopal elections always tell us something about the mood of the church. And the mood in 2000, as revealed by General Conference, was characterized by four c-words—contention, contrition, celebration, caution.

\[ \text{I} \]

Contention is the place to begin. Contentious issues handled cautiously often lead to contrition. And contrition may be a component of celebration.

As it was yesterday, so it is today

The contentious issue that confronted one General Conference after another during the first half of the nineteenth century was the abolition of slavery, to which Methodists responded with caution, not wishing to lose members and money. Addressing the 1836 General Conference, the bishops announced that they had “come to the solemn conviction, that the only safe, Scriptural, and prudent way for us, both as ministers and people, to take, is wholly to refrain from” dealing with manumitting the slaves.\(^5\)

In 1858 Bishop George F. Pierce (elected in 1854 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South) argued that slavery belonged to Caesar while salvation belonged to God.

Therefore the Church should render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar (Mt 22:21)—let the civil authorities deal with slavery—and get on with the business of saving souls.\(^6\) Besides, Bishop Pierce added, slavery had “shown itself a great missionary institution.”\(^7\)

\(^2\) Approximately 4,900 ordained persons, out of a total of roughly 38,500, were women.
\(^3\) Approximately 1,900 ordained persons were Black.
\(^4\) Figures for UM membership at the close of 1999 are approximate: 8.3 million, down roughly 50,000. In 1971, the UMC lost 174,677 members. Since then the decline has been slower: 1995, 49,256; 1996, 43,419; 1997, 48,632; 1998, 40,723. Nineteen conferences reported membership increases in 1999: all, except Alaska, are in the Southeastern and South Central jurisdictions (NewsScope, August 11, 2000).
\(^7\) Abbey, 94.
A century and a half later, at the General Conference of 2000, United Methodism’s bishops participated in an act of contrition for that capitulation to the demands of slave owners and for ongoing racism after slavery was abolished. During this “Evening of Repentance for the Sin of Racism,” Bishop William B. Grove called racism “a malignancy in the bone marrow of the church,” and called for an apology: “It’s high time to say we’re sorry, and only the General Conference can do it. Only the General Conference speaks for the church.”

After the Civil War, contention erupted again when women requested lay rights. Five women, including Frances E. Willard, leader of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, were elected to serve as lay delegates to the 1888 General Conference. But the male members, clergy and lay alike, voted to deny them entrance. Caution prevailed. The constitution, it was pointed out, provided for laymen to be General Conference delegates. So it would take a constitutional amendment to redefine laymen as a word that included women. And the process of approving such an amendment would be contentious. Some folks were certain to invoke Paul’s ban—“Let your women keep silence in the Churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Cor 14:34, KJV).

Miss Willard, being told that she and her four companions had been excluded, recalled how lay males had jimmed open the doors of General Conference in the years after the Civil War to let themselves in. So she felt “no more spirit in” herself when she learned that a majority of the lay males were now barring the doors to women. Nevertheless, she made a spirited prediction: “I confidently predict that we five women, whose election was thus disavowed, will have a more enviable place in history than any who opposed us.”

More than a hundred years later, women continued to be the voice of Methodism’s conscience. A key planner of the 2000 General Conference’s time of “Repentance for the Sin of Racism” was a woman—Ruth A. Daugherty, Eastern Pennsylvania lay delegate.

Just as post-Civil-War Methodism denied women lay rights, so did it deny them ordination. The New York Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church ordained Anna Howard Shaw in 1880. But the contention aroused by her ordination prompted the denomination to be cautious: It declared the New York Conference’s action unlawful. Not until 1956 did the Methodist Church grant full clergy rights to women. In 1980 the first woman was elected bishop—Marjorie S. Matthews. Twenty years later, in 2000, a woman bishop, Susan M. Morrison, was arrested for taking part in a protest against United Methodism’s cautious position on the contentious issue of homosexuality.

Which brings us to the General Conference of 2000. Opponents of United Methodism’s thirty-year-old ban on gay and lesbian pastors formed a circle on May 6 around the convention center in Cleveland, Ohio, where the General Con-

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9Norwood, 462.
10Norwood, 462.
ference of 2000 was in session. The circle of protesters dramatized Edwin Markham’s poem “Outwitted”:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!\(^1\)

Bishop Melvin G. Talbert, addressing the protesters, likened United Methodism’s discrimination against homosexuals to his experience as a Black man facing racism in the church. He said: “I hope I will never forget what it feels like to be excluded.”\(^12\) Outside the circle of love stood protesters holding signs saying; “Thank God for AIDS,” “God hates fags,” “Methodist fag church.”\(^13\)

Four days later, advocates of fully including gays and lesbians in United Methodism’s circle of love blocked the convention center’s driveway while the Archbishop of Canterbury was addressing the delegates inside. That blockage, according to one of the organizers, was a way of telling the delegates, “Stay in there until you get it right.”\(^14\) When the police led away one group of persons engaged in civil disobedience, another group moved in, until more than 180 protesters had been arrested. Bishop C. Joseph Sprague was among the first to be booked.\(^15\)

Bishop Susan M. Morrison described her participation in the demonstration as a “sign act of gracious hospitality.” It was, she said, “a nonviolent way to be in solidarity with some of God’s children who are excluded. I feel as a person of faith and as a bishop there is a need for that presence.”\(^16\) Then she affirmed her belief that change was coming: “It’s inevitable, but it may take a new generation to do it.” It may require “people letting go of their fear” and the church taking a stand. “Too often,” she observed, “the church is not a leader in that.”\(^17\)

The next day, May 11, the delegates responded cautiously—more cautiously than previously—to the contentious issue of homosexuality. From 1972 to 1996 there had been a gradual increase in the number of delegates opposing the United Methodist Church’s positions on the question. Progay votes approached 40 percent in 1996 but dropped to around 33 percent in 2000.\(^18\)

There were important votes on the issue of homosexuality. Delegates voted 628 to 337\(^19\) to retain this statement in the Social Principles\(^20\): “Although we do

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\(^{13}\) *Newscoop*, May 19, 2000, Vol. 28, No. 20, 2.


\(^{15}\) See Press Release, 1–3.

\(^{16}\) Press Release, 2.

\(^{17}\) Press Release, 2.


\(^{19}\) UMNS Press Releases, May 11, 2000, GC-066, 1; GC-068, 1.

\(^{20}\) The conference amended the preface to the Social Principles to make it clear that the Principles are a “call to faithfulness” and “not church law” (*Daily Christian Advocate*, May 13, 2000, 13; *Newscoop*, May 19, 2000, 4).
not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm God’s grace is available to all.” 21 An attempt to amend that statement was defeated 585 to 376; the proposed amendment read: “Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it is acceptable when practiced in a context of human covenantal faithfulness.” 22

Earlier in the conference, Liberian Bishop Arthur F. Kulah told delegates that a global church does not accept the gay lifestyle. He contrasted the denomination’s proscriptions against homosexuality with the gay advocates’ assertion that homosexuality is “a natural variant of human sexuality,” and said that Scripture, which is the primary authority for belief and practice, “is unequivocal on this subject of homosexuality.” If the United Methodist Church is to be a global church, it must continue its stance, he said. Both the Old and New Testaments condemn the practice of homosexuality. 23

A delegate from Zimbabwe asked the delegates not to “betray” the church in Africa by supporting homosexuality. 24 Tom M. Junk, Oklahoma Conference, made the American case for caution: “If we reverse our longstanding position on homosexuality, the fallout of members and money lost will be disastrous.” 25

Caution prevailed. Delegates voted 645 to 306 26 to continue the Discipline’s ban on openly gay persons in the ordained ministry: “Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” 27

Likewise the prohibition of homosexual unions—“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches”—was retained (646 to 294 28), although it was moved from the Social Principles to “Special Provisions” under the “Ministry of the Ordained” (670 to 222 29).

Without taking a formal vote, the delegates agreed, while insisting that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” to implore “families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends.” 31

And the conference rejected (705 to 210) a proposed “loyalty oath,” which would have required pastors, before they could be appointed to a church, to sign this statement; “I do not believe that homosexuality is God’s perfect will for any

25 Press Release, May 11, 2000, GC-066, 4
28 Discipline, 87.
person. I will not practice it. I will not promote it. I will not allow its promotion to be encouraged under my authority.”

The conference’s atmosphere became tense when the delegates rejected (637 to 320) a motion calling for a four-year “moratorium on the implementation of all actions regarding homosexuality in current paragraphs of the Discipline.” Thirty persons, who had previously been allowed to maintain a silent vigil at the front of the auditorium, walked up and stood in the chancel behind the desk of the presiding officer, Bishop Dan E. Solomon. Some 150 people in the balcony began singing “We Shall Overcome.” They were joined by over 100 delegates, many wearing stoles representing ordained pastors who were forced to surrender their orders because of their sexual orientation. Thirteen bishops also locked arms across the stage in support of the public witness.

When the 30 persons in the chancel refused to heed Bishop Solomon’s request to leave, police officers arrived, led them off the stage, and charged them with “disruption of a lawful meeting.” Among those arrested and fined were Bishop Susan M. Morrison and Bishop C. Joseph Sprague.

In the end, the General Conference of 2000 voted by a growing majority—60 percent in 1996, 66 percent in 2000—to maintain the position that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” And protesters vowed to stage a “massive civil disobedience” on the opening day of the General Conference of 2004, with “one thousand people of faith being arrested.”

II

While the General Conference of 2000, fearing the loss of members and money, dealt cautiously with homosexuality, it expressed contrition for Methodism’s cautious approaches in the past to slavery and racism.

Three biblical symbols marked “An Evening of Repentance for the Sin of Racism.” A giant plumb line was lowered from the convention center’s ceiling, glittering in the lights and rotating slowly. Ruth A. Daugherty, Eastern Pennsylvania lay delegate who helped plan the service, described the plumb line as a light rope and weight showing whether “a line is vertical and therefore stable and true. Amos,” she continued, “had a vision of God holding a plumb line with which to test the people’s capacity for true righteousness (Am 7:7–9). The plumb line hangs in the midst of this assembly as a constant reminder that we must pass God’s test for righteousness.”

The second symbol was salt, a biblical sign that the parties to an agreement

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33Newscope, May 19, 2000, 1. Also see Daily Christian Advocate, May 13, 2000, 4 (which says there were 29 in the chancel); Jean Caffey Lyles, “Watershed in Cleveland,” Christian Century, May 24–31, 2000, 591 (29 in chancel); UMNS Press Releases, May 11, 2000, GC-065 (27 in chancel), GC-066 (30 in chancel), GC-068 (30 in chancel), GC-081, p.2 (30 in chancel)
34Newscope, May 19, 2000, 1.
35Daily Christian Advocate, May 13, 2000, 6, hereafter cited as DCA.
36DCA, 10.
intended to preserve their covenant vows. Members of a liturgical dance company gamboled around blocks of salt and then smashed them, signifying the breaking of the covenant of inclusiveness.\footnote{DCA, 10.} Covenant-smashing occurred in Methodism early in 1785 when implementation of the Christmas Conference’s decision (December 1784) to force Methodists to free their slaves was suspended because the clergy decided it “would do harm.”\footnote{DCA, 10.} Later, because of various discriminatory acts within Methodist Episcopal congregations, Blacks departed and established the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME, 1816) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ, 1820). Immediately after the Civil War, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South encouraged its Black members to form the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church (CME, 1870).

Elements of the third symbol, sackcloth and ashes, were offered to delegates and visitors as signs of repentance. Bishops stationed around the convention center rubbed ashes on wrists and offered strips of rough cloth to be pinned on the clothing for the rest of the conference.\footnote{DCA, May 13, 2000, 10.}

Representatives of three African-American Methodist denominations were introduced: Bishop McKinley Young, AME, Bishop Clarence Carr, AMEZ; and Bishop Nathaniel Lindsey, CME, who said, “We appreciate this symbolic act of repentance and forgiveness. As we know, a symbol participates in the reality it symbolizes. I see this ritual tonight as an act of supreme importance. We forgive you. By our entering into this ritual of forgiveness and repentance, we will be waiting to see what will happen. And as we wait, we will be working with you.”\footnote{DCA, 10–11.} Bishop Carr said he hoped United Methodists would move from the symbolism of the service to substance. Redemption demands restitution and reparation, he noted, and “a new sense of freedom both for the victim and the victimizer.”\footnote{UMNS Press Release, May 5, 2000, GC-019, 2.}

Some days later, May 12, the delegates mandated that each of the United Methodist Church’s agencies must have on its governing board at least one member, with voice and vote, from among the AME, AMEZ, and CME churches.\footnote{UMNS Press Release, May 12, 2000, GC-074.}

The same day, the delegates approved (831 to 45) a constitutional amendment to be submitted to the annual conferences for ratification. Titled “Racial Justice,” it will follow, if ratified, Paragraph 4, Article IV, on the “Inclusiveness of the Church.”\footnote{See 1996 Book of Discipline, 22.} The proposed amendment reads:

The United Methodist Church proclaims the value of each person as a unique child of God and commits itself to the healing and wholeness of all persons. The United Methodist Church recognizes that the sin of racism has been destructive to its unity throughout its history. Racism continues to cause painful division

\[\text{37 DCA, 10.}\]
\[\text{38 DCA, 10.}\]
\[\text{39 Robert Emory, } \text{History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church} \text{ (New York: Lane and Sandford, 1844), 80.}\]
\[\text{40 DCA, May 13, 2000, 10.}\]
\[\text{41 DCA, 10–11.}\]
\[\text{42 UMNS Press Release, May 5, 2000, GC-019, 2.}\]
\[\text{43 UMNS Press Release, May 12, 2000, GC-074.}\]
\[\text{44 See 1996 Book of Discipline, 22.}\]
and marginalization. The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, . . .

Clearly the General Conference was trying to give substance to Bishop William B. Grove’s assertion that only it, as the conference that speaks officially for the denomination, can apologize for the malignancy of lingering racism “in the bone marrow of the church.” Two months later, the church’s five jurisdictions further substantiated United Methodism’s commitment to overcoming racism by electing seven Black bishops out of a total of 13 new members of the episcopacy: Warner H. Brown, Jr., Violet L. Fisher, James R. King, Jr., Linda Lee, Rhymes H. Moncure, Jr., Gregory V. Palmer, and Beverly J. Shamana.

III

In addition to contention and contrition, celebration played an important role in the General Conference of 2000. Although the timing worked better for the United Brethren tradition than for the Evangelical one, the 992 delegates from the United States, Africa, Europe, and the Philippines celebrated the Evangelical United Brethren heritage within United Methodism. Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm founded the United Brethren in Christ in 1800 and were elected its first bishops. Jacob Albright formed three classes in 1800, but the first conference of his followers was not held until 1803, Albright did not become a bishop until 1807, and the name Evangelical Association was not adopted until 1816. Evangelicals and United Brethren merged in 1946 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church, which united with the Methodist Church in 1968 to create the United Methodist Church.

Text and pictures were used to highlight memories such as the evangelistic meeting in the mid 1760s in a barn on the outskirts of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where Otterbein, a German Reformed pastor, and Boehm, a Mennonite minister, discovered they were brothers in Christ; the formation of the United Brethren in Christ in September 1800 on a farm near Frederick, Maryland; and Albright’s organizing of three Methodist-like classes in eastern Pennsylvania in 1800. Both Albright’s followers and the United Brethren focused their ministries during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on German-speakers, while Methodists carried on their work in English, thus anticipating the “global” nature of United Methodism in the twenty-first century.

The bishops’ message to the conference was delivered by Emerita P. Nacpil from the Philippines, the first United Methodist bishop living outside the United States to deliver the Episcopal Address. He said, “Your bishops believe that our polity should remain open for more inclusive fellowship—sexually, racially, cul-

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45 Newscope, July 21, 2000
46 See 1996 Book of Discipline, 1.
turally, and globally.” To which he added that “United Methodism is too closely identified with the mainstream of American culture.” Delegates—152 of the 992 were from outside the United States—were able to listen to Bishop Nacpil’s address in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Swahili.

Bishop William B. Oden said the major issue before United Methodism was the global nature of the church. “We have basically been a U.S. church with global outposts and are having to recreate our structure” to make the global nature visible. A proposal to give a global structure to United Methodism was rebuffed, however, by a vote of 784 to 144. All that was retained of the recommendations, which cost the church $660,000, was agreement to move ahead in these “transformational directions”: center on Christian formation, call forth covenant leadership, empower the connection for ministry, strengthen global and ecumenical dialogue and relationships, and encourage dialogue around church doctrine and theological understanding.

The caution with which the delegates treated the proposal for a radical restructuring of the United Methodist Church characterized the conference in general.

IV

Two observers of the General Conference of 2000, Jean Caffey Lyles and Thomas C. Oden, commented from opposite perspectives on the conference’s cautious aura. Lyles, a Christian Century editor at large, reported that, according to some observers, “the church’s heavily southern conservative wing, had already won the battle [over homosexuality] a year ago, having organized to get its people elected as delegates at annual conferences. The moderate-to-liberal camp—strongest in the West, Midwest and Northeast—may have been more complacent about electioneering and lobbying.”

Continuing her underscoring of caution, Lyles wrote: “For supporters of full acceptance of gays and lesbians, the handwriting is on the wall: The church is losing members in liberal territory and gaining them in conservative areas, and the resulting reapportionment of delegates will probably mean a stronger conservative presence at the 2004 session. Moreover, the church is growing overseas, where church members’ disapproval of homosexuality is expressed in even stronger terms, especially in parts of Africa, where delegates are apt to speak of homosexuality as ‘an abomination’.”

The new formula for determining how many General Conference delegates an annual conference may elect, referred to by Lyles, was approved by a vote of

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52 UMNS Press Release, May 12, 2000, GC-077.
57 Lyles, 590–591.
By favoring conferences with larger congregations and fewer clergy, the measure increased the number of delegates from the Southeastern and South Central jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{59}

"The ascendance of conservative evangelicals," Lyles noted, "was also seen in a well-oiled campaign that resulted in the election of at least three members to the Judicial Council from a slate circulated by members of the Good News and Confessing Movement caucuses."\textsuperscript{60} Of the five jurisdictions, only the Northeastern lacked a member of the Judicial Council when the General Conference’s members completed their balloting.\textsuperscript{61}

Lyles’ tone reveals her discomfort with the conservatism of the General Conference of 2000. Thomas C. Oden, on the other hand, rejoiced in what Lyles deplored. Oden, a Drew professor of theology and ethics, interpreted the conference as a time when Methodist evangelicals pulled a once “incurably liberal” denomination back toward the orthodoxy center.\textsuperscript{62}

Of the 8.5 million United Methodists in the United States, at least 2.5 million were evangelicals, Oden claimed. “If evangelicals within the UMC were a separate denomination,” he wrote, “it would be about as large as the United Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Church.”\textsuperscript{63}

He defined evangelicals as “those who view Scripture as the written Word of God and stress the believer’s experience of a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior, the only Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as enabler of mission.” They were “cast in a pariah position” during the second half of the twentieth century, according to Oden—“unable for the most part to gain positions on seminary faculties, influence church spending, or elect bishops. By the late 1960s, these institutions had become almost uniformly and dogmatically liberal. In the 1970s and 1980s, they were increasingly influenced by feminist, liberation, and process theologies. By the 1990s, evangelicals had only a token presence among UMC seminary faculties, boards, and district superintendents.”\textsuperscript{64}

“But,” Oden rejoiced, “the curve of evangelical political and strategic intelligence is sharply up, as attested in Cleveland. Legislating within the United Methodist Church is a vast democratic process, with multiple views at the table often largely reflecting the mood of the country. Evangelicals can take heart from what happened in Cleveland.”\textsuperscript{65}

Among the conference’s conservative actions ticked off by Oden were:

\begin{itemize}
  \item UMNS Press Release, May 10, 2000, GC-057, 3.
  \item \textit{Newscope}, May 19, 2000, 4.
  \item Lyles, 591.
  \item UMNS Press Release, May 9, 2000, GC-048, 2.
  \item Oden, 59.
  \item Oden, 59.
  \item For example: “Around one-third of Americans support civil marriage for gay men and lesbians; another third are strongly opposed; the final third are sympathetic to the difficulties gay couples face but do not approve of gay marriage as such” (Andrew Sullivan, “Why ‘civil union’ isn’t marriage: State of the Union,” \textit{The New Republic}, May 8, 2000, 18).
  \item Sullivan, 60.
\end{itemize}
*Obliged clergy candidates\textsuperscript{67} and curriculum planners\textsuperscript{68} to follow Wesleyan evangelical doctrinal standards.

*Affirmed that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world and the Lord of All,"\textsuperscript{69} against efforts to legitimize the doctrine of universal salvation as if it were a standard Methodist teaching.

*Resisted persistent challenges to grant legitimacy to homosexual behavior.

*Opposed partial-birth abortion by a vote of 622 to 275, "in contrast to previously adamant pro-choice stance."

Agreeing with Lyles that those actions reveal the "ascendance of conservative evangelicals,"\textsuperscript{71} Oden described their climb to power: "The Good News movement was founded 33 years ago to bring a more distinctly evangelical emphasis to the denomination. More recently, the Confessing Movement (a broader coalition of evangelicals, orthodox, Wesleyan traditionalists, moderates, prolife, and mission-oriented faithful) was inaugurated in 1994 when a group of 90 church leaders met in Atlanta and drafted an invitation to call church leadership back to classic Christian teaching."

Oden went on to report that "several renewing movements united as Decision 2000 during the Cleveland conference. That coalition included the Mission Society for United Methodists, Aldersgate Renewal Fellowship, Lifewatch, the Renew Network: An Ecumenical Coalition for Women, Transforming Congregations (encouraging evangelical ministries to homosexuals), and United Methodist Action, the Methodist branch of the Institute for Religion and Democracy."

Looking at the same developments, Lyles predicted that "if moderate and liberal voices fail to work effectively for their delegates in 2004, the result could be an ultraconservative takeover" of United Methodism. "In any case," she continued, "the window of opportunity for compromise [on homosexuality] has probably closed. Neither progay nor antigay forces intend to quit the battle or leave the church. Years of stalemate loom. But the fight appears to have reached the stage at which the next move could be a risky raising of the stakes by one side or the other. No wonder delegates were saying, 'Things will never be the same again'."

Similar words, no doubt, were spoken when women received the right to be ordained in Methodism in 1956; when the doors of the 1888 General Conference

\textsuperscript{67}\textit{Newscoop}, May 19, 2000, 7.
\textsuperscript{68}This was adopted with a positive vote by 89.7 percent of the delegates (UMNS Press\textsuperscript{3} Release, May 6, 2000, GC-030).
\textsuperscript{69}\textit{Newscoop}, May 19, 2000, 5.
\textsuperscript{70}Ibid. The UMC position on abortion (Social Principles, paragraph 65J, 1996\textit{ Book of Discipline}, 90–91) is not adamantly pro-choice. Rather, it is carefully nuanced, as is the 2000 statement on partial-birth abortion, which calls "for an end to the use of dilation and extraction abortion except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life" (\textit{Newscoop}, May 19, 2000, 3).
\textsuperscript{71}Lyles, 591.
\textsuperscript{72}Oden, 61.
\textsuperscript{73}Oden, 61.
\textsuperscript{74}Lyles, 591.
were barred to women; when Anna Howard Shaw’s ordination was invalidated by the Methodist Protestant Church in the 1880s; when laymen entered the General Conference as voting members after the Civil War; when the Methodist Episcopal Church split over the issue of slavery in 1844.

Lyles reported that although United Methodists uttered the word “schism” in 2000, few believed that homosexuality would split the denomination as the abolition of slavery did. “United Methodists,” she wrote, “are held together by what one bishop calls ‘Wesleyan DNA,’ by their attachment to the Board of Pension and Health Benefits, and by a clause in the Discipline that bars departing local churches from taking their property with them—delegates rejected (615 to 312) an effort to change that policy.

Even though the General Conference of 2000 tilted toward the right, some of its votes leaned leftward. It adopted a resolution calling for nations where United Methodism has a presence to outlaw “ownership by the general public of handguns, assault weapons, automatic weapon conversion kits, and weapons that cannot be detected by traditionally used metal-detection devices.” A clergy delegate from Ohio opposed the inclusion of handguns, arguing: “If someone breaks into my home in the middle of the night to do bodily harm to myself or my wife, I can’t pull out the Book of Resolutions and say, ‘Wait a minute, I’m a United Methodist. I’ve got a position on this.’” A student from Illinois countered, insisting: “If we’re really the disciples of the Prince of Peace, shouldn’t we speak against guns? Guns are destroying our society. They’re destroying my generation. They’re destroying future generations.” At the close of one of the conference’s most spirited debates, the anti-gun resolution was adopted by a vote of 724 to 205.

By a three-fourths majority vote, the conference called on the United Nations to lift the 10-year-old economic sanctions against Iraq. The “burden of these economic sanctions,” the resolution stated, “falls squarely on the shoulders of the poor, the elderly, and the children of Iraq. According to UNICEF estimates, it pointed out, the sanctions “are directly responsible for the deaths of five to six thousand children every month.”

These sentences were added to the paragraph 65L, Death with Dignity, in the Social Principles: “The use of medical technologies to prolong terminal illnesses requires responsible judgment about when life-sustaining treatments truly support the goals of life, and when they have reached their limits. There is no moral or religious obligation to use these when they impose undue burdens or only extend the process of dying.”

As it was yesterday, so it is today
Will it be so tomorrow?

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75UMNS Press Release, May 12, 2000, GC-072, 1. The conference clarified the longtime Methodist position, declaring that all properties at all levels of the UMC—“tangible and intangible”—are held in trust for the UMC (Newscope, May 19, 2000, 5).
76UMNS Press Release, May 9, 2000, GC-046, 1 Also see DCA, May 13, 2000, 13.
78Newscope, May 19, 2000, 6; see 1996 Book of Discipline, 91.
We have noted similarities among the cautious responses to the contentious issues of homosexuality, clergy rights for women, lay rights for women, and the abolition of slavery. In each case, there were biblical warrants for resisting what the liberals of the day demanded. Those who took the conservative side tended to focus on particular verses of the Bible. Their opponents based their cases on what John Wesley termed “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture.” That phrase appears in Wesley’s sermon on “Free Grace,” where he deals with verses used by Calvinists to prove the doctrine of predestination. Whatever those verses do mean, Wesley argues, they cannot mean that God is not love: “No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.”

Advocates of the abolition of slavery and of lay and clergy rights for women may never have quoted Wesley’s answer to the proponents of predestination, but their arguments, in effect, were similar. Whatever the Bible verses that condone slavery do mean, they cannot mean that God respects some skin colors and not others. Likewise, whatever the verses that order women to keep silent in church do mean, they cannot mean that God denies women a voice in governing the church and a place in its ordained ministry. Opponents of slavery and proponents of women’s rights argued that particular verses must be interpreted in terms of “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture.” And “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture” reveals that God is love and that God does not respect some persons more than others.

Obviously, the debate over homosexuality is being waged on the antigay side by persons who focus their argument on particular Bible verses (for example, Lev 20:13, Rom 1:26–27) that condemn gay and lesbian sexuality; on the progay side it is carried on by persons who center their position on the affirmation that God is love and that God does not respect heterosexuals more than homosexuals.

Retired Bishop Jack M. Tuell’s comments to his home congregation in the spring of 2000 illustrate the difference between dealing with homosexuality on the basis of particular Bible verses and dealing with it in terms of the Bible’s overall message. He was once opposed, he said, to full ministry for homosexual persons in the United Methodist Church, but now he believes he was wrong. The bishop, who presided at the church trial in which Gregory Dell of Chicago was charged with having celebrated a gay union, said that the decision to find Dell guilty of violating the Discipline was ecclesiastically correct, but “as I understand the Spirit of God, it was wrong.”

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81 “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”
82a ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”
83 Newsweek, March 10, 2000, 3.
Which brings us to the questions: Does history predict that future General Conferences will observe acts of contrition for the General Conference of 2000's antigay stance, just as the General Conference of 2000 observed a time of repentance for the way its predecessors acquiesced in slavery and racism? Does history predict that a twenty-first-century General Conference will open doors to the ordained ministry now barred to gays, just as a twentieth-century General Conference (1956) opened doors to the ordained ministry that once were barred to women? The answer: Historians can identify parallels but cannot make predictions.

History helps us fit what is happening today into a framework of interpretation. But history cannot assure us that correspondences we spot between yesterday's events and today's will allow us to forecast tomorrow's. Therefore we cannot be certain that the parallels we have observed between the ways recent General Conferences have endeavored to overcome the sins of their predecessors mean that future conferences will seek to redress the General Conference of 2000's antigay attitudes and actions. There is no ultrasound technology for peering into the womb of history.