

**MFSA Presentation
at**

**General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns
Listening Event, Cincinnati, OH
June 15, 2002**

On Saturday, June 15th, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUIRC) hosted a listening post on "Homosexuality and The Unity of the Church." This event was one of several being sponsored by GCCUIRC in response to a General Conference mandate that they hold a series of dialogues. The focus on this day was to hear from caucus groups. Each group that spoke was allotted 45 minutes for a presentation and follow-up questions and answers.

The following persons spoke:

John Calhoun - Affirmation

Gil Caldwell - United Methodists of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church

Mark Horst - Confessing Movement

Marilyn Alexander and Sue Laurie – Reconciling Ministries Network

James Heidinger, Norm Coleman and Chet Harris - Good News

Kathryn Johnson, Methodist Federation for Social Action

Presentation by Kathryn Johnson, Executive Director, MFSA

Two weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend an evening session of the Florida Annual Conference. On that evening the conference was holding a **Service of Repentance and Reconciliation**. I was deeply moved by the entire event. The music was magnificent and the sharing heartfelt. The pain was palpable as we acknowledged the anguish of African Americans...those who left the Methodist Church and those who chose to stay, as they found themselves having to fight the racism of our denomination. Many in the convention center that night cried along with the woman who offered a plea for forgiveness, confessing that she had grown up in a world so defined by white privilege that it took years for her to begin to recognize the ways in which she had participated in the oppression of persons of color.

Bishop Keaton was the preacher that night. At one point in his sermon the Bishop got a hearty laugh when he referred to an Annual Conference where Methodists had done what Methodists tend to do when they encounter an uncomfortable issue. At this particular annual conference said Bishop Keaton they were dealing with the issue of slavery. Unable to figure out what to do, he said, they appointed a committee.

With no disrespect meant for the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, or the General Conference that mandated today's listening post, I must admit that coming to speak today feels something like participating in a "committee to study slavery."

I am aware that at one point in history, many people did not understand that owning another human being was wrong. I thank God we no longer find it even conceivable.

I know that many, in fact most, people once thought homosexuality wrong or somehow sinful, and that homosexual persons were encouraged to deny and reject, repress or somehow change their sexual orientation.

I thank God that many in the church, and in society, now understand how very misguided that notion is. And I pray for the day when *all* within the church will find it inconceivable to ask another to name as “sinful” the good gift of sexuality given to them by God whether that be heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality.

I am *not* a church historian, a biblical scholar or an expert in church unity. I *am* a deeply committed Christian with a passion to follow Jesus. I understand the church as those who live their lives individually and corporately in such a way as to *embody* God’s love in the world.

I speak today not only for myself as an individual, but as the Executive Director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action. The Federation, as many of you know, has a very long history of seeking to help the church faithfully *be* the church. I recently received a copy of a letter signed by Georgia Harkness and 15 other members of the Garrett Theological School faculty from the archives of one of our members. That letter, written some 50 years ago, reads in part, “The Methodist Federation for Social Action has been an unofficial agency within the church which for nearly fifty years has attempted to direct the attention of church people to the relevance of the Christian faith to current social problems. Although unofficial by its own choice, it has been regarded as a recognized and important agency of the church and serving it in important ways.” The letter goes on to say that the undersigned faculty members of Garrett are members of the Federation and commend the Federation to others.

I share this not to toot the horn of the Federation, although it was fun to come across this endorsement from Georgia Harkness, but rather to emphasize the *tradition* out of which I speak.

Members of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, now the Methodist Federation for Social Action, have long understood that to follow Jesus is to take the part of those whom others would reject...to proclaim the full humanity of those whom others declare somehow less than fully human...to celebrate and honor the fullness of creation.

In the early part of the 20th century this took the form of championing the rights of workers. Specifically in 1919 members of the Federation supported striking workers at the Pittsburgh Steel Company, then working sixty-eight hours a week. They joined the workers in demanding a shorter workweek and better working conditions.

Throughout the 1930’s depression, MFSA focused on the conditions of southern textile workers, usually female, and mostly African American according to Alice Knox in her book, Fellowship of Love.

In the 1939 merger that created the Methodist Church, the Federation opposed the provisions for racial segregation in the merger and worked hard to desegregate its own organization. In the years that followed, the Federation worked on behalf of the anti-lynching bill that was then before Congress and advocated for the educational and religious needs of tenant farmers. This work was strengthened in 1940 when Mary McLeod Bethune joined the Executive Committee of the Federation.

The MFSA's history of advocating on behalf of those who are marginalized has continued throughout the last century and into this. We do not have time, nor is it the purpose of this listening post, to recall the entire history.

It is important, however, to set the stance of MFSA regarding the full inclusion of persons in the church regardless of sexual orientation, in this larger context. This is not the first time that MFSA has stood firm in insisting on the full humanity of a group of people that the church once defined as second-class citizens. This is not the first time that MFSA has stood in opposition to those who would use Scripture to exclude others.

Since 1972, MFSA has stood firm in its support of the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church. This stand has only been strengthened over these thirty years through Bible study, personal sharing and experiencing the wide variety of gifts and graces that both lay and ordained gay and lesbian people bring to the church. The growing body of evidence from so many other disciplines (including medicine, psychology and science) that points to the reality that sexual orientation is a given in one's life and can be expressed in either healthy or unhealthy ways, regardless of what that orientation is. This new knowledge has only strengthened our resolve to continue to help the church "be the church" as an inclusive, embodiment of God's love in the world.

In the letter inviting MFSA's participation in today's event, we were asked to reflect on how "the issue of homosexuality" is "affecting the unity of The United Methodist Church, positively or negatively."

I must admit that I find the question itself very troubling. Homosexuality is not "an issue" that can be discussed apart from the human beings who understand their sexuality in this way. It would seem more than odd to me to be invited to discuss the "issue" of the "femaleness" of women. "Femaleness" is not an issue. It is part of one's identity. While I know that there are others in this room that disagree, I will speak the truth that I know which is that sexual orientation is also a part of one's very identity.

In response to the question posed by the Commission, I would have to say that the very fact that we discuss "homosexuality" as an issue has a tremendously negative impact on the unity of the church. We have singled out one portion of the population, the portion of the population that experiences their sexuality as anything other than opposite gender attraction, and said that somehow their very being is "not compatible with Christian teaching." How dare we?

From my perspective the way in which the church has dealt with sexual minorities has had a huge impact on church unity. For what we have done as a church is to wound and reject, over

and over again, members of our church who are gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual and in that wounding we have also hurt the families, friends and loved ones of those persons. In these actions the *unity* of the church has been torn asunder. I believe those of us concerned about church unity are called to recognize the pain being caused, to address the wounds we have created and to ask God's forgiveness.

Perhaps the most effective way of illustrating what I am trying to say is simply to share stories of those who have been wounded. It occurred to me at one point in my preparation for today that I might ask gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual members of the MFSA network to share stories with me that I might in turn share with you.

I have decided instead to share some of my own story. For over and over again in my *own* experience, the official stance that the church has taken since 1972 that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" has wounded me and those whom I love. Again and again the official stance of the church has torn at the fabric of church unity.

My best friend in college was a man by the name of Andrew. He was extremely bright, rather hyperactive and very much engaged in all that life had to offer. Andrew often took a sleeping bag and slept in a field next to our dorm simply because he so loved the beauty of the stars in the sky.

Andrew and I were close friends for four years before he got up the courage to tell me that he was gay. It wouldn't take me four years today to figure it out on my own, but back in the early 1970's I wasn't as wise about such things. Andrew was a Christian. He was my closest friend. He was bright, funny, articulate and most of all kind. But had I wanted to invite him to my United Methodist Church I would have been asking him to subject himself to those who would reject the gift of sexuality that he had spent years finally acknowledging and learning to accept. To invite my best friend to church was to risk subjecting him to that pain and rejection. The unity of our Church was already torn asunder.

Those of you who have attended seminary know the experience of having soul mates on that journey. One of my soul mates in seminary was a divorced mother of two. Struggling to meet the needs of her two children, which she did magnificently by the way, and attend school full-time, she had a depth that made my friendship with her one of the richest and most precious of my three years in divinity school. Often we would talk on the phone at night after her children were in bed. Discussing pastoral counseling challenges; our latest efforts to understand, interpret and apply Scripture in ways that were meaningful; grappling with issues raised in classes in Christian ethics, the two of us prepared for ministry.

Two years later she would fall deeply in love with a woman – as it happened – a minister in another denomination. I rejoiced with her in the beauty of her newfound love and continue to do so to this day. This life-giving, loving, supportive, monogamous relationship has lasted twenty years. I had occasion to see this friend recently. I delighted as she told me of her ministry, her church, her home, and her children. When she spoke of her partner, however, she got a tired look in her eyes. "I'm counting the years until retirement" she said. "It is so very exhausting to constantly hide this part of who I am." Twenty-two years of faithfully serving as a local church

pastor. Twenty years of the rigors of ministry without being able to publicly celebrate the primary relationship in her life.

The fabric of the church is already torn asunder. For the church to be united we must address this sin.

A colleague with whom I now work has two children. His daughter, while a fine person, has grown up to want little to do with the church. His son, on the other hand, has been involved in the church throughout his life – Sunday School, Youth Group, District Events, and Conference activities. Feeling the call to Christian ministry this son attended seminary, graduating last June. In the meanwhile, this young man discovered that he is gay.

As my colleague shares this story I ache for him, for his son and for our church. His daughter with no interest in the church is welcome unconditionally. His son who longs to *serve* the church is welcome only on the condition that he reject his God-given sexuality as somehow “non-Christian.” The unity of the church has been torn asunder. It is time to act to bridge the chasm we have created.

The second question upon which we were asked to comment was what strategies might help to *strengthen* the unity of the Church. I believe that the place where we must start is to honestly admit that we are of different minds.

There is not a lot about General Conference 2000 that I find funny. I do have to chuckle, however, each time I think about the vote that was taken on whether the church is of one mind on homosexuality. The vote as you will recall was roughly three to one rejecting the statement that we are not of one mind. Essentially then the delegates voted 3 to 1 that we *are* of one mind. What’s wrong with this picture?

I’ve pondered long on why it is that delegates were unwilling to admit the simple fact that those within the church are obviously not of one mind regarding questions of sexual orientation. I believe that many fear affirming or admitting our differences precisely because they *fear* for the *unity* of the church.

If we admit that good people, caring people, people who study Scripture and seek to follow Christ...if we admit that such people can honestly differ in their beliefs around the wholesomeness and acceptability of homosexuality, then perhaps we are admitting that the church must split if we are to live out our faith with integrity. I do not believe that honestly admitting our differences – voting affirmatively that clearly we are not of one mind on issues of homosexuality – will necessarily split the church. I see no reason why it must. And indeed I pray that it does not.

I do know that if we refuse to speak the truth – to admit that others who are doing their utmost to be faithful to the Gospel may differ from us on this issue – then the church is doomed, for we will be living a lie.

I remember my excitement during seminary as I studied Methodist history and the theology of our founder. This was a denomination of which I wanted to be a part. Wesley's articulation of the role of God's grace in our lives and his understanding of the relationship of faith and good works resonated deeply. So too did his appeal to persons to join hands and hearts, *allowing for differences*, but being united in our love of God and God's world.

Just recently, in studying the Scripture for the lectionary two weeks ago, I reread one of Wesley's sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. I was struck by his comments in that sermon on orthodoxy. To depend on orthodoxy for one's salvation said Wesley is too build one's house upon the sand.

His words move me:

"What is the foundation of my hope? Whereon do I build my expectation of entering into the kingdom of heaven? Is it not built on the sand? (Do I build my expectation of entering into the kingdom of heaven) Upon my orthodoxy, or right opinions, which, by a gross abuse of words, I have called faith? (Do I build my expectation) Upon my having a set of notions, (supposing them) more rational or scriptural than others have?" Alas! what madness is this! Surely this is building on the sand, or, rather, on the froth of the sea!

Say, "I am convinced of this: Am I not again building my hope on what is equally unable to support it? Perhaps (I am building my hope) on my belonging to "so excellent a church; reformed after the true Scripture model; blessed with the purest doctrine, the most primitive liturgy, the most apostolical form of government!" These are, doubtless, so many reasons for praising God, as they may be so many helps to holiness; but they are not holiness itself: And if they are separate from it, they will profit me nothing; nay, they will leave me the more without excuse, and exposed to the greater damnation. Therefore, if I build my hope upon this foundation, I am still building upon the sand."

The church will not be saved because one or the other side in this dialogue has "right thinking." The church will be saved and remain unified when we are willing to live together and continue to share God's truth as we understand it with one another.

The final question on which we were asked to reflect was "how we have been involved in dialogue on this issue, that is, discussions or study groups outside of church decision-making or legislative arenas where all participants were invited to talk openly about their differently held positions."

I have been involved in any number of discussions, dialogues and debates that were billed as opportunities for people to talk openly.

Only one stands out, however, as a situation where that actually happened, that is where it seemed that everyone truly was open.

That occasion was in a small church that I served in Southwest Boston. We didn't have official church study guides at that time, or if we did I wasn't aware of them. Instead we devised our

own format and spent six Monday nights together exploring issues related to sexual orientation, our faith and the church. We studied scripture together, shared out of our own experience, looked at church tradition and the official (and contradictory I might add) stance of the United Methodist Church.. As I said, this was a small church – with an average attendance of perhaps 40 people – not unlike many United Methodist Churches across the country.

I was stunned therefore on the first night when our largest Sunday School room filled with people. If I recall correctly there were perhaps thirty people. I can still see those people in my mind's eye anxiously sitting there on the first evening.

We began our session with prayer – asking God's guidance in our time together. I then handed out index cards. I asked people to use one side of the card to write down three fears they had about the series of discussions we were about to enter into. I asked them to use the other side of the card to list three hopes. I then collected the cards, mixed them up and handed them back out. We then went around the room, one by one reading out the fears of the members of the group. We then went around again reading out the hopes. I knew at that moment that whatever happened from them on would be alright. For in those quiet moments of deep sharing we had journeyed to a place where we were standing on holy ground. Everyone in the room knew it and it made all the difference in the sessions ahead. People talked openly and honestly. We shared our questions our concerns our deeply held convictions and our places of uncertainty.

What made the difference? As I reflect on it today I can't help but believe that part of what was going on in those times of sharing was that in our very first action together we stood before God and admitted our humanity – we shared our fears and our hopes. We did not try to appear certain or right or strong. We stood there confessing those things deep in our hearts – the posture that is most propitious I have found for experiencing God's grace.

The other thing that I think may have made a difference was that by that time I had been pastor of that church for two years. I knew those people and I loved those people – deeply. And they knew it.

It would be silly to pretend that I did not enter the process with the hope that some of the people there would change their minds and free themselves of what I believed to be unfounded prejudices. I was honest and upfront from the beginning.

What people knew, however, was that no matter where they stood in their beliefs and in their searching, that they would not be wounded by those around them. The love in that room embraced us all and fear vanished.

It was not our beliefs or the fact that people may or may not have changed their thinking over the course of those six weeks that made that time significant. No, what became clear was that in many ways for the first time we were authentically struggling with what it meant to be a church. What does it really mean to embody God's love? What does it mean to share that love with one another? What does it mean to open our doors and share that love with those beyond the walls of the church?

I count that experience as perhaps the most significant of my years of ministry in that place. It mattered not whether we thought the same. What mattered was that we loved one another. And together we wanted to embody that love for others.

At a recent council of bishop's meeting, one of our bishops defended the church's current stand with regard to sexual orientation. "I would hope that our current position would be viewed as a loving one," he said. "We don't have signs outside our churches that say, 'No homosexuals allowed.'"

I would suggest that in fact that is exactly what we have.

In a sermon preached at my own Annual Conference last week, the preacher illustrated this when he talked about the fact that his church had recently gone through the process of becoming a Reconciling Congregation. He described the experience of being one of having a fresh breeze blow through the life of the church. He said that during the course of their conversations together as a congregation the question had come up as to whether they really needed to explicitly say that they were welcoming of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons. Couldn't they just say that they welcomed everyone?

In responding to this question the preacher used an analogy that I found both vivid and apt. He said that those who had lived and worked on farms know that when you put an electric fence around an area to keep animals in, or out, you really only have to run current through that fence until the animals experience that first painful shock. After that you can turn the current off. Once having experienced that pain the animals will not venture near the fence again.

For too many years our churches have been surrounded with an electric fence that says that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons will experience deep pain if they enter our doors. It is not enough to declare a general welcome to all people...to tell people that they are welcome in our church but that we believe that something which they experience as fundamental to their very being is "incompatible with Christian teaching." We must be explicit in our welcome. We must declare loudly and boldly that the fence is turned off. That people are welcome not in spite of who they are but because of who they are. We must consciously **stop** inflicting pain and explicitly **start** embodying love. For everyone.

When I returned home from the Florida annual conference I did some research. What annual conference had the Bishop been referring to when he spoke of a committee appointed to deal with the issue of slavery? The only reference I found to such a committee was in the 1844 conference when it became clear that the church was in grave danger of splitting over the issue.

Could this have been the conference to which the Bishop referred? If so, the parallels are even clearer than I had imagined. For just as a committee was appointed to address the issue of slavery in the church, a committee (or Commission in this case) is "studying" the issue of homosexuality.

And just as the church was on the verge of splitting over the issue of slavery in 1844 – and did in fact split – the church today threatens to come apart as well.

We have spent the better part of the second half of the 20th century seeking to heal the wounds inflicted during the church splits during the 19th century. I sincerely hope that we move back from the precipice of division, that we not rush to split the church as we avoid the hard work of understanding and reconciliation.

Can the church remain united through this current controversy? It's a fair question. Certainly we should not remain united if our goal is simply to perpetuate an institution.

But if our goal is to seek unity as the body of Christ, to embody God's love in the world, to show a broken, hurting world that there is a way other than hatred and violence, then I think we need to give it a chance.

I believe we need to begin with confession – to stand humbly before God and one another and admit we do not have all the answers. To admit we are not of one mind. To ask God's guidance.

I believe we need to be willing to face our fears – our fears that we may be wrong – our fears that we may lose control – our fears that God might show us a new way.

Most of all, I believe that all we do must grow from love.

In the same sermon that I quoted earlier John Wesley ends his comments by speaking of love. Encouraging us to be “lovers of God” and all humankind, Mr. Wesley says, “In a word: Let thy religion be the religion of the heart.”

As we seek unity for the community of faith we know as United Methodist, may we heed this word. May our religion “be a religion of the heart” as we seek to follow the one who taught us the very meaning of God's love.

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Response to another speaker, Mark Horst of the Confessing Movement

I'd like to take a minute to depart from my notes to respond to something Mark Horst (Confessing Movement) said in his presentation earlier today. To tell you the truth I was surprised as I listened to Mark's presentation to note how much the two of us have in common. I have spent most of my life attending urban churches and at several points have been very involved in the kinds of urban ministries that Mark spoke about. In particular I spent several years helping to coordinate a program at Old West Church in downtown Boston where we served meals, gave out clothing and offered a safe space for those living on the street in what we called the “Old West Drop In Center.” I agree with Mark that such ministries are urgently needed.

The church that I currently attend, Dumbarton UMC in Washington, DC is also deeply involved in ministry that addresses urban needs. As part of the Washington Interfaith Network members

of Dumbarton have a relationship with a local public school which, like many Washington, DC schools, is in urgent need of resources. Members of Dumbarton serve as tutors and mentors, often involving children from that school in the worship and fellowship life of the church.

I also agree with Mark that global issues, particularly poverty, cry out to us as persons of faith. It is critical that we respond. Having lived and worked as a missionary in the Philippines I have a sense of urgency about this that comes from having witnessed the ravages of hunger and poverty first-hand.

What I don't understand in what Mark shared, is why being fully inclusive and explicitly welcoming gay and lesbian persons into our churches in any way effects the vitality of such urban and global ministries. The members of Dumbarton, a good percentage of whom are gay, lesbian and bi-sexual, are deeply involved in such ministries.

If what Mark is suggesting is that the *time* we take to discuss inclusiveness is taking time away from these ministries, then I would suggest one solution would be to explicitly welcome sexual minorities in our churches and then get on with other ministries.

I would also add that in a world where remaining prejudices against gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons still engender hatred, discrimination and violence that time spent on working for the acceptance and affirmation of sexual minorities is not time taken *away* from ministry. On the contrary, I would suggest that it constitutes ministry.

Finally Mark spoke about knowing God through Scripture and through revelation. I'm not clear if he was saying that God is revealed solely through Scripture or that God is revealed through Scripture **and** additional revelation. Whatever the case, I would respond, again, by saying that fundamentally we agree. I too know God through Scripture and revelation.

Over lunch Mark shared with those of us at the table about his family, specifically about his son who has just graduated from high school. He spoke with warmth and deep love. I have absolutely no doubt that God's love has been revealed to Mark in his relationships with his wife and his children. I experience a similar revelation of God's love in my incredible love for my own daughter.

I have no interest in denying Mark's understanding and experience of God's revelation.

What I **would** like to share however, is another of the places that **I** have experienced God's revelation, that I have come to know the love of God. Families at Dumbarton church come in all shapes and sizes. Single parent households, two-parent households, extended family households, single persons living alone, single persons living with others, children from blended families, biological children, adopted children, foster children. Again and again I see God's love revealed in these "family" relationships. It matters not the gender of the persons involved or their sexual orientation. What matters is the commitment, love and support offered by adults one to the other. What matters is the patience, love and guidance given by the adults to the children.

One of these families consists of Carlos and Floyd and their two adopted sons. I vividly recall being in their home one evening playing the card game "Set." Anyone who has played that game knows that the initial concept is difficult to grasp. I was deeply moved as I sat and watched Floyd, a reading teacher by profession, patiently work with his oldest son to help him understand the game. This son, who had come to Floyd and Carlos with not insignificant learning disabilities, was having trouble grasping the basics of the game. Again and again Floyd showed him how to play, affirming his efforts and encouraging him to try again. God's love is present in the loving commitment Floyd and Carlos have made to each other. God's love is present in the patient, kind love that Floyd and Carlos share with their two sons. God is present in that home. And I am confident that God celebrates the love that the members of that family have for one another.

I would suggest a different way of looking at the Scripture Mark quoted concerning God having made man and woman for one another. What seems most important in this Scripture to me is not the gender of the persons involved, but the relationship itself. Granted that in the human community the majority of people who experience that deep down union to one another are of opposite genders. I see nothing in Scripture, however, that negates the possibility that that union can exist between persons of the same gender. What matters I believe is the quality of the relationship itself – the commitment, the love and the care. When we find such love between two people, no matter their gender, we glimpse the wonder of God's love.
