

## Amy Coles

These are interesting times. Growing up as a United Methodist, I would never have imagined the possible fracturing or dissolution of the denomination which introduced me to “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” In fact it wasn’t until my first appointment after graduating from seminary at Duke that the pages of history were actualized as I served a former Methodist Episcopal South congregation where the cemetery for the slaves and their families was located approximately 100 yards up the road from the “official” church cemetery. While I knew that we were sadly still light-years away from Beloved Community, God’s desire for the Church, I naively believed that we had learned the lessons of our sins and were moving on toward perfection as The United Methodist Church.

In subsequent years, while serving as an associate pastor at a new church start and then at what I would describe as a medium-sized rural church, the cracks in our denominational unity became quite apparent. Still, I saw that as the work of the church, healing the harm, reflecting the Light, and sharing with the world the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. Guided by the Wesleyan understanding of holiness of heart and life, I’ve understood my call as preaching, teaching, and modeling the interrelationship of discipleship and mission. In each local church appointment, I’ve helped to establish systems of discipleship for those new to the faith and new to the church as well as create opportunities for children, youth and adults to deepen their knowledge and understanding of God. That, in turn, has been the springboard for launching the church into missional ministry outside its walls, within the community, across the state, and beyond.

Through serving as a district superintendent, I’ve had additional opportunities to experience the vitality that comes as churches attend to this dual focus of mission and discipleship and to witness to the inevitable decline when self-preservation becomes the sole reason for existence. In my role as the assistant to Bishop Goodpaster and now Bishop Leeland, I have led the conference staff in supporting and resourcing local churches to grow in both areas so that they might make a kingdom difference in their community and the world.

These are interesting times. Becoming the guardian for my nephew in 2010 at the untimely death of his mother and then in 2015, accepting the role as care-giver for my niece at a time when her mother could not do so, has given me another lens through which to see the church and the world. Many millennials and gen x’ers are acutely aware of the consequences of the “isms” still rampant in our culture and long for a community committed to respect and care for all persons and all creation. We in the United Methodist Church are perfectly positioned to help rebuild their trust in a community of faith as long as we’ll embrace their vision, not ours.

It is with repentance for the deep divisions which plague our denomination while at the same time thanksgiving for who we are and hope for the even more that we can become, that I

have sensed a call from God to at least offer myself for possible service as an episcopal leader once again. For the past five years, I've had the opportunity work closely with two different Bishops, each with distinct gifts and strengths. I've seen up-close, some of the challenges of the office as well as the opportunities for transformation leadership that is possible. Additionally, during the last three years, I've served as a member of the denominational Connectional Table, which has deepened my understanding and appreciation for our global denomination as well as given me insight into the work of our General Agencies and the World Service Fund.

I believe that God has gifted me with some of the necessary skills for this work, and even more importantly, others have affirmed those gifts in me. I am also confident in the discerning work of the delegation, as an episcopal nomination is that outward call by the annual conference of the leader needed for this particular time in the life of the jurisdiction. I am clear that my call is to say that I'm willing and then release it, allowing others to decide.

So, to what am I offering myself? First and foremost, a new episcopal leader will need to be comfortable with the uncertainties of how people and churches will respond to the decisions of General Conference 2020. He/she will need to be able to lead through what, at times, is chaotic, with a confidence that in the end, God and God's Church will prevail.

I believe that it will be important for a bishop to be able hold what I see as unique tension, self-confidence in his/her desire for a more inclusive church and empathy for those who hold different perspectives. To effectively lead, the bishop must establish trust with his/her followers through what The Commission on a Way Forward described as "convicted humility," honesty about the convictions which divide us along with the humility of knowing that I might very well be wrong.

For the past decade, we, as a denomination have been resistant to any wholistic evaluation and change in our structure and the means by which it is funded. We no longer have the luxury of maintaining the status quo, and thus our denominational leaders will need to wisely embrace the knowledge, hopes, and dreams of those who will be the church of the future.

I still hold hope that we can find that "third way" which will maintain the unity of our denomination while halting the wounding of our sisters and brothers in Christ. I don't believe that God will be pleased with anything less. Thus, even if I'm not gifted with the opportunity to serve as an episcopal leader, I am committed faithfully to persevere in the journey toward Beloved Community, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."