



Higher Ground

Sharon Brown Christopher

About a dozen years ago, long before I was assigned to the Illinois Area, I woke up abruptly early one spring morning enveloped in a haunting sense of dread. I laid there in the dark with my eyes closed, trying to name this new and unusual feeling for me. And now I am going to confess. I realized my dread was caused by a desire to absent myself from the upcoming annual conference session. I talked with my husband Charles about it at breakfast. For every reason Charles gave for my needing to go to the conference, I had at least two excuses for not going. Finally, when all else had failed, he said in exasperation, "But, Sharon, you have to go to the conference. You are the bishop!"

My dread went unresolved for several days. Early one morning later in the week, I put on my walking clothes and headed out to the walking trail near our house. It was not long before the endorphins kicked in, and I noticed a song running through my mind. Spontaneous songs filling my head at unexpected times are not unusual for me. Sometimes they contain messages from God.

Well, on this particular spring day on the walking trail the words that were given went like this: "Lord, lift me up...and let me stand...*hum, hum*...on heaven's tableland. A higher plane than I have found, Lord, plant my feet on higher ground." It was a hymn out of my youth. Try as I might, I could not quite remember it all. I *hum, hum, hummed* all the way home. The words would not come.

When I got back home, I marched immediately to the bathroom where Charles was getting ready for his shower and said, "What are the words? What are the words? God is sending me a message, and I cannot remember the words." While I am a morning person, Charles describes himself as a noon person. Without saying a thing, he just stared at me through my reflection in the bathroom mirror. That did not stop

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me. I said, "The hymn is in the old Cokesbury hymnal. Do we have one?" "Don't think so," he mumbled. Charles is a man of few words by nature. His words become even fewer early in the morning. I searched our bookshelves to no avail, and then headed off to my office.

When I returned that evening, there was an old *Cokesbury Worship Hymnal* lying on the kitchen table. Charles had borrowed it from a nearby United Methodist church. It was opened to page 127. "Lord, lift me up...and let me stand...**BY FAITH**...on heaven's tableland. A higher plane than I have found, Lord plant my feet on higher ground."

God was speaking to me...by faith...on higher ground. "Oh, faith...higher ground. God, I get it."

Faith plants us in trust on a common ground that honors yet transcends our differences and binds us in love.

Our Choice

The religious community and the Christian movement within that community have a choice: In this volatile season of the theo-diversity and Reformation/Counter-Reformation we can weep and wail over the apparent disconnect between us, or we can receive the moment as an invitation to a new connection of our diverse human family.

The biblical vision of life in God is a connecting vision, a transcendent vision: a Promised Land overflowing with milk and honey, wolves and lambs lying down together, children dancing over adder pits, a city of God with citizens of heaven, all members of one another, the commonwealth of God in which the blind see, deaf hear, lame walk, oppressed are set free, and the poor hear good news, all the nations gathered at God's banquet table. Our Wesleyan DNA holds the hope of community within community within community within community and equips us in a singular way for this very moment.

For the church to be God's vision, showing the world a connected way of life, it needs transcendent leadership. Transcendent leadership walks and talks with God made known in Jesus Christ. It lives in the valleys, listening deeply to the pulse of the world and the hearts of the human family and acting compassionately toward the brokenness

of the world. With regularity and intention, transcendent leadership climbs a mountain. On that mountain, transcendent leadership together reads the world and the church.

Transcendent leadership wears a special pair of reading glasses, tri-focals, with three viewing prescriptions in the lens that are ground especially for reading the church and world.

Cohesion

The first prescription is ground to read the cohesiveness of the body of Christ. Cohesion is about stickability, the ability of a body to hang together as one body. The cohesion of the United Methodist body is rooted in its identity—its vision, its mission, its Wesleyan roots, its global nature. Transcendent leadership asks, What in the world is calling for the church's attention? Where is the church body suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder that diverts its attention from its intended purpose? What are the signs in our body that we are being who God intends us to be? Where are the places of mistaken identity? How do we move the church's eyes from focus on itself, to focus on God and God's creation and within God's creation our human family?

The overseers are assigned the responsibility of reading the cohesion of the body and then leading the body by

- containing the body in its God-given identity, its purpose, its reason for being,
- holding the body's hope,
- providing the container for the body's conflict so that the body may address its differences and remain one body,
- lifting the body into God's perspective, calling the body to live in time marked by *kairos* and not just *chronos*, steering the body from its absorption with temporal affairs into the eternity of God's love.

Capacity

A second prescription in the tri-focal reading glasses of transcendent leadership is ground to read the capacity of the body of Christ called United Methodism.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines "capacity:" ability to contain, absorb, or receive and hold; the power of receiving and holding knowledge, impressions (or in the case of the church, holding faith;) ability or qualifications to do something; aptitude; the maximum output of producing ability.

At the very time that human family is crying for new life that we know in Jesus Christ, the church struggles with compassion fatigue amplified by feelings of powerlessness and resignation. "What difference can we really make? Does God really transform lives?" the church asks.

When the body stops, it atrophies. Transcendent leadership asks, "Where is the body stuck? Where is its flow frozen? Where has inertia set in? How do we analyze and assess the circumstances and relationships of the world toward which we move? How do we connect the church's movement with the world?"

Transcendent leadership focuses its eyes on the capacity of the body, measures its ability to fulfill its purpose (forming people in faith to transform the world or however we choose to name our mission). It asks, "Where are the faith formation processes healthy and in need of re-enforcement? Where are they sick and in need of healing? Where is the body suffering from decreasing strength and stamina? Where is the church's conviction and courage waning?"

Momentum

A third prescription set in the reading glasses of transcendent leadership is the lens of momentum. The body of Christ in the world is moving. It is moving from context to context around the world and throughout history as the times change. It lives in a journey motif, moving from Egypt to the Promised Land, moving from sin to redemption, moving from exile to home, and moving from death to resurrection, inviting others to join it on its journey. When the body stops, it atrophies. Transcendent leadership asks, "Where is the body stuck? Where is its flow frozen? Where has inertia set in?"

How do we analyze and assess the circumstances and relationships of the world toward which we move? How do we connect the church's movement with the world?

The Transcendent Leadership Rhythm

So, transcendent leadership, charged with overseeing, entrusted with God's big picture, lives out a rhythm of moving from valley to mountain top to valley to mountain top. It lives a rhythm of reading and leading, reading and leading so that the church's cohesion, capacity, and momentum are always growing and so that God's realm is made visible and real through the life of the church. Transcendent leadership forms the church as community of hope for the world.

I am not suggesting that the Council of Bishops does all the system work to maximize the cohesion, capacity, and momentum of The United Methodist Church. That is the work of congregations, conferences, and general boards and agencies. I am suggesting that the Council of Bishops read and lead in such a way as to encourage and optimize the cohesion, capacity, and momentum of our church.

Questions

This leaves me with five questions, the start of the questions I believe we, The Council of Bishops, need to answer to intensify our transcendent leadership of the church, increasing the cohesion, capacity, and momentum of The United Methodist Church for the sake of the people of our world, especially the children and the poor.

1) What is required of each of us in order to make room in our resident responsibilities, with their relentless expectations and demands, for focus together as one council on leading the whole church?

2) How might the Council of Bishops increase the cohesion, capacity, and momentum of The United Methodist Church through our episcopal initiatives,

our leadership of the denominational boards and agencies, and through a common context and strategy for our Area leadership?

3) What are the implications of being transcendent leadership for the whole of our council life, including the structure and content of our meetings and our life together?

4) How might we model theological discourse as defined in our disciplinary theological task ¶104 so that we, the Council, rather than falling into the Reformation/Counter-Reformation theological divide of two camps, one belonging to Cephas, the other to Paul, engage in a 146-sided theological discourse that transcends division and offers a sign of unity to our fractured church and world?

5) How might we engage the global nature of the church issue so that it rises above the focus on our organizational structure and positions of power and becomes rooted in a new connection for the urgent common mission that all people named Methodist share in our world?

“Lord, lift us up and let us stand by faith on heaven’s tableland. A higher plane than we have found, Lord, plant our feet on higher ground.” I pray that the feet of the United Methodist Church will be planted on higher ground through the transcendent leadership of the Council of Bishops so that the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the oppressed are set free, and the poor receive good news.

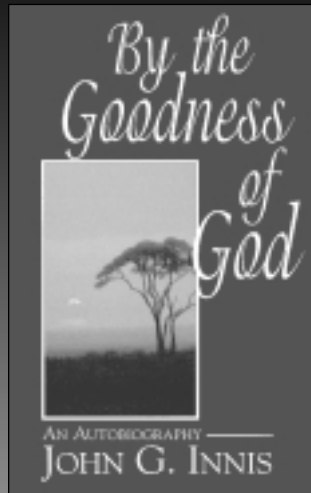
And the annual conference session that I dreaded? I am glad to report that because of the gift of higher ground, it was one of the best conferences I have ever attended. □

This article is excerpted and adapted from a longer address by Bishop Christopher to the Council of Bishops.



Sharon Brown Christopher is Resident Bishop of the Illinois Area of The United Methodist Church.

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