



UNITED METHODISTS
OF UPPER NEW YORK



TOGETHERNESS

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26



June 1, 2023, Opening Worship, 14th Upper New York Annual Conference Session, Syracuse NY

As some of you may have already heard, my children love sports. For the past twenty years, it has been our joy for Jazelis and me to journey alongside them as they engaged in different sports and teams. Baseball, Basketball, Street Hockey, Volleyball, Ping Pong, Horseback Riding, Disc Golf, and Soccer, just to name a few.

Something that I love about children engaging in team sports early on is that it helps them develop physically and socially, AND it also helps build their character and provides them with many important life lessons they can carry throughout their life. And, before I go any further, let me make a parenthesis here to say something I share every time I bring up the topic of sports in a message – friends (don't throw stones at me), youth sports are not a problem, nor an enemy of the church. Raising our children in faith and participating in extracurricular activities, such as sports, is possible. Yes, it can get complicated at times, yet with intentionality, discipline, and some flexibility – our children can grow to be active disciples and engage the world in healthy ways.

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The most popular sport in our household is soccer. All our children have played it. And our son Joel today plays it professionally in Belize. As for most team sports, in soccer, two values are prioritized, celebrated, and lifted as essential for a team to be successful - UNITY and DIVERSITY.

I still remember when one of Joel's coaches, pumping up the team before an important game, told the players: "Kids, we will do well in the game if we play it TOGETHER. If we go out to the field as ONE and leverage the skills, each of you brings to the game." He continued, "There is no space for lone rangers or superstars in this team – we are one, each with a different role, but all important and playing for the same outcome."

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The theme for this annual conference session is TOGETHER. When thinking and praying about a theme for our gathering, we wanted not only to highlight the fact that we were coming back together in person but also, given all that's happening in the world and our denomination – we felt it was essential to lift the value of our TOGETHERNESS in Christ as the church and United Methodists.

Talking about togetherness these days is not easy. In a way that perhaps many of us never anticipated, our society has become polarized over many issues dividing our communities, nation, and even the world. Today, many people would rather be right or make their point than promote and ensure the common and greater good. And social media has given an unrestricted outlet to polarized people to spread their toxic ideas and opinions with little to zero accountability. Sadly, these polarizations and divisions have reached the church and our beloved denomination. We are divided over several issues, with the one on the mind of most people these days being our disagreements about ministry with and by LGBTQ persons.

Our witness is weakened because of our disagreements and divisions. And our fellowship and community are fractured.

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The first letter of the Apostle Paul to the Christian church in Corinth helps us see that conversations about TOGETHERNESS, UNITY, and DIVERSITY are not new within the body of Christ. The church in Corinth was divided over spiritual gifts. The tensions were such that Paul spent three whole chapters addressing it, and through his writings, we can find holy wisdom that can help us strengthen ourselves as the body of Christ, as United Methodists – and as members of God's team.

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One of the most significant challenges we face when reflecting on our togetherness in the church is that, many times, we approach it with an EITHER/OR (ALL OR NOTHING) mentality.

We value unity. We value diversity but struggle to bring it together and balance them.

In today's text, the Apostle Paul offers us a different approach – a BOTH/AND approach, when he urges the church to celebrate both unity and diversity. Not just unity and not just diversity, but unity and diversity. And as many Bible scholars assert, to help us understand the importance of unity and diversity, Paul compared the church to the human body – which, as we all know, is a unified organism made up of many different parts connected and working in harmony with one another for the wellbeing of the entire body.

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Siblings in Christ, unity in the church is essential to our TOGETHERNESS and witness to the world. The church is like the human body. It is a living organism. We, each one, through Christ, are members of the body of Christ – we don't get to determine who is part and who is not part – Christ, not us, is who brings us together into this holy fellowship so that in our living together, in our pursue of harmony, we witness to the perfect love of God in Jesus Christ. Our diversity is also essential to our TOGETHERNESS and witness to the world. You see, Paul celebrated the unity of the body, and he also celebrated the diversity that exists within us. Paul said, "There are many parts, yet one body." He celebrated unity and diversity.

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Upper New York, unity is good. Diversity is good. And both are essential to our witness and ministry as followers of Jesus and United Methodists. Amen? If unity is emphasized at the expense of diversity, we have uniformity. That is not good. If diversity is emphasized at the expense of unity, we have anarchy. That is not good either. We need to celebrate unity and diversity in all its expressions. The world wants unity for the sake

of unity and diversity for the sake of diversity. God wants unity and diversity for God's glory and to bring hope to the world.

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United Methodists in Upper New York – God's vision for us is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and be God's love with our neighbors in all places. And as my son's coach said to his team, "We will do well in the game if we play it TOGETHER. If we go out to the mission field as ONE and leverage the beauty and gifts, we each bring to the game. There is no space for lone rangers or superstars in this team – we are one, each perfectly made in the image of our Creator, with different gifts, experiences, and perspectives to offer, and perhaps invited into different roles within the body. Still, we're all playing for the same outcome – to bring glory to the name of God and to share the hope of Christ with as many people as possible." Alleluia!

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In our short time together, I have been blessed to journey alongside you and witness firsthand how you live in this way of being the church. The Upper New York Conference is a strong network of congregations comprised of more than 125,000 disciples living out their faith in the Wesleyan Way. As United Methodists in Upper New York, we are united in Christ and purpose, living the gospel and sharing Christ with our neighbors in all places. We're planting new faith communities that engage new and different people. We're helping people experiencing poverty and hunger through food pantries and cloth closets. We are responding to natural disasters, locally and throughout the region, bringing hope to those in need.

We are working to eradicate the sins of racism, sexism, and exclusion from the church and society. Together, we empower a new generation of disciples and spiritual leaders and support life-giving initiatives through our global missions and more.

Friends, that's what unity in Christ looks like.

The Upper New York Conference is also blessed with rich diversity. On any given Sunday, United Methodists in Upper New York worship the Risen Christ in more than ten languages in various formats and styles. Our congregations, led by the Holy Spirit, some as small as ten active members and others as large as two thousand members, faithfully serve in urban, suburban, and rural towns and inner cities. We are also blessed with a rich theological diversity that includes conservatives, evangelicals, centrists, and progressives, all as beloved children of God. That's what diversity looks like in the body of Christ – it's not a problem but a gift we need to celebrate.

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In a world filled with polarization, divisions, lone rangers, and folks trying to be superstars. In a time when some are trying to put God's all-inclusive grace in a box, in a season that church disaffiliations threaten our fellowship as United Methodists, God is inviting us to stand as a witness of unity and diversity. God is calling us to be together and remain focused on what is most important: loving God and loving our neighbors – encouraging one another to thrive in life and ministry.

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And how do we go about this way of being? Together in unity and our diversity?

FIRST, we keep Christ at the center of our individual and communal expression of faith – and claim Christ as the perfect source of our unity. Nothing else, no one else will do it. (Our theology on human sexuality is not the glue that keeps us together. What we think about gun control is not what keeps us together. Our ideas on socioeconomics are not the critical ingredient to unity – Christ is the source of our faith and hope. Amen?)

SECOND, as Paul clarified to the church in Corinth, we need to stop questioning who belongs to the body or is more valuable – friends, if someone is in Christ – they are part of the body, period. We are all baptized into the same faith in Jesus Christ and sealed and empowered by the same Holy Spirit to live Christ's way—end of the debate.

THIRD, we honor our diversity in all its forms and expressions as a gift from God. We acknowledge that while we are on the same journey, we might be at different places – trusting that God meets everyone where they are and carries them with grace and love, even when we might disagree on some matters.

FOURTH, we pursue the good of the entire body, not just our well-being, and God’s vision to bring hope and reconciliation to all people.

LASTLY– we commit not to harm. To do good – and to grow TOGETHER in our inward and outward expressions of our love for God and one another.

Is this an easy task? No. Is this an easy way of living the gospel? No. Is this a comfortable way of being in a relationship with one another and sharing God’s love with our neighbors? Perhaps, no, BUT it is a more excellent way –the way of Christ—the way of LOVE.

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I invite us now to center our heart in prayer and converse with the Holy Spirit - first confess the times you have been thinking about our togetherness with an either/or mentality – and ask God to open you to the possibilities of embracing a both/and approach to our togetherness where both unity and diversity can live together. Think about one way you can live and promote togetherness in Upper New York that lifts unity and diversity.

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Jesus prayed for his disciples and those who would believe in the future (that’s us), “I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are. I am in them, and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.” On another occasion, encouraging his disciples told them, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples – if you love one another.”

United Methodists of Upper New York – We are better and stronger together, even if it is sometimes complicated or messy.

This season, God is inviting us to live in a reality of togetherness – where unity and diversity are valued and celebrated so that we, our communities, and the world may experience Christ’s hope and healing love through us. We are all members of God’s team, not because we’ve earned it, but by grace.

May this vision of unity in our diversity inspire, encourage, and energize us for the journey.

All for the glory of God – Amen.