

**Dr. J. Michael (Mike) Lowry, executive director  
New Church Development and Transformation  
The Southwest Texas Conference**

The church has entered into a wilderness. It is not a wilderness of our making, nor did we enter this wilderness of our own volition. This wilderness is the post-Christian world we live in. It is a wilderness of disestablishment; a wilderness of indifference; a wilderness of dwindling membership, a wilderness of ignorance (of the basics of Christianity); a theological wilderness; and, ultimately a wilderness of identity.

Perhaps more telling than all of the other wilderness markings is the theological wilderness we have entered. Basic presuppositions are disputed. Popular culture disputes the very notion of “truth” with a capital “T”. Many regard religious truth as a matter of personal preference. Most United Methodists are clear that they are not fundamentalists. They often know (with some vehemence) what they are against (i.e. graceless judgmentalism). What we struggle mightily to do is define a new theological identity in an age of religious anarchy.

The Bible reports on the Exodus, “God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer.”<sup>1</sup> God provides the desperately needed leadership. This is massively good news. Applied to the current context, it instructs us that we have not been abandoned by God. In fact, just the opposite is happening. God is leading us out of our cultural captivity. Rather than lament the loss, we can look forward with anticipation (and fear) to the unknown future faced through God’s leadership.

We need the wilderness time to recover a real sense of who we are and who or what God calls us to be; to reclaim the deep faithfulness of being led by God and not driven by our own denominational political reality (fights and all) and institutional survival. The very “round-about-ness” of our wilderness journey is a new form of shaping and testing from God. It evokes in us radical trust in God. It all challenges us to turn again to the Lord in classical spiritual disciplines (like prayer, searching the Scriptures, and humble confession) and a reinigorated combination of evangelism and the missional activities (love, justice, and mercy).

The battles we have been engaged in are symptomatic of the wilderness journey. The roundabout wilderness way of God will both transcend and cut through such common denominational fights in ways that will ultimately surprise us all. In an age of ease and comfort, it is hard for us to understand that God wants us in the wilderness! The Lord is calling and claiming us to both a faithfulness and a fruitfulness that transcends petty goals and institutional survival.

Perhaps it is best to be driven back to God in listening and prayerful discernment. At its best the way forward will be marked by four signposts. It will be genuinely orthodox, truly Wesleyan, unashamedly evangelical, and passionately missional.

To be genuinely orthodox, we must be involved in reclaiming a theological identity that is biblically grounded and faithful to the historic understanding of Christianity. McLaren’s phrase – “a generous orthodoxy” – is evocative.<sup>2</sup> Genuine orthodoxy is both open and orthodox; proactive and not

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 13:17b

<sup>2</sup> Brian D. McLaren, from a book so entitled

reactive. It is a way of moving forward not a manner of retrenching, a guide for engaging the world not a censoring tool for limiting discussion.

To be truly Wesleyan involves an unapologetic reclaiming of our heritage and identity. In the chaos of our wilderness times, God has given the Wesleyan movement—a perspective and outlook that the wider Christianity community and the world itself desperately need.

Our grasp of God’s grace set alongside and tempering human potential is a vital insight and offering to our bruised and bleeding world. Our insistence is that justification and sanctification go together—an intimate relationship with Christ as Lord and Savior inseparably twined with a deep social justice, love, and mercy for all of God’s children, creatures, and creation itself. The original vision of Methodism still towers above the landscape—“to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness across the land.”

To be unashamedly evangelical we will respond to the great commission to make disciples of all without apology or pause. We lift up Christ and him crucified and risen. Our call is to grow churches in ways that are both faithful and fruitful. Evangelism is not the sideline of a few so inclined but central hallmark of our reason for being. We offer Christ!

Passionately missional, United Methodists challenge us to deeper engagement in fighting injustice and oppression. Faithfulness and fruitfulness call us to be about living the great commandment—love of God and love of neighbor, every accessible human being we may reach. The deeds of love, justice, and mercy will be at the core of what we are about in the name of Christ our Lord.

“Samuel Shoemaker’s haunting question has never been more compelling: ‘Can your kind of church change this kind of world?’”<sup>1</sup> By ourselves, the answer is clearly no. But we are not left to our own devices and resources.

The risen Christ not only sends us out, he promises to go with us—“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>2</sup> In our wilderness the promise of the Exodus can once again be trusted. “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> George G. Hunter, III, Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry & Evangelism, p. 74

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:20

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 13:21-22