

SURRENDERING MY ORDINATION

Standing Up for Gay
and Lesbian Inclusivity
in The United Methodist Church

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PART 2

Why I Gave Up Ordination

*T*o give up ordination, after sixty years, was not an easy decision! I deal with what prompted the decision in chapter 6. But, first, I provide a brief narrative account of those sixty years to give the reader a sense of what this meant to me. Chapter 6 gives an account of what actually happened, what immediately precipitated the move. Chapters 7–9 explore the meaning of this action, drawing upon the theological, ethical, and pastoral dimensions explored in part 1. A concluding chapter discusses how I believe the church can find a way out of its present impasse that largely prompted my decision.

I want to emphasize two things. I am not, here, rejecting The United Methodist Church.

I love this church. I have experienced its life on different levels and in many different places. I think immediately of many of its people, both lay and clergy, who affected my life for good. Moreover, I can affirm so much of the prophetic social witness of The United Methodist Church. On the whole, I believe this church has been a real force for good, both for its own members and in the wider world.

Second, I do not harbor animosity to those whose hurtful actions occasioned my move. We all see in a glass darkly,

as Paul reminds us. I've had to learn and grow through the years, and I hope that process has not ended quite yet. We all need to love one another, both within and beyond the church, despite our differences.

Chapter 5

My Sixty Years of Ordained Ministry

*T*his chapter is frankly autobiographical. The story of the years of my ministry prior to the surrender of my credentials will help to place that action in context.

I cannot honestly record any dramatic moment when God spoke to me directly about entering ministry, although there was a definite point of decision. I had grown up in a parsonage home, the son of a Methodist minister. That upbringing meant that I was no stranger to Methodist ministry, although childhood experience was doubtless superficial. In thinking about my own future, the ministry was always an attractive option, although I wanted to be sure that such a decision was not simply following in my father's footsteps—much as I loved and respected him. It had to be authentically my own decision.

The moment came at a Methodist youth summer camp just as I was finishing high school. The camp speaker, the Rev. Richard Dunlap, was one of those clergy who had a special gift for communicating with youth. I don't recall his making any particular pitch for his young listeners to consider ministry as a vocation, but somehow what he had to say spoke to my heart. And I decided then and there that, yes, this was the direction I should pursue. My sense of what that might mean was doubtless immature. But it set a trajectory that

provided for growth in maturity and spiritual discernment. Was it a calling from God? Who's to say? God speaks to us in many different ways, and we can be led. I never had reason to doubt that this was the direction in which I was being led, although there have been so many twists and turns along the way.

Years of Preparation

I knew, of course, that years of preparation lay ahead. I had never doubted that I would go to college, but this decision helped define the form that education would take. After one year in a small junior college near my home in Safford, Arizona, I attended the (then) small College of the Pacific in Stockton, California. My studies there ran the gamut of liberal arts and social science courses, including the college's required Old and New Testament courses. I had to work my way through college, which, in the long run, gave me a better sense of the working world. Additionally, during my college years in Stockton I experienced the ethnic and economic diversity of that city. And I gained valuable leadership experience through student government.

After finishing college, I enrolled at Boston University School of Theology—then, as now, a very progressive seminary with much emphasis on social justice. (It had been Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s graduate school, although our years there barely overlapped.) My field work at the School of Theology included service as a YMCA youth director in Roxbury and as part-time minister to students at nearby Second Church of Boston. Ordained a deacon after one year of seminary (legally possible in those years), I served as co-pastor, with my brother-in-law, of the Methodist Church in Marlborough, Massachusetts. We had

both gotten married the summer after our first seminary year and, with our new spouses, we settled into the large, rambling parsonage.

After graduation from the School of Theology, I began PhD studies, also at Boston University. My chosen field was social ethics, and my doctoral adviser was Dean Walter G. Muelder, an internationally recognized leader in the field. My choice of social ethics was partly academic, but it was also influenced by my involvement in social justice issues through the years. We had moved to Arizona (for my father's health) when I was eleven years old, and I had the benefit of a home in which social justice issues were addressed, including racial issues, migrant labor problems, and problems facing American Indians at an impoverished nearby reservation.

My doctoral study focused largely on racial issues, and my PhD dissertation addressed how to accomplish desegregation in all levels of the (then) Methodist Church. (The dissertation was published and sent to all delegates to the 1960 General Conference.) Doctoral study helped me better understand the deep relationship between theology, ethics, and practical engagement with social problems.

A Ministry of Teaching

Through most of my student years I fully intended to return to the Southern California–Arizona Annual Conference to become a pastor. But I began to wonder, as I neared completion of PhD study, whether I should consider teaching instead. After careful consideration, I and my wife, Carolyn, agreed to become missionaries to Cuba, where I would teach at its Union Theological Seminary. But that was in 1960, and the prospect fell through while we were studying Spanish in Costa Rica. By then the idea of a teaching ministry

had taken hold, so we agreed to go back to my college alma mater in Stockton, where I would teach Bible and social ethics while leading a research program on church-state relations in California.

While I taught courses on social ethics, most of my work was with Old and New Testament. I had not done doctoral study on the Bible, but teaching introductory classes in Old and New Testament for five years proved to be an invaluable experience. The benefit was not so much from better grasp of technical issues of biblical scholarship, which I cheerfully leave to real experts, but from repeated review of the biblical narratives and teachings. I had studied Bible in college and seminary years, of course, but this teaching pushed me into a deeper grasp of profound scriptural treasures. In the long run, it was to draw me deeper into the theological meaning of Christian ethics. My work in ethics continued, including engagement with social issues such as the campaign against discrimination in housing.

In 1966 I was invited to join the faculty at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. Carolyn and I readily accepted the change. For me, it was opportunity to concentrate in my field of social ethics and to do it in the nation's capital. During twenty-six years of teaching at Wesley, I helped to educate generations of future clergy, mostly United Methodists but also students from other denominations. Most were headed toward ordination, some were engaged in theological study with different career intent, and a few found in the course of their studies that ministry simply was not their real calling. For all, Washington was a superb environment for study of social ethics.

During those years I was able to do much more research and writing. One of my models for that work was the late Professor Georgia Harkness of the Pacific School of Religion, with whom I served on a couple of committees in California and whose books I found especially attractive.

Was this career pattern real ministry? Clearly, yes. The teaching itself was, one way or another, an exploration and communication of the faith. The years also involved a fair amount of preaching and teaching in churches in various parts of the country, pastoral engagement with students, and service to the connectional church at different levels.

Social Justice Activism

My years of ministry involved a lot of engagement with the social-ethical issues of the day. This began well before my ordination, even during student years. That included participating in efforts to foster greater inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities and Jews. Much of this was influenced by my home environment, with a mother and father who actively encouraged the struggle against racism in all its forms. My preacher-father voiced prophetic sermons (and was partly responsible for desegregating schools in an Arizona community). My participation in social justice causes was also prompted by direct observation of the plight of migratory workers—Steinbeck’s “grapes of wrath”—and of the impoverished Cocopah tribe on a reservation near one of our Arizona hometowns. I don’t recall feeling heroic about any of this; it just seemed to come naturally.

During my teaching years at the University of the Pacific, I, along with a number of other younger faculty members, formed the Stockton Fair Housing Committee to fight against housing discrimination. We participated in a campaign to create fair housing legislation. We were not successful at the time, but the campaign laid the groundwork for later laws. I recall that we younger faculty members supported Cesar Chavez’s farm labor movement by helping to prevent shipment of grapes by an agricultural organization that resisted unionization. In 1965 I was among those who responded to

Dr. King's call for people to come to Selma for the march to Montgomery, Alabama. During the Wesley Seminary years, I, along with many others, became deeply involved in the anti-war movement. The list could go on. I want to emphasize that most of this just came naturally, without any sense of heroism. It was, to me, simply a part of what ministry is all about.

In light of the subject matter of this book, a reader might well ask at what point I became active in issues related to homosexuality. That is a fair question. In fact, I came to that rather late. During the decade or so after completing my doctoral studies in social ethics, I didn't pay much attention to those issues at all. If asked (which I rarely was), I'd have said that homosexuality was a form of emotional pathology or of sin or some mixture of the two—but I didn't want to be distracted by those issues from my focus on what I considered weightier issues. But during the mid-1970s or so, I found I couldn't as a teacher of ethics ignore those issues any longer. I studied the issues and, more importantly, I became better acquainted with gay and lesbian people and the hurt they were suffering at the hands of the church.

Serving the Connectional Church

From the beginning, my years as an ordained minister included considerable involvement with the church at connectional levels—that is, the church structures extending beyond the local church. I was often called upon to be a consultant to the Board of Church and Society (and its predecessor boards), located in Washington, DC. Earlier, I had been a member of the conference Board of Social and Economic Relations in Northern California. While at Wesley I was a member of the conference Board of Ordained Ministry for eight years, serving as president for four of those years. In 1980 I was asked to serve as chair of a general church committee seeking to negotiate an

end to the Nestlé Company's infamous marketing of breast-milk substitutes in third-world countries—an effort that was ultimately successful. I was elected as a delegate to the General Conferences of 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000, and to the jurisdictional conferences of 2004 and 2008. At each of these General Conferences I was actively engaged in the struggle to change policies affecting gay and lesbian people, including authoring the legislation in 1988 creating the Committee to Study Homosexuality. I served as a member of the church's General Council on Finance and Administration from 1996 to 2004 and on the Commission on Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns from 2004 to 2008.

These and other involvements at the conference and denominational levels were not just an ego trip; they involved hard but necessary work for the church. I mention them here to underscore that my institutional involvements with broad church structures and laws were not incidental. When I took the action described in the following chapter, I had a clear understanding of what it could mean.

The Foundry Years

In 1992, after service on the Wesley faculty for twenty-six years, I was asked by Bishop Joseph Yeakel to become senior minister of the Foundry United Methodist Church, also in Washington, DC. He anticipated a crisis in that centrally located downtown church and thought I would be able to deal with it. Founded in 1815, Foundry has played a key role in the religious life of the nation's capital throughout its two-plus centuries of service. When asked why I would leave a seminary faculty for that pastorate, I'd jokingly say that after decades of teaching future clergy, it was time for me to put up or shut up. The church did face many challenges during those years, including the crisis that Bishop

Yeakel anticipated. But those were wonderful years, and neither Carolyn nor I ever regretted the decision to go there.

Not incidentally, the church served a very diverse congregation, including people who had been rejected elsewhere and, in terms of status and class, parishioners ranging from the homeless to leading figures in Congress and even the president of the United States. It is and was a progressive church, challenging those who occupied its pulpit to make the gospel relevant both to individuals and to the collective life of the city and nation.

I have written mainly of my own professional involvements during my sixty years of ordained ministry, but in more ways than I can name my ministry was shared and supported by my wife, Carolyn. As noted above, we were married during my seminary years, which means that as of this writing we've been married for sixty-two years. Our decision to accept Bishop Yeakel's invitation to go to Foundry was fully shared. Carolyn had been a preschool teacher at the National Child Research Center in Washington and felt it was time to retire from that. She was interested in turning her attention to inner-city problems, and the Foundry challenge seemed a good way to become more involved. She then spent years as chair of the board of the Calvary preschool learning center, a program designed to reach and help Latino young people. That program evolved into a full-scale educational enterprise called Centronia. Even before the Foundry years, she was instrumental in forming an innovative summer program for children from a number of suburban and inner-city churches conducted for fifteen years in Washington's Rock Creek Park. As parents, she and I raised four children, and she had to do a whole lot of the heavy lifting.

The time came when the Foundry years had to end, because I had reached the then mandatory retirement age of seventy. Perhaps it was about time anyway. It had been a wonderful experience, but it was time to turn the respon-

sibility over to others. But ministry doesn't end with retirement. A couple of years later I was asked to be interim president of Iliff School of Theology in Denver, which I served from 2002 to 2004. Then the bishop of Nebraska asked me to be interim pastor of a church in Omaha. And so on, with more teaching and writing and involvements with the church. I recognized that ordination is a lifetime commitment.

But there came a point, which is what this book is about, when even that commitment had to be set aside for sufficient cause. When the time came, I didn't give up my credentials because of the meaning of ordination nor because of any dissatisfaction with what it had meant in my life. My sixty years were full and fulfilling in so many ways. But the time came when I had to make a very important decision.

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