

## Openness Discussion - March 8, 2020

**Dan Rudalevige** (his answers and comments noted as “DR”)

DR - We are all Gods people.

1. Q - How did Sudbury make the journey?

DR - Became reconciling congregation 2004 2005 (2 years prior to my retirement). Not everybody knows what a reconciling congregation is.... Within the UMC a reconciling congregation is one which declares itself inclusive of gays and lesbians and, of course, everybody else. If You're a reconciling congregation, you registered with the reconciling network - a visible sign of inward and spiritual grace what happens in Sudbury 14 years ago before I got there David Kirby was the pastor he has a congregation at a point where we don't want to be seen (we accept everybody but we don't want to talk about it) we don't want to join the network, we don't want to be seen and Dave Kirby let that go. I (the successor) said how can you be open and affirming, how you can you be welcoming, if nobody knows they've got to come and ask you are you affirming or are you going to receive me? We're not going to do that. So we began a process and we had a consultant come in from the annual conference and he was dreadful. He opened with you're going to lose members over this. But we had a couple people in the congregation who were very good at community resolution. And we met in circles and people took turns speaking. The turning point came when a lesbian couple said we don't know how the vote is going to go; however it goes, we know we are loved here and we will stay. That was a converting moment for many in the congregation. We should make it public that we are reconciling. Then the vote came and it was a very narrow vote - people were clear that they weren't voting against gays and lesbians but were voting on whether or not we go public with reconciling and that was much harder for me to get my mind around but we did vote to do it. The church went on to celebrate. At our 5th year anniversary, the conference invited many of us from our church who had and invited other reconciling churches. We did it but it was hard work. We're proud we did this. We did not lose members. Anyway.... it took us about 8 months of discussion and this was a church already geared towards acceptance.

2. Q – I'm a retired Methodist minister. I'd like to know specifics about the future. I'm trying to figure out which group to go with... I'm getting mailings from 2 different progressive groups – the liberation Methodists and the protocol Methodists. Liberation Methodists aim to be the more progressive group and are saying that we shouldn't listen to the Protocol group for several reasons. 2 reasons that bother me are: more money is being given to the conservative group than to the liberal group. How many gay people were involved in the decision making of the protocol group? When I looked at the live stream, it was mostly white men (and no one told me that there were any gay people who were part of that decision).

DR - The protocol is a way of changing what happened at last year's general conference to move from a position of punitive action to a church that allows for openness. As you heard, part of that would give 25 million dollars to the conservative group. The liberation church takes no prisoners saying we need to be pure in our approach. Protocol folks say we are all sinners, we are not going to be pure. There are other groups some with the Western Covenant Association - some

conservative groups say they're going to leave no matter what the decision is - so there are divisions. My own church (Hope Gateway in Portland, Maine) is in the process of discernment as to whether we will remain within the UMC. That discernment process is going on throughout the conference. Many churches are involved in it. I felt that it was a bit premature to discuss this prior to the 2020 general conference.

If you're confused, we're all confused. We don't know what the future holds.

The protocol calls for each conference to set the discipline according to its cultural needs.

There are 5 jurisdictions in the US:

- North Central
- Northeast
- South Central
- Southeast
- Western

Outside the US there are 7 central conferences:

- African
- Central and Southern Europe
- Congo
- Germany
- Northern Europe
- Philippines
- West Africa

The jurisdiction will be able to establish its own cultural take on the discipline. Right now the discipline is written so that all the US churches have to abide by every ——— African, Philippine Russian and western Europe churches can change the discipline to suit their culture and they did it and that's appropriate - they represent almost 40% of the vote at the General Conference – so they have permission to change their discipline, we do not but they have 40% of the vote as to what that discipline says. The African church particularly is a ?? at the church to voting anything that includes gays or lesbians. At the 2016 general conference vote one African pastor voted with the more progressive side and when she got back home to Africa the church took away her orders and ordered her husband to separate from her. The Philippino church voted much the same way as Africa but have since changed their perspective, they can't see why it is that we should be compelled to follow the same rubric when others can change it and make it fit their culture. Why cannot change the discipline to fit our own culture. For the liberation church this is not significant. They feel UMC should split in the cleanest possible way - a purist position. The Protocol is a mixed position. 2019 General Conference punitive decision. Anybody could bring charges against me because I perform same sex marriages along with others. We have 18 retired pastors in the Gateway Church (Sudbury?). We have a community of retired pastors - more than half of them could be brought up on charges. It's just an absurdity.

During the last few months, no action has been taken in the Western jurisdiction. The bishops are united in saying that they will not bring charges against any pastor. In fact, they have a married lesbian bishop (Karen Oliveto) which offends the southern churches enormously. Bishop Elaine Stanovsky is adamant that the Western jurisdiction will not comply. However, Bishop Easterling

in WA has brought charges against a pastor after the Protocol but done it tactfully – brought charges that won't be heard until after the General Conference and she's the only one I'm aware who has brought charges.

3. Q – Please summarize.

DR - In May at the General Conference again there will be 1000 delegates, 40% from Africa, Philippines. There are 4 annual conferences that are going to bring a petition to change the discipline to take into account what the protocol calls for which allows jurisdictions to adjust the discipline to fit their need culturally which means NE and probably North Central and probably Western jurisdictions will make those changes. In the Southeast and South Central there will be a whole lot more division. Individual churches will be leaving rather than whole jurisdictions or conferences. It would be able to adjust the discipline. There will be no charges between Jan 1, 2020 and Jan 1, 2021 (which is when the 2019 discipline will be in effect). There will be a provision of paying \$25 million to the Western covenant association (which has said it's already leaving) and will leave with other conservative churches. There is also a provision of \$4 million to any other independent groups to help them establish their denomination like the liberation church. Right now we are in a position where churches can look to what it means to leave the denomination. This discernment process is going on in many churches throughout the country.

4. Q - My take is I do not care what the General Conference decides because I need to take care of my own backyard. I need to know who we are. First decide in the church who we are.

DR - You are absolutely right. First decide who are we as God's people and then does the church go along with who we are as God's people. John Wesley said, "If your heart is as my heart is, give me your hand and we will walk together as far as we may." That's the crux of it. Is our heart together? Are we united in love? If we're united in love and the denomination says no you can't be, then that's too bad for the denomination. If we're united in love and the denomination says so are we, then let's walk together.

5. Q - Carrying on with that plan of discerning who we are. The challenge we face when we are communicating is about openness. First aspect: how comfortable we feel describing and explaining our point of view. Second aspect: some kind of game playing goes on and we walk away and then say I didn't speak my mind because I didn't feel comfortable. Human nature. How do we make people feel comfortable to state what they want and stick with it?

DR - The model we used was to bring people together in listening circles and never more than about 15 people – we passed around a candle sometimes a cross but you had to have the talking stick in order to speak and you had to speak out of your own understanding. Don't say "I like Senator Warren for president but other people won't go for her." You can't go there, you've got to say "I like Elizabeth Warren, this is who I am, this is my experience..." Describe who you are and what you want, describe how angry you get when the subject (ie LBGTQ) comes up according to your own experiences. And the next person cannot say "Oh what a bigot." That is what proved the decisive factor. At our church a few people were trained how to lead groups.

6. Q - Where does the \$25 million come from?

DR - The church can always find the money in wants. It will come out of General Funds reserved for a rainy day and this would be considered a deluge.

7. Q - How did you/the Sudbury church keep everybody together after the decision was made? How did you manage that part of the journey?

A - People had talked it through enough that they respected the vote. It was no longer an issue. The church definitively dealt with it.

8. Q - Were the sessions/conversations truly open and did people feel comfortable to speak their true feelings?

DR - It was painful sometimes. Yes, a level of trust was built as those circles continued. It took several months. There were tensions and real conflicted feelings. The lesbian people spoke up - what caused them to speak up - some tough words were said against gays and lesbians - especially by one person. The lesbian couple I spoke about earlier were able to diffuse the situation and speak from their heart. They diffused it and came together. Now this person and the lesbian couple are very close friends.

9. Q - Do you think people changed their views or they just co-existed?

DR - I think both were true.

10. Q - When a retired minister marries a gay couple, can they lose their pension?

DR - No. Our pensions are vested. So retired clergy are safe. But the current pastor is not safe.

11. Q - Can we use a UMC church to perform a gay marriage ceremony?

DR – In theory (according to the Discipline), no. In practice, we do.

12. Q – Following up on what you said during the sermon, using the analogy in the bible saying that a son who disobeys his father should be killed. Our Book of Discipline says it's ok for sons to disobey their parents. Do you think we should make a statement in the Book of Discipline about homosexuality or be silent?

DR – Up until the Discipline of 1972, the Book of Discipline was silent about that aspect of sexuality - we had a lot to say about marriage, abortion, and other matters concerning family life and we were silent about homosexual relationships. In 1972 homosexuality was inserted in the Book of Discipline and there was a certain permissiveness in the Discipline that was removed, and over the years, has become more blatantly restrictive.

Q – Do you think it should be in the Book of Discipline?

DR - I think, given where we are now, we need to make an affirmative statement such as: we affirm loving, committed relationships between committed partners.

Comment by someone else: I think the other part of the history that's interesting is, about 1972, the reason homosexuality got into the Book of Discipline 1972 is that the psychiatric community had just decided that being homosexual was no longer an illness, no longer abnormal. The Methodist church decided to reach out to the homosexual community and do some research

about the needs of homosexual people and how they can start to minister to homosexual people. Conservative people in the Methodist Church were so upset and threatened by this that they inserted negative language into the Discipline as a reaction.

DR – By about a dozen votes, the Conference agreed to that language. I was an alternate at this General Conference, in the balcony. We moaned “how could we pass that?” Then this elderly black woman turned around and said, “we’ve been fighting this battle for hundreds of years, what made you think that it was going to be easy?” That has stayed with me. That and the fact that the African Americans in the Central jurisdiction from 1939 to 1968 stuck with a racist church seeking to change it. That’s the only reason I’m a Methodist - that they had the courage to stand and try to make us understand what it was we were doing. That is the reason I stayed with the Methodist Church. It was primarily aimed at clergy.

13. Q - In the end it is how we interpret the Bible. One UM section says the Bible says love everyone regardless of any separation and the other says well, no, homosexuality is not good. In the end, we are all Christians. We are all followers of Christ. How do we as people reconcile that within ourselves and accept that we can still love each other in spite of our differences in opinion and be able to move forward?

DR - If we understand scripture as being culturally bound, we will see that there are aspects that we cannot accept and there are others we affirm strongly. For example Saul is king, Saul wins the battle – and scripture says God ordered Saul to wipe out that town, to kill every living thing, destroy it all - Saul couldn’t do it, he refused, he allowed prisoners to live, he allowed the animals to live..... God was so angry he took away Saul’s kingdom.... now I don’t believe that that was God, that God was a monster. It’s a God of a single people. It’s not the God of all people. God loves the losing side as much as God loves the winning side. We need to learn from Asian theology how to live with each other respecting that God is within each of us, Quakers do this: the God in me greets the God in you. We need to learn how to meet each other’s God. We all interpret the Bible differently. We each interpret scripture differently. Karl Barth said “Scripture is meant to be read with one eye on the Bible and one eye on the newspaper.” I don’t think he would say that anymore given contemporary newspapers. But to understand the culture in which we live as to how it modifies the Bible and how the Bible modifies our understanding culture.

14. Q - I’d be shocked that the congregation didn’t accept everyone’s lifestyles. But, in the end this is a fundamental right. Until that unknown right is acceptable We all should love one another. I’ll accept your lifestyle but I don’t want you to be married in the church. We can have lots of listening sessions. This is a fundamental right - speak up for what is right Until that unknown right is accepted

DR - What would lead you to deny marriage to same sex couples?

Commenter - Established rules and traditions.

DR - Established rules and traditions change. During the renaissance and medieval times in the lower classes you waited until a woman was pregnant before you get married. In the upper classes you got married because you needed a contract to guarantee money and property. After

you got married, you went off and had affairs with whomever you really loved. That was true until the early 20th century. The nature of marriage changes overtime. Within our congregation we have 3 same sex couples who have children. What is their status in our culture where there is still an onus if you're born outside of marriage? Why would I make it more difficult for those children?

15. Q - On both sides of the conversation, how do you make sure that each will not speak disparagingly about the other?

DR - You can require that as part of the rules of engagement in public. I can't guarantee you won't talk badly in private. We offer ourselves in a loving relationship. If I'm in a loving relationship with anyone, I cannot talk behind their back. We do not have the right to be that critical. We need to be honest with one another but also caring with one another. What we do in private I cannot guarantee. And don't want to guarantee.

Comment - I feel some people can speak very easily in public and others have a difficult time in trying to get their feelings in words and they can be rolled over. Others can be very biting in the way they speak. There needs to be a lot of patience on both sides.

DR - That is part of the ground rules. How do we live in a caring relationship? That's where the circles become so important - that we could hear one other - and these small groups should be no more than 15, preferably 12, people. We need to be able to hear one another. Introverts need more time to speak. Extroverts are eager to jump in. That's where the talking stick become important, you can only talk when you have the talking stick. Because you are doing multiple sessions you are developing trust in one another. We found most people participated in 3 sessions.

16. Q - I am a reconciling individual. I struggle with some people saying we are inclusive and we accept everyone BUT gay people can't be married or pastors can't be in an openly homosexual relationship. To me those things are mutually exclusive. Either you are accepting and individuals can enjoy all aspects of Methodist life OR you are not.

I joined this church 27 years ago, it was overwhelmingly white, we still are. We are becoming more diverse and it's wonderful. Why would we draw the line at you people cannot participate in all the sacraments of the church because of who you are. I don't get that. I'm one of those extroverts. My question to you is where do you draw the line at conversation? We've had 2 conversational sessions last year and I get that introverts may not even feel comfortable in attending those. And we've had 2 separate anonymous surveys so it seems that the introverts have had opportunities to express their opinions and express their beliefs and be heard. Where do you decide when enough conversational sessions is enough? And decide as a group where you are but this is where we are going.

DR - At Sudbury the board decided on a date when we would take a vote. We knew we would never reach a consensus but we would abide by the decision. You could say it should have happened 14 years earlier.

17. Q - After one of our board meetings a number of people left the church. It's difficult for me to speak in public and, during that meeting, I was asking for everyone to have patience and allow

people to have more time to express their feelings. I was interrupted and, thus, just stopped talking and I felt like leaving at that point. I saw others who tried to express their feelings, were cut off, and then left. All I want to see is that, when people speak, others should realize that these are their feelings and that's real - that is true to them - that should be accepted.

DR - Nobody has the monopoly around truth. We need to hear one another non judgmentally. This is easier to do in a listening circle than in a meeting. The ground round rules are different.

Rearrange your meeting to saying "everyone needs to be heard and no one should disparage another." Speak out of who you are, not your opinion about their opinion. Be clear that you cannot put someone else down. The facilitators need to be clear. Hear them respectfully. That doesn't mean you agree. Paul says there has to be disagreements in the church so you can eventually find out what's true - you've got to work it through.

18. Pastor - We as a congregation have publicized our openness statement. Some people have said to me that we do not need to do any more publicizing. I have heard from some but I want to hear other parishioners' ideas.

DR- This is part of the circle to discern - not in this gathering. Do this at a special conference.

Pastor - People keep saying to me "You did not lead, you've done nothing." Some were disappointed and left the church - I was very sorry. Some people think we've not done enough, others feel we have.

DR - Put a flag outside, participate in a gay parade, hand out pamphlets to let people know we are here. I'm not sure what else one needs to do. I don't know. Gays and lesbians want to feel welcomed when they come in but they don't need to be singled out either. People came into our church, Gateway, in part because of our website saying where we stood in terms of inclusion and openness but stayed because they were welcomed as human beings. Some people we knew were gay, some we didn't. We have 2 transgender persons but we may have more. People don't walk in with signs "I'm gay." They walk in as human beings seeking to be loved in their failures and successes.

19. Comment - If you are accepting of everybody, you have to let the world know that. Putting it in the paper isn't enough. We made the decision. We are stating we are open to the world but mostly we are saying it amongst ourselves. I need to state to the world we are an open church. I want to feel pride about the fact that we are open. How do we take that next step? As a church we need to move forward. Not doing anything, inaction in my mind is worse than action. We are stuck as a church. It's all our responsibility, not just the Pastor's, we are all leaders in the church, we are the church. Each one of us should take charge and come with a proposal.

20. Comment - This has been weighing on my heart. Church is not about moving the openness forward. It's about moving forward with accepting each other for who we are, understanding and continuing to love each other regardless of whether we disagree or not. That is where we are struggling. It isn't about whether the vote is happening or not. Do we love each other? Can we strive to work toward social justice causes? As a church can we build a church that wants to look past this issue and on to other issues? We are going to disagree. We all are on different places in our journey. I look back on my own journey 10 years ago. I have a sister-in-law who is gay and

is in a relationship. That has even been a journey. Even though I accepted her, did I truly accept her? Was she openly introduced and talked about? That has taken me years to truly grow and learn to accept them even though I love her with all my whole heart. During a church service where Mabel spoke. She told a story that truly resonated with me. There is a clerk in a local shop who is a curmudgeon and he's always nasty to all people - one day Mabel had the strength to go in there and, rather than just assuming he was a mean person, she just said "what's wrong?" Right? We all have our own struggles in life. We have to meet people where they are and they aren't always going to agree.

DR - Let's put this in context. We are part of the United Methodist Church. The General Conference is in 58 days. I pray that there will be a consensus in what serves all of us, without offending people; giving jurisdictions and churches the freedom to decide to move on.

Response from someone: Amen to that.

21. Comment - I know that good Methodists, when they have a need, they make a committee. I attend the Chelmsford Central Congregational Church and they were in the similar situation and they decided to be affirming. Now what do we do? We formed a committee. We've done interesting things - educational, informative. Deciding actions such as how to label our bathrooms which would be welcoming to everyone. We had a tremendous speaker explaining all the pronouns associated with the LBGQTQIA. We also heard from speakers who have grandchildren who are transgender and who just told their personal stories which were incredibly heartwarming. Our committee would be happy sharing resources with you.

DR -We sponsored a conference with youths in middle school to talk about sexuality and bullying - it was meant to be mostly about bullying around sexuality but it ended up being the other way around. That became a means to a broader conversation.

22. Q - I'm mostly concerned about the children. I have friends who are gay and I love them and I accept them. I respect them. I get worried - what are the children going to do and what are they going to see. Gay people who want children. I'm not fully accepting. These options are just crazy. Too many choices on the table. In my custom we don't have choices. Educating the young people, it's not choice or options - what are we doing for the children?

DR - A retired pastor had twins, a niece and nephew. They knew the girl was gay when she was 5 years old. In her teens she said "I have a new name and she declared herself to be male and wanted to have surgery." The parents were taken aback. She did visit with a doctor who said "you are much too young, you're not mature to do this now. Your hormones are already in disarray. Let your body straighten itself out first." There ought not to be pressure on children to make a decision. He can identify to be male but he should wait until he's older to decide about surgery. It is complex for children because they are struggling with their identity on a whole range of issues. But sexuality identity is huge. It's something parents and/or a trusted adult should be involved in but we don't know how. I can say "Please hold off on making any firm decisions that could transform your life when you're not there yet." We have an obligation to our children to raise them, not to determine how they will be but to help them get to a place where

they are comfortable with whom they will be. That is not going to happen at ages 12, 13, 14, 18. Every child is different how they mature and where they want to be.

23. Q - What do we do in our church so we can educate our children appropriately?

DR - You probably won't have to broadly deal with this in a church. Perhaps as individuals one-on-one. Our education should be more around "how we accept one another."

Talk about fidelity, being loyal to one another at that age, rather than the institution of marriage. We're in a society where fewer and fewer people are getting married.

24. Q - During a Council Meeting where the entire congregation was invited to attend, the meeting went out of control. People got hurt and left the church because of that meeting in my opinion. At SPRC we're talking about how do we address those people who have left? Pastor could meet with them outside of the church? We have not implemented anything to let them know that their opinion matters and we apologize. What can we do? How do we let them know about our apology?

DR - It should be publicized that the church is apologizing - the whole church can participate in the apology. We have pastors who go once a week to a local coffee shop and sit for a few hours to meet with whomever would like to attend.

25. Comment - One of the things that has helped me move forward in my decision-making in this journey are my children. They are much further along in accepting everyone for who they are and it's not "a thing." They don't look at you and say you're gay or you're transgender, rather it's you're a person just like I'm a person - they don't identify you as a thing. That gives me a lot of hope. For the generations coming up, this is not going to be an issue for them.

26. Comment - I grew up in the Lexington Methodist Church. Back then there was the issue of Catholics being accepted in the Methodist church - the ecumenical issue came up. Every Sunday we started saying this is an open table, it is open to all people. That always had a lot of meaning to me. The table - that is a perfect place - every month before communion state that this is a table, a church, that is opened to everyone.

DR - At a funeral of a young girl who was well loved in the community, I said during the service and before communion "Whoever you are, you don't have to believe what we believe. This is an act of community given to us by the Holy God." It was so moving to see everyone come forward to receive communion. This is a God who receives us, who loves us.

Pastor - Thank you for your patience and participating in active conversation. We need to have this kind of conversation to continue. Last year I suggested that we form a committee but nobody responded. Perhaps we can now form a committee.

Prayer:

Lord,

Thank you for being with us.

Thank you for our differences that make our life rich.

And transcending our limitation, enriching your vestments.

Bless our congregation to focus on the higher calling which is love,  
being together doing your ministry.

Please forgive us if we hurt by our saying, our behaving, our gesturing.

Let them be God's comfort and let them know your love.

Lord, be with us as we go from here.

And be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the midst of our daily life.

Be with us all the time. All the time you have.

In the name of loving father, son and holy spirit,

Amen.