

Chapter one, *Always Renewing*

Rev. Laurie Kantonen, North Star District Superintendent, Minnesota Conference

How many of you feel like you or your church have been stuck in the wilderness the last few– or maybe even several– years? I think many of us have felt like we have spent some time in the wilderness or desert, and we have felt the accompanying feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, desperation, even a hunger and thirst to be renewed and refreshed.

We have been through the pain of a pandemic, the pain of disaffiliation in our Annual Conference, the pain of polarization that has made its way into even our neighborhoods and our families. We in the church have even experienced the pain of people walking away from or giving up on the church, choosing a spirituality that is unconnected with the life of church and community.

We have spent a season in the wilderness.

As the passage from Isaiah that is a part of our study this evening continues, the author uses words like "wilderness" and "desert" to describe what God's people have been living through. But it seems to be right there in the wilderness that we are best prepared to see and welcome the new work that God is about.

As I was making my rounds visiting the churches on my district this past fall and winter, I talked to a lot of people about what an exciting time this is to be the church and I would say especially a church in the Wesleyan tradition, our United Methodist Church, and I truly believe that– I believe as a church that we are living through quite an incredible time.

Even though many of us might still name our experiences that of wilderness or desert, I believe we are starting to see fresh winds of the Holy Spirit show up in some new and unique ways. As we have begun to lay down some of our ideas of what church should be or needs to be, cracks are appearing, and in those cracks I see light. I believe the church is poised for a time of renewal. And I believe that our Wesleyan heritage uniquely prepares us to participate in that renewal.

In the first chapter of our book, Chilcote introduces us to this idea of God's renewing work among us and then through us. He focuses on allowing a renewal in our understanding of scripture, and he lists three principles that are embedded in our Methodist DNA:

- that we keep in mind the whole tenor of scripture rather than cherry picking certain verses,
- that we study difficult or confusing text alongside clear text to try to clarify their meaning,
- and that we read all of scripture through the loving eyes of Jesus Christ.

Then Chilcote talks about the transformation brought on in the ministry of John and Charles Wesley because of their willingness to faithfully engage the biblical text alongside what they were witnessing with their own eyes. In the case of the Wesleys, that concerned allowing women– and lay people– to preach the gospel. Chilcote argues that this same kind of biblical engagement must be applied to the participation of LGBTQ persons who show up with their God-given gifts for ministry, their love and devotion to Jesus Christ, and the evidence of fruit in their ministry.

Chilcote reminds us that throughout its history, as the Church has existed in real time and in real places, it has had to constantly change in order to stay the same. We are constantly challenged to discover or recover again and again how to live in faithfulness to God in our ever-changing settings.

I have lived long enough to know that our natural inclination is to resist change, to hang on to what is comfortable, which can stifle a passion for renewal or make it little more than an empty word. We have any number of sayings that reinforce that– "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." "Stick with what works." You could probably come up with a few more just like that. Our trouble might be that we have been sticking with what doesn't work anymore. Something has been broken. And either much of the world hasn't been interested in what we have been offering, or are turned off by the way we are offering it.

So where does true renewal come? I think you will begin to name places for yourself as you make your way through this book and along this Lenten journey. But I can tell you where I am seeing signs of renewal– in churches that are making an effort to open up everything they do to include those outside the church. What does that look like? Well, it looks like a pastor using social media to reach out to whole communities beyond the church for All Saints Sunday, inviting anyone who might be grieving a loss to come and hear the name of their loved one remembered aloud. You know what? People in every one of those communities came.

It looks like a small rural church opening up its doors a couple of mornings a week to provide opportunity for community, for anyone who wants to come and have coffee, play a game of cards, just be with other people through the cold winter months.

It looks like community meals, which are open to everyone. It looks like a church donating some of its land for a larger food shelf. It looks like a church that partners with another agency in town to offer free childcare for parents during school breaks or teacher training days.

It looks like all of the different Fresh Expressions that churches are starting throughout our episcopal area, bringing Christ to people rather than waiting for people to come to us. It looks like a radical, inclusive love that witnesses to the world, our belief that God created all that is out of love and God loves all that God created. That was a direct quote from the book!

You might have recognized that it looks like every church that says to all people– no exceptions– that all people are gifts of God and have been gifted by God and welcomed to use those gifts in the building of God's kin-dom.

What I found so refreshing in this chapter was in particular was Chilcote's suggestion that we stop focusing on what has divided us– that the most important need we have isn't that we all agree on everything. When the world around us is changing fast, there are some things we need to agree on or hold fast to:

- the Great Commission– making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
- the Great Commandment– to love God and to love one another,
- and the Great Requirement– to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

But the most pressing need we have is for a renewal that will push us out the doors of our churches, out of our comfort zones, and into sharing the unconditional, radical, irrepressible love of God with a world that is also experiencing wilderness and exhaustion and desperation.

Come Holy Spirit, renew us again!