



PRACTICAL DIVINITY

BY ANDREW C. THOMPSON

Prayer: inviting God to come close

Editor's note: This column marks the first installment of *Practical Divinity*, an occasional series from the Rev. Andrew Thompson, the Arkansas Conference's Wesley scholar. The name of the column comes from a phrase used by Methodism's founder, John Wesley, to describe theology that speaks to the situations Christians face in their daily living. Thompson's aim for this series is that it will inform the everyday faith journeys of United Methodists across Arkansas.

We are coming very close to the time when General Conference will convene in Tampa, Fla. How should the church prepare?

General Conference meets only once every four years. With delegates from every part of the United Methodist Church, it is a body truly representative of the church as a whole. There will be clergy and lay delegates from Africa to Europe, and from the U.S. to the Philippines.

The primary reason General Conference meets at all is to celebrate our worldwide Methodist connection. We're doing important work in lots of different places, carrying the gospel of salvation to needy sinners all over the world. That vital ministry needs to be celebrated. Even more, thanks and praise need to be lifted up to God for it.

There are other reasons General Conference meets as well, some of them anxiety-producing. For the past several quadrennia, issues related to human sexuality have been debated in heated tones. Though the doctrinal position of the UMC on these issues remains unchanged, the issues themselves don't seem likely to go away and will emerge in various proposals.

And this year, deliberations around the proposals arising from the Call to Action report promise to be spirited (and not always easy).

General Conference has the power to change large portions of the

Book of Discipline with a simple majority vote. So it is understandable that people all over the church—whether they are delegates or not—take a keen interest in what goes on there.

I've heard lots of questions about General Conference over the past few months—phone calls and emails from people with earnest questions about what we should expect.

It's hard to say what we should expect. But I have been present with the Arkansas delegation to General Conference during its meetings since last June. And I've been consistently impressed with how seriously and intentionally our delegates have taken their preparation. We will be well-represented in Tampa, I am certain.

A better question than the one about how the conference will all turn out is this one: "How should we prepare?"

It seems certain that the best preparation for General Conference is to clothe it in prayer. We should pray for our delegates and for the conference itself. We should ask that God's will be done among us. And we should humbly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that the church would be faithful in all things to Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the New Testament, the letter of James gives us this counsel: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8; NRSV). In the Wesleyan tradition, we express this scriptural truth by our claim that prayer is a true means of grace.

But note the tone of James' teaching. He tells us to *seek out* God, so that we will know what it means to be *close* to God. And he gives us the assurance that our efforts will not be in vain. God will come as close as we are willing to receive him.

Prayer is one of the central means of drawing near to God in this way. It is not fundamentally a

mechanism we use to give God a "to-do" list. And it's not a tool we can use to manipulate God or change God's mind.

Prayer is about submission to Jesus Christ. It is a humbling act, where we put ourselves aside and ask Christ to show us what it means to say truthfully that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11).

There is a wonderful scene in the second book of Chronicles, just after King Solomon has finished building the temple in Jerusalem. God appears to Solomon in a dream, and he tells Solomon to use the temple as a place where true worship happens.

God says, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place" (2 Chronicles 7:14-15; ESV).

The temple, of course, was the central place of worship in ancient Israel. It was the place where the whole people of Israel could gather and sacrifice and pray.

We don't have a temple like that. But we do have a General Conference. It is the place where—once every four years—the whole people called Methodist gathers to glorify God and equip the mission and ministry of the church.

So it seems fitting that we would treat the conference ahead as God told Israel to treat the temple. Its very presence should call us to an attitude of humility, confession and supplication.

If we will but draw near to God, then God will surely draw near to us.

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