

“Background to the Aldersgate Covenant: Twenty Years of Hope for Spiritual Revival”

By Mary Brooke Casad

Twenty years ago, a group of laity and clergy came together to celebrate how the Holy Spirit was at work in the United Methodist Church; to address the loss of membership, resources and confidence in our denomination; and to discern how to engage a world that was increasingly indifferent, even hostile, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The initial group met at Perkins School of Theology, SMU, Dallas, Texas, and selected the name “Aldersgate Covenant” because they met on May 24, 1994. As John Wesley experienced a “heart-warming” experience on May 24, 1738 on Aldersgate Street in London, the group covenanted together to seek spiritual and missional revival for the UMC.

The Dallas-area group quickly connected with other United Methodists from across the country and sponsored gatherings in several locations. Legislation was drafted for a proposed mission statement for the Church, to be sent to the next General Conference. A video was produced for General Conference delegations as a way to garner support for the mission statement petition, and the petition was also endorsed by several annual conferences in 1995.

The result of these efforts was the 1996 General Conference’s adoption of a mission statement, later amended by the 2008 General Conference, that proclaims, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” Paragraphs 120, 121 and 122 of *The Book of Discipline* were also a part of this original petition.

The work of the “The Aldersgate Covenant” was undergirded by six important principles: *First, and most important, we carry out our work in prayer, seeking the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Second, we renew our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. Third, we rekindle our commitment to mission as a central component of our self-understanding. Fourth, we use new insights that are available about the nature of organizations. Fifth, we focus on those things that will make the most significant difference in our Church’s life. Sixth, we break through theological labels that have divided us historically and break down traditional barriers of age, race, ethnicity, gender and geography so this can truly be an inclusive undertaking.*

The Aldersgate Covenant was active at the next two General Conferences, offering revisions to the report of the Connectional Process Team in 2000, and working to bring about the creation of The Connectional Table in 2004. As more of the Aldersgate Covenant members moved into leadership positions across the Church, they carried the principles forward in their respective ministries.

In reflecting over the past twenty years, some of the original Aldersgate Covenant leaders expressed their continued desire for spiritual renewal and a Christ-centered Church. They invited “the next generation” into conversation. There was agreement that the fractures in our connection are real and paralyzing. With a common consensus that we are in need of a return to our single greatest resource for spiritual revival—Jesus Christ—the Aldersgate Covenant was re-born.