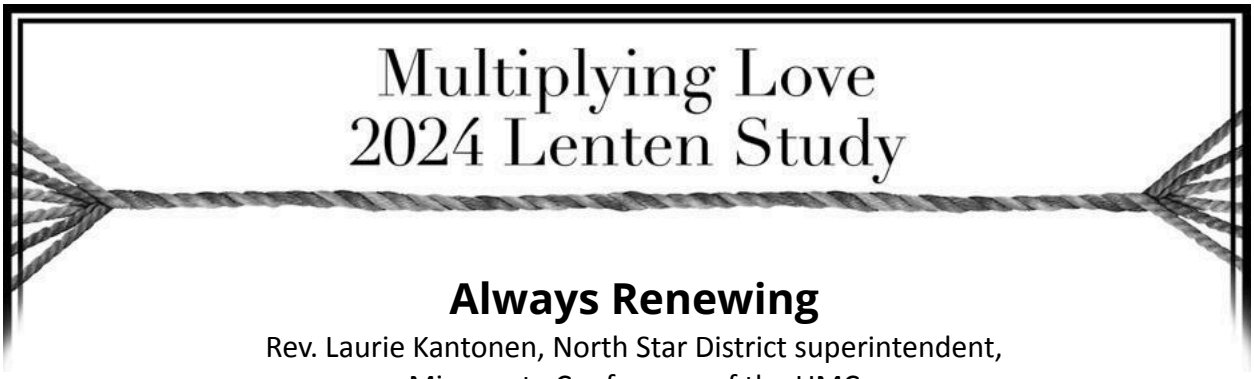


Always Renewing

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Scripture Text: Isaiah 43:18-19

How many of you feel like you and your church have been stuck in the wilderness or desert the last few years? 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 disaffiliations in our annual conference, the pain of polarization that has made its way into our neighborhoods and our families. We, in the church, have experienced the pain of people stepping away from or giving up on the Church, choosing a spirituality that is unconnected with the life of church in community.
We have spent a season in the wilderness.

The author of the Isaiah passage 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 visit churches in my district, I talk about what an exciting time this is to be the Church, especially a church in the Wesleyan tradition. Even though many of us might still name our experience as that of wilderness or desert, I believe we are starting to see fresh winds of the Holy Spirit show up. As we have begun to lay down some of our ideas of what church should be, cracks are appearing, and in those cracks, I see light. I believe the church is poised for a time of renewal, and our Wesleyan heritage uniquely prepares us to participate in that renewal.

In the first chapter, Paul 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:

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

Then Chilcote talks about the transformation brought about 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, it 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, the church has had to constantly change in order to stay the same. We are constantly challenged to re-discover faithfulness to God in our ever-changing settings.

I know our natural inclination is to hang on to what is comfortable, which can stifle a passion for renewal. Stick with what works. Our trouble might be that we have been sticking with what doesn't work anymore. Something has been broken. And much of the world hasn't been interested in what we offer or are turned off by the way we are offering it.

So where does renewal come? I think you will begin to name places for yourself as you make your way through the 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. This looks like a pastor using social media to reach out 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 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 open to everyone. It looks like a church donating some

of its land for a larger food shelf. It looks like a church that offers free childcare for parents during school breaks or teacher training days.

It looks like all of the Fresh Expressions that churches are starting—bringing Christ to the people rather than waiting for them to come to us. It looks like a radical inclusive love that witnesses our belief that God created all that is out of love, and God loves all that God created. It looks like every church that says all people—no exceptions —are gifts of God and have been gifted by God and welcomed to use those gifts in the building of God's kin-dom.

Chilcote suggests that we stop focusing on what has divided us. When the world around is changing fast, there are some things we do need to agree on or hold fast:

- The Great Commission: make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- The Great Commandment: Love God & love one another
- The Great Requirement: do justice, love mercy, and 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!