

**"I Ain't Staying In
Any Box!
--God"**

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My grateful appreciation and gratitude is expressed to Jane Dennis, Editor of the award-winning *Arkansas United Methodist* newspaper, for being my editor.

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- God”**

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FOREWORD

At first they were just appearing in Florida and then they began to pop up in several places. “God billboards” they were called. Nobody seems to know who was paying for them or where they came from. Here is a sampling of what people were seeing as they traveled up and down the highways and byways of America.

Let's Meet At My House Sunday Before The Game. - God
C'mon Over And Bring The Kids. - God
What Part of "Thou Shalt Not..." Didn't You Understand? - God
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Keep Using My Name In Vain And I'll Make Rush Hour Longer. - God
Loved The Wedding, Invite Me To The Marriage. - God
That "Love Thy Neighbor" Thing, I Meant It. - God
I Love You...I Love You...I Love You - God
Will The Road You're On Get You To My Place? - God
My Way Is The Highway- God
Need Directions? - God
You Think It's Hot Here? - God
Tell The Kids I Love Them. - God
Need A Marriage Counselor? I'm Available. - God
Have You Read My #1 Best Seller? There Will Be A Test. - God
Do you have any idea where you're going. - God
And my favorite - “Don’t make me come down there! - God”

So now I add my own - -

“I Ain’t Staying in Any Box! - God”

No, I am not making an attempt at being humorous, and I certainly do not intend anything even close to blasphemy or heresy.

Our God is indeed an awesome God. The God you will find in these pages blows out all barriers of time, space and dimension.

It is my heartfelt intent, in what I share with you among these pages, to encourage all of us to just let God !

1. HOI -POLLOI:

I was a child of the late '30s. Born in 1936, I was raised in a Christian home where my parents kept me in Sunday School as early as I can remember. I was nurtured by loving and caring Sunday School teachers who taught me values and ethics that still guide me today. Craig Kennet Miller at the General Board of Discipleship (The United Methodist Church) would define me as a product of the "Pioneer or Silent Generation." I was raised in a "porch society."

Everyone in our neighborhood spent the summer months out on their porches or under the shade trees in their front yard. Everyone knew me, knew my full name, and helped form my early years. To paraphrase Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York - it took a whole neighborhood to raise me. One of our neighbors, Grandma Potts, used to ask me "How is your hammer hanging?" I never really knew what that meant, but I would always say, "OK!"

I remember our first window box fan. What a relief that was! We did not get our first window air conditioner until I was in junior high school. We can attribute a guy named Willis Carrier, who produced the first room window air conditioners, for closing down the porch society in the South.

I can remember when there was no TV, and when we did get one you had to have this gigantic antenna on your house top - and, worst of all, you had to get up and turn a dial to change to the only one other channel available. The absolutely essential remote control was yet to be invented.

In my early teen years it was Sam Hester in the "Hoi-Polloi" (the common people) Sunday School class who captured my attention and kept me on track in those times when my body was changing in many ways, not the least of which was going from a tenor to a baritone!

Sam was a humble Christian man who owned a service station on Asher Avenue. Sam loved all of us boys and desperately wanted us to know about the Bible and faith issues. He wanted us to know his Jesus in a very personal way!

To my knowledge, he and his wife Bernice did not have any children of their own. She was the church organist and pianist. I do remember this about them, they were always in church.

Being a city kid, I did not have a chance for many fishing expeditions. Sam made sure that all of us "city boys" knew how to fish. He even baited my hook for me ... the first time.

Sam helped us know that we were valued and appreciated as young boys and young men. He made us feel important! He knew our names and who our mothers and fathers were.

I was smart enough to go by his station in my early '20s and thank him for being my friend and mentor.

I was raised in the very strict, ultraconservative, Missionary Baptist faith where if you were not baptized in their baptistry you were not a "true" Christian and could not join "their" church or take "their" communion. Posted on the wall of the church was a list of what you must believe to be a member, including what version of the Bible you must use and read. Everything and everyone else were simply "un-Godly" and guilty of heresy.

Dr. Ben M. Bogard was our pastor. To me he was just Brother Ben, but I later learned he was a prime leader in the nationwide Missionary Baptist Church. He was a great Bible debater. He and the Church of Christ preachers would have those great, protracted debates that were published in books that are still around today. I also have discovered that "Brother Ben" was an arch-segregationist and a leader in the fight to keep Little Rock schools from being integrated.

In my growing up years I was very fortunate to have only been in three Little Rock schools - Woodruff Elementary School, Pulaski Heights Junior High School and Little Rock Central High School. I was in the first graduating class at Little Rock Central High School in 1954. Because of the opening of Hall High School that year we were no longer the only high school in town - Little Rock High School. My graduating class gave the large gold colored letters CENTRAL that are still on the front of the building today. The school was named Little Rock Central High School - and in just three years the whole world would know about it.

My parents never pushed me into a faith decision although we had several conversations about it. They felt that if I made a decision for Christ that it should be mine. My mother was very concerned and, I am sure, prayed for me often. I was a stubborn teen and they never did get me in that deepwater baptistry, but nonetheless I was nurtured as a child and teenager in that southern protestant ultraconservative culture and ethos.

I did all of the crazy things that adolescent teenagers did in the '50s. I never got involved in drugs or alcohol or did anything that landed me in jail. I was not like my friend, Dr. Roger Swanson, former head of Evangelism for the General Board of Discipleship (United Methodist Church), who likes to tell of the story of him and his brother who kept breaking into the nearby Methodist Church to play at their pool table, until one day the preacher caught them - and gave them a key so they would not have to break in.

As a young adult in my '20s I rejected the Missionary Baptist faith. The final breaking point for me was one Sunday when a person joined the church on a profession of faith and was denied communion that morning because he had not yet been baptized. I will never forget that! The pastor

spent about five minutes explaining to this person and the congregation why he could not participate and there I was sitting in my pew thinking “Why not?”

I had been “illegally” taking communion all those years because everybody just assumed that I had been baptized and was a member of the church.

I became disenchanted and dropped out of church until I met my future wife.

I had always had a rock solid faith in Jesus Christ but had never made that a public decision.

When Nell and I were dating in 1962, she was a member of the Washington Avenue Methodist Church in North Little Rock. They were having a week long revival. We had not been dating long but she kept inviting me to come to the revival that week. I finally decided that if I was going to see her that week I had to go to church to do so. When you are in love, you will go to great lengths to be with your girl!

Well, I went and found a true loving community of faith. Everyone surrounded me and made me feel so warm and welcome and loved. They did not have any rules posted on the wall, no grace barriers and no secret way to get to God’s grace. That had never happened to me in church before. Before we were married in February 1963, I began attending with Nell on a regular basis.

It was an old church and it seemed that everyone was kin. I could sense that they cared for each other in deep and abiding ways.

On a Sunday night in December 1962, with my parents proudly present, I came forward and made a profession of faith and Rev. Aaron Barling baptized me and took me into the Methodist Church.

Therefore, I am, by choice, unashamedly and unapologetically a United Methodist evangelical Christian. I try to live that faith day by day and step by step.

I truly believe that Jesus Christ was and is God’s revelation and gift of grace to humankind that came in a particular time in history. I am deeply rooted in a Trinitarian God revealed to us in three ways - God the “Yahweh” of the Old Testament, the creator God (creator of all that we know and all that we do not know), the omnipotent God who is continually present with us. I believe in Jesus Christ as truly the revelation of God in human form that came down and dwelt among us as fully human and fully divine. I truly believe that Jesus Christ was and is the long awaited Messiah for God’s people who had traveled the journey from Egypt. I also believe that Jesus Christ was the savior of all, Jew and Gentile. I believe that Jesus was born of Mary in God’s own way (i.e., immaculate conception). I truly believe that Jesus Christ died a real death on a real cross and that

in three days he emptied that cross and tomb on our behalf and that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And then finally, I believe in the indwelling presence and awesome power of God's Holy Spirit - the sustaining grace that walks with us continually. That is my credo!

One God - with many names - and many revelations, hitting us between the eyes with Love!

People will ask me if I am conservative, moderate, or liberal, and my usual answer is "Yes!" It really depends on the issue at hand. Can I pass the litmus test of the conservatives? - yeah - maybe a B+! I have always used the apostle Paul as my mentor for ministry. If that means that I have to take my Big Mac inside a closet to eat it to keep from offending you - no big deal - I will do it. If it means sitting at your table and eating sushi (yuck!) - well OK - if I need to witness to you about my Jesus I will eat it and look like I am enjoying it. My friend Jim Clemmons took me to eat octopus one time in Baltimore and I survived that! I saw some Cajuns sucking crawfish once in Louisiana - hey, there are limits

2. THE GOD BOX

My lifelong study of God's word, as revealed through our Holy Bible, has convinced me that God cannot be put into anyone's "box."

"God Box" people can be found in every faith group. There are mega and mini churches taking in big bucks by telling their congregations that they have God in a box and here is what God looks like, says and does, and that is that and there is nothing further you need to know! Ever notice how their God always speaks in the language of the King James Bible?

They have their secret "God language," their own secret handshake and secret password.

That is heresy at its worst and an industrial strength ecclesiastical Prozac© at its best. For the folks who want a Sunday "fix" or a midweek "fix," that seems to fit just fine. You don't need to question anything or for that matter "know" anything. Your church, the only "true" church, has it all tied up for you and all you need to do is "show up, shut up and pay up". We sometimes call those SSP churches.

God is revealed to each of us in very special and unique ways. For some, it is wisdom, for others vision, still others possess special gifts and graces. I want to enter a church where I do not have to leave all of that at the door and be spoon-fed someone else's revelation. Yes, there are indeed some churches' doors where you have to check your brain at the door as you enter.

I am continually amazed and puzzled at highly educated people with advanced degrees in the sciences and other disciplines who seem to get all wrapped up in these SSP faith groups. Their brains must be bipolar where one side is stuffed with disciplined, scientifically proven, God-revealed knowledge and the other side is an ugly gray from non-use which they use as their "religious side." Arthur Sulzberger is quoted as saying "I believe in an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out." The corollary of that is a mind that the light of knowledge never enters.

Folks want to wrap their religion up into something mysterious and almost unattainable. We create dogmas and structures that make us appear as something unique and special, when all we are being are "grace barriers."

Our current mantra in the United Methodist Church is "Open Doors, Open Hearts and Open Minds!" (See Chapters 8, 9, & 10) We do pretty good on the first two. It is the last one that we most often stumble across with our mean-spirited dialogue. Our "right wing (ultra conservative)" and "left

wing (ultra liberal)” groups both feel that God is truly on their side. They can even proof text It from “their” Bible. Some are willing to tear our church apart over the issue of human sexuality. Folks get all wrought up about homosexual behavior but wink and grin at heterosexual misbehavior.

One of the most troublesome issue now facing bishops and cabinets in the United Methodist Church is that of marital infidelity among the male clergy - “another preacher has gone and run off with some woman in the church.” Sin seems to take seasons in our theological thinking. Our current designated sin is homosexuality. Folks of the “left wing” group would have us believe that more than two thousand years of church thinking and teaching on the tragedy of human suffering brought about because of homosexual “behavior” is wrong. They tell us that we need to re-tool our thinking to be in step with this new revelation from “God” that has been reshaped to meet our social mores of the day. Those of the “right wing” persuasion reject all medical revelations that persons are homosexual not by choice but by some genetic cause that they have no control over. And the debate goes on - sometimes at the “screaming level.” Folks are willing to get arrested and carried off to jail to have their say!

Some say, “love the sinner” but “condemn the sin.” That sounds good but doing it seems so difficult.

Do you think that God really will stay in either of these boxes?

The clouds were dark as the General Conference gathered in session in 1956 in Minneapolis. The church was split - - North and South. Would those gathered to represent the Methodist Church follow their guts or their hearts?

The battle lines were drawn - - the issue was whether or not to give African-Americans equal voice and vote in “their white churches.”

Delegates walked from meeting to meeting with heads down and hearts heavy.

Everyone was wondering what was going to happen. There were threatened walk outs. There was talk of organizing the southern church all over again. Caucuses were having all nighters to plot their strategy.

Dr. Harry Denman headed Evangelism for the church at the time. Harry gathered a group of like-minded individuals who organized an all night prayer vigil the night before the vote was to be taken the next day. Word got out that Brother Harry and a bunch were praying over it all night. North and South both loved and respected Brother Harry. He has been in their churches, preached at their camp meetings. He was a man of unquestionable integrity and a deep and abiding faith.

They made history the next day when the General Conference voted to end segregation in all of its churches.

One observer said, "I shall never forget the raining down of the Holy Ghost the next morning when we came to the auditorium. No more bickering. Harry Denman had prayed."

The church did not split. The world as they knew it did not come to an end. Life went on and folks returned to their pews. We are still not fully recovered, at least in the south, from the sins of segregation. However, the issue of African Americans in our churches is no longer an issue - - it is now just who we are.

I graduated from Little Rock Central High School in 1954. Designated as the most beautiful high school in the United States. Mine was the first graduating class from LRCHS - - Another high school opened that year and we were no longer the only high school in town. My graduating class gave the word CENTRAL that you now see emblazoned in gold letters across the front of the school. The historic Brown vs. Board of Education ruling had been made by the Supreme Court. We could see dark clouds gathering on the horizon.

In 1954 the boys would gather outside the entrances to Central for a smoke break and brag about what they were going to do when the first blacks showed up. How macho they were!

Then 1957! If you lived through that time you can never think of Central High and not also think about what happened on that beloved campus in 1957. Suddenly my high school was catapulted onto the world stage. There was no turning back. I lived in Little Rock through that era. I saw raw hatred up close and personal. Those of us destined to live our lives in Little Rock during that time were afraid to go within blocks of 14th and Park Streets.

You have seen the news clips. You know the history. It was just one of many to come "final stands" in the name of segregation that was to be taken across our nation during that time. It was a terribly dark time in our history.

There were people totally convinced that if one black was admitted to Central that the "Southern way of life" would forever come to an end.

Today, Little Rock Central High School, is again a model school. It is still the most beautiful high school in America. It now has one of the highest SAT score averages of any high school in the state. It has the highest percentage of college bound students than any other high school. Kids of all colors and cultures are now a part of the fabric of that school. There have been many African-American class presidents and school Principals. It is now a model for the entire world.

The “Southern way of life” as we knew it in 1957 did, thankfully and mercifully, come to an end. It has been replaced by a peaceful coexistence of all of God’s children.

There is a new battle raging in the United Methodist Church. The battle this time is not one involving race - - it is now one involving human sexuality.

The wagons are being circled and the battle maps are out again. We saw first evidence of that this year as the annual conferences elected their delegations to the 2004 General Conference. The letters were sent, endorsements were made, and you were told who to vote for to keep the United Methodist Church from ruin.

Historically, unfortunately, the United Methodist Church has mirrored our political environment instead of modeling Jesus Christ.

We have seen our church at its very worst as the debate rages on. The 2000 General Conference in Cleveland ended in shambles. I was there. They made arrests and carried people to jail - - just so they could have their say. The plenary of the General Conference was shut down by demonstrations.

Bishop Gregory Palmer of the Iowa Area has recently said: “If Christians can’t find a meaningful way to work through tough stuff without gouging each other’s eyes out, it could well be we do not have a hope of modeling anything redemptive for the world.”

The United States Supreme Court has just ruled all “sodomy” laws to be unconstitutional. This week’s Newscope reports on the ruling and shows a lesbian couple on the cover. The issue of gay unions (some say marriages) is now THE issue.

Old Testament images of gloom and doom are being recast upon this issue.

There are cries from across our land that we are now on a slippery slope that will completely ruin the family unit as we know it. The talking heads on television are screaming at each other. There are those that say civilization as we know it will come to an end. Images of Sodom and Gomorrah are being cast upon us.

It all sounds all too familiar to me. We heard it in 1956. We heard it in 1957. We are hearing it again in 2003. As that great philosopher, Yogi Berra, once said, “It is *deja vu* all over again!”

Will the United Methodist Church as we know it come to an end over this issue? Will the church split? Will there be a conservative church? Will there be a liberal church? Or will we be content to continue to just gouge each other’s eyes out?

Some of you will chastise me to dare to even compare the issue of integration with that of human sexuality. While the elements of each issue are not the same at all, our church is going through the same trauma! We are a bleeding and hurting church over an issue that deeply divides us. These are tough issues.

We are again walking with our heads down and our hearts heavy.

In their advertising Buick brought car designer Harley Earl back from the dead to design a new line of Buicks for the 21st Century.

Do we need to resurrect Brother Harry to come back and “pray over us”?

I think so!

God has revealed to our scientists that creation is still going on - God’s universe is still expanding and being created. Isn’t it great that God has not given up on us yet - or at some point in history just quit being God?!

There was a story going around about “heaven” a few years ago that went something like this: It seems that heaven turned out to be this high-rise, multi-tower building filled with condominiums (always knew I would end up in one of those someday). Each arriving saint would be met by old St. Pete or one of his assistants and escorted to their condo. One day a newly sainted one was being escorted up to their new heavenly home when she noticed that the floor indicator on the elevator skipped floors 25 to 30. She asked why there were no floors numbered 25 through 30. To which the angelic escort said: “Well these floors are reserved for those who thought that theirs was the only true religion, they have their own elevator, and we do not want them to know that anyone else is here!”

The God of kairos time (see Chapter 3) does not fit in that box or in any box you and I might create out of our own denominational prejudices and cultures, or even our Christian prejudices.

Just as soon as we think we have God neatly folded up in a ribbon-tied box - POP! Out God comes to surprise us and say

- - **“I ain’t staying in any box!”**

3. GOD'S TIME:

We live by the clock! Our time is measured in 60-second minutes, 60-minute hours, 24-hour days, months, years, centuries, millenniums. Our finite minds can only understand time in this dimension. Most of us wear a chronograph on our wrist to tell us what time it is. I would hazard a guess that we probably check for the correct time more than we do anything else except breathe.

Chronos time marches on second by second in exactly measurable ticks and tocks. I have a computer program that goes to the Naval Observatory, via the Internet, and comes back and tells my computer exactly what time it is - to the nanosecond. I have an electronic clock on the wall in my study that is updated twice a day to the exact time via a radio signal from who knows where.

“Kairos” is another Greek understanding of time. Kairos time is not measurable and cannot be read on any clock yet invented. Kairos time - God's time - is in a dimension we cannot fathom or really comprehend. This is the time in which creation came into being and in which in God's own time and way - we came into being.

What was significant about the timing and place of the birth of Jesus - - the coming of God to each of us? What was God thinking about anyway? What was going on in the cosmos of God's time (kairos) to trigger such a marvelous gift to us?

Why not earlier? Why not now? Why not later in history?

As they say “timing is everything” - and God always knows exactly what time it is!

Everyone got excited in the closing months of 1999 about something called Y2K - about the new millennium. People were buying generators and preparing to “hole up” for the duration. The folks who sell survival equipment and supplies had a gold mine on their hands. The computer programmers and manufacturers didn't do badly either making sure all of our computers were ready for Y2K. Yes, I fell for it also - and spent some big bucks making sure my computers were ready.

The hype was really humorous. Our calendar that told us we were beginning a new millennium is “man-made.” Some of “those men” began counting the years all over again. They felt themselves of such importance and believed so much that their world circulated around them that they began counting the years from the beginning of their reign. At one time there were several calendars, all different. And then when Jesus came along we began counting all over again.

After all of our hype about a “new millennium,” there God was already standing in the year 2000, smiling and beckoning us to come on in! The God of Creation had already prepared the way for us, and we were scurrying for our “hidy-holes.”

We know from scientifically proven, sound, physical God-revealed evidence that our Earth is billions of years old. Indeed, eons of millennia have come and passed with just another tock of the clock. Why did we get so excited about a new beginning, a new millennium, something we call the third millennium? The reason is that we have absolutely no concept of kairos time.

Genesis says, “In the beginning, God.” For eons people have been trying to apply our Chronos time and finite understanding to that and simply have come up short every time. God revealed to those chosen to first write down the creation stories the simple fact that it was “God - in the beginning.” We have been trying to express all of that in terms of “human understanding” ever since. The Genesis writers tried to express it in their understanding and gave us the seven-day version we have been debating ever since.

I have best reconciled that in my own faith journey with this understanding -

“In the beginning - God!”

That is sufficient!

4. GOD'S WORD:

“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path”

I have been teaching Sunday School for 35 years. I have taught Disciple I, Disciple II and several other Bible studies, including a six-year course through the entire Bible. I have lead one group through “Witness” which is the study to train and equipment witnesses for Jesus Christ that has been released by the General Board of Discipleship and The Foundation for Evangelism. I have a full shelf of Bibles in my study, of every translation and paraphrase. I have six translations on my computer.

I am a Bible believin', totin', quotin' Christian!

God's Word is my teacher, advisor, sustainer, comforter and play book! I have virtually worn out several Bibles. I marked a couple up so bad that I could no longer use them.

A new revelation comes every time I open and read God's word. It is like mining for gold and coming up with a precious nugget every time.

No, I do not believe that God handed down the Bible through a big cloud one day or as some believe that God dictated every word.

My life-long study of this Holy Word has convinced me that what we have is a compilation of writings of holy people who were tapped out by the Holy One for a mission in their time. They wrote from their own culture and understanding of what God had revealed to them. Are there errors in the texts? Sure, because imperfect humans were involved. Somehow God has always used imperfect humans to accomplish divine intervention. The record is clear on that!

Our Bible is full of “losers” whom God made into “winners.” Who among us would have selected Moses and Miriam, Abraham and Sarah, Isaiah, David, Mary and Joseph, Peter and Paul? Why did God call out The Wesley's Suzanna and Samuel and John and Charles, Ghandi, Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King? Why did God call you out?

Bible scholars and archaeologists are still searching for the “holy grail” of holy texts - the first writings of Genesis to Revelation. Somewhere, hopefully, there is a “Qumran” where they will eventually be found. The closer we get to the original sources the truer our translations will be. Every intervening era of “scribes” made their own errors in transcribing the texts and scribes being scribes used a free editorial hand on the texts.

Because of my administrative skills I have served as secretary of several bodies both within and outside the church, including a general agency of The United Methodist Church. Believe me, a “scribe” can take a set of minutes and do wonders with an otherwise “blah” meeting. If you do not have someone checking your work very closely you can even sometimes get away with “making the meeting go like you wanted it to.” I can just see some folks now scrambling to find some minutes that I wrote of meetings they attended. Gotcha!

We are living in a time when our knowledge base is expanding quicker than ever before. The onset of computer technology and the internet have increased the pace to phenomenal speeds on the Information Superhighway. When scholars were working on translating the King James Bible, their tools were primitive compared to what translators have at their disposal today. So many more “Rosetta stones” have been found that have added eons of scholarship and precision to the process.

What will the Bible of the next millennium look like? One thousand years from now, when our civilization is being excavated, what Holy Writ will be revealed? Will they choose any of the writings of John Wesley? Will Charles Wesley be the new Psalm writer? Will Mother Teresa’s writings be included? How about the awesome prophetic words of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Translations from the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Will there be a Gospel according to Jim Lane?

Will there be a Gospel according to you?

Heresy, you say! At some point in history did God stop revealing, calling out and using imperfect humans to accomplish God’s purpose in creation?

Are we through with revelations about Jesus? Is there not a word for our time? Who will write it?

There is a lot of mystique and superstition about how our Bible came into being. Any good study Bible of the last 15 years will reveal how the “canonization” of the Holy Bible took place. Simply stated, it was a lot of old religious guys who cloistered themselves and began to go through their libraries and finally decided what would be “in” and what would be “out.” The “canonizers” debated long and hard on some ancient texts.

History tells us that some of our “sacred books” just barely made it. The Apocrypha and the Gospel of Thomas are good examples of excellent faith resources that these “old religious guys” simply chose to leave out. The Apocrypha was in for a while and then out. And we now know

that a lot of really excellent, God-inspired writings were left out. Some of those are available in print today.

But would anyone mess with the “canon?” No way! I would not begin to judge the theological sway of those “old religious guys,” I will let you work that one out on your own. Contemporary history, however, is very revealing on this subject, check it out and you will find they were true sons of their time, politics and culture. However and nevertheless, that is what we are stuck with (blessed with) as our “Holy Bible.” Hey, it works for me!

The God box people will argue, “That is what God said and that’s it!”

John’s gospel tells the shortest creation and nativity story. It goes something like this: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” How’s that for a “Reader’s Digest” version of Genesis 1 and 2 and Luke 2? That “Word” continues to speak to us, and that will never end!

That word continues to come to us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through the word and touch of those around us and through the God-inspired writings of God’s messengers.

That will never end!

5. GOD'S CREATION:

Creation, Big Bang or whatever - God did it in God's way and in God's time.

We try to box God into seven days of our time in the Genesis creation stories and all we can do is get into senseless arguments about "how long were those days anyway?" Don't you just love to hear "religious folks" argue with each other over who is right? And, friends, some of them are totally convinced that they are correct and everyone else is wrong. They will even form a new church over this issue - those who believe in seven of our twenty-four hour days and those who do not.

State legislatures and school boards get a little crazy from time to time and start legislating in this creation/evolution debate, and folks get all heated up over which is right. Sometimes I just wish that they would leave the subject out of textbooks entirely. There are many more important issues for teachers, students, parents and school administrators to cope with than the issue of how we came onto the scene. Subjects such as ethics, social graces, behavior and conflict management are what most young folks need to be immersed in.

Aren't you glad that God did not quit on us after seven days (however long they were)?! Just imagine what some of us would look and be like if God had!

Do you think that Divine Creation was all God ever did? Seven days and that was that. Shortest career I have ever heard of.

Yes, God is still creating, moment by moment. God's unknown vast creation is continually expanding. We cannot even imagine its vastness or comprehend its beginning or end.

A few years ago I saw an interesting movie at the IMAX. It portrayed creation as beginning like a small atom - an atom that contained all that we and creation will ever be. It was in God's hand that the atom began its miraculous journey.

It was an awesome visual. It began with a baby on planet Earth and then backed through space until Earth was no longer discernable from the other planets and our sun was no longer visible among the millions of other stars. It kept backing up through the "big bang" and finally all there was left was a solid block of matter that would fit in a hand - the hand of God!

A friend once asked me, "if there were a beginning and an ending to our universe then what was it contained within?" I told him to quit messing with my finite brain! A member of an earlier civilization was discussing creation and another said that the Earth rested on the back of a turtle.

His companion asked what that turtle was on, and he explained that it was on the back of another turtle. Well, and what is that turtle on, the conversation continued, to which the reply came that “it was turtles all the way down!”

If you believe, as I do, that God is still revealing and creating, then hear this: God is constantly revealing creation to us the wonders of our God-created world, through dedicated scholars and scientists. These people are not making all of these revelations up. It is not some kind of nutty conspiracy. It is God-inspired, scholarly research and very hard, lifelong work. Through these dedicated professionals, God is letting us, see a glimpse of creation in kairos time.

My momma used to say, “Never get mad at news you did not like.” It is humbling indeed to think that at one time, in God’s time, we might have looked something like a block of solid matter in the hand of God.

Isn’t it marvelous how God is continuing to reveal this marvelous creation through our medical sciences. Cancer may be cured in our lifetime. Wow! It was recently announced they have a very promising cancer drug that could completely eliminate one particular kind of killer cancer. Got a plugged up heart artery? Get a bypass or a stent and get up the next day or so and be on your way. Who would have ever imagined?!

Our family doctor told me pharmacologists are now creating formulas that go direct to single genes and cells and implement a cure to that gene or cell only. God will reveal to us, through gene therapy, unheard of miracles in the medical sciences.

That just did not happen by accident. God is still revealing and creating through “God-incidents.”

Archeologists have unearthed evidence of “God” in almost every known predecessor period in our history as a planet. I am fascinated by what has been revealed to us from looking into the ruins of previous civilizations. The primitive writings that are found on cave walls, in ancient pyramids and in ritual mounds have revealed early primitive knowledge of Creator. In every case it has now been revealed that a deity had been worshiped.

When a civilization truly worshiped that God, that civilization survived. Some cultures created their own gods so they could cover all the bases with “many gods” that let them live in perverse sinfulness. These cultures and their gods did not survive. But in almost every case there is evidence that each culture instinctively knew that they were a part of something beyond themselves - that was God’s revelation for their time - just as Jesus Christ was and is our revelation for “our” time and our place in space!

6. ANGELS - GOD'S MESSENGERS:

Ever seen an angel? A woman in the Sunday School class that I teach says that she has and that it resided in her home for some time. She says that all the time the angel's apparition appeared that she felt complete love, joy and acceptance. She is a sweet grandmother, not some kind of "nut case." This same sweet lady has a parrot that says, "God is Good, All The Time!"

Angel jewelry is very popular. One of the very popular television programs is "Touched by an Angel."

My wife and I have countless "man made" angels throughout our home, almost in every room. We have been led to believe by religious artists down through the ages that angels are heavenly beings with long flowing white robes and wings. Our Bible text reports on angels appearing to announce God events almost from the very beginning. The Bible even attributes a "pecking order" and names to some of the more prominent ones! Michael and Gabriel seem to be the chiefs among them!

A popular gospel song says that "there were angels all around." Angels are God's messengers, God's arms and legs, God's touch, God's very presence, God walking around among us.

I have not met an angel yet who had a flowing white robe, wings and a halo, but I have encountered God's angels.

Let me tell you about one I met July 4, 2000. When I awoke, my stomach was churning and I felt very nauseated. As the day progressed, I got sicker and sicker. I tried to eat some lunch and in a few minutes it came up, along with everything else I had recently eaten. Well, tough old me says, "I can whip this thing." My intestinal system had other ideas.

By 3:00 p.m. I was in the Emergency Room very, very sick. Dr. Rich Doncer and the folks at St. Vincent North soon had my "innards" calmed down and I decided that I was going to live after all. Dr. Doncer sat me up on the table and began to listen to my lungs from the back. He made an off-hand statement about a mole on my back and said a dermatologist might need to look at it. My wife had mentioned it a couple of times, but you know how us "guys" are about things like that.

Well, I made an appointment with Dr. Jay Flaming, and he took a biopsy and sent it off for a check. A few days later Dr. Flaming called me. It is never good news when the doctor himself calls you after a test. He said, "Jim, you have a superficial spreading malignant melanoma that we need to get removed right away."

Friends, the only words I heard were “malignant melanoma,” I heard nothing after that. I knew what that cancer could do to you, and I was scared. I saw Dr. Virgile Lyons the next week, and we scheduled surgery. Dr. Lyons excised the affected area. The pathology report was very good. The cancer was very superficial and had not broken into the lower skin levels. Praise God, we caught it in time!

Now what did that angel God sent to me look like? Well, he was dressed in white but he had a stethoscope around his neck and the words “Richard M. Doncer, M.D.” on his coat.

Has God ever sent you on an angel mission? How many times has God used you to meet someone at a life intersection to help that person make the right choice and go down the right path? Or to find a malignant mole on a back? Or to just help someone cry? Sometimes God will send you to hold someone’s hand or just to listen.

Let me tell you about an angel with whom I crossed paths last year.

I was serving as the Lay Leader at my church. Our pastor and I decided to present “Witness” on two different nights. His class was Monday night and mine was Wednesday night. The classes lasted an hour or more. I had seven students and he had six. Let me tell you about one of my Wednesday night trail hikers.

Her name is Pepper! Married, mother of two, the youngest less than a year old when we started. She and her husband joined our church when they were transferred into our area by his career.

Pepper admitted a Bible illiteracy when we began. She excited all of us with her eagerness to get into God’s word and to learn to share her faith. She was so open and curious. She would ask extremely probing questions that would make us all stop and do some searching. We all helped her learn her way around in the Bible. She finally bought a new version with a tab index. Pepper wanted to know about everything!

During the course of the year she got deeply involved with our church’s ministry with children and was elected as the Children’s Coordinator at our last Charge Conference.

Like many churches in our area, our church has made a decision to change the children’s graded Sunday School to a new concept called “Rotation Sunday School.” Pepper and her committee visited other churches already into the program and are almost ready to launch at our church. She so excited our Administrative Council about it that they gave her an ovation and no negative votes when she presented it.

She and another young mother have now begun a Mother's Day Out program two days each week. Their goal is to be fully licensed by the State.

We had been talking in our Witness group about those "Ah ha!" moments when we know that the Holy Spirit has come upon us and really feel the presence of God's Holy Angels around us. We had also discussed the importance of everyone being a faithful Disciple of Jesus Christ.

I received an e-mail from Pepper one day in which she shared with me that she was sending an e-mail to another of her planning group for the new Mother's Day Out program, when it suddenly occurred to her to call the program the "Little Disciples Mother Day Out" program. Her dream is not to just warehouse children, but to train them in Christian discipleship. Tears came to her eyes as she experienced God's Holy Spirit warming her heart and giving her a real "Ah ha!" moment.

One more personal angel story.

When you undergo an EECPP procedure (* Enhanced External Counterpulsation (EECP) treatment is a noninvasive, outpatient procedure to relieve angina by improving perfusion in areas of the heart deprived of adequate blood.) they strap these big blood pressure machine type cuffs around each of your legs, each of your thighs and your abdomen. You are literally Velcro© strapped to the bed. Try as you might you cannot get up!

It is five days a week, Monday through Friday, one hour each day, for seven weeks. You have to clear your schedule for seven weeks for that period that you are undergoing your treatments. Carrie said no excuses, other than death!

Well what are you going to do strapped to a mat for one hour each day with this machine pumping away to make your heart stronger? Here is what happened to me.

Carrie is a dedicated health professional if there is ever was one! She says that this is the most rewarding opportunity she has ever had in her nursing career. She can see real progress in her patients. Carrie is a loving and caring Christian nurse.

Carrie is the Angel that God sent into my life. You see she had to have me strapped down with Velcro©, where I could not move to get my full attention.

Remember Balaam from Numbers 22:26. "Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left."

I was very much like old Balaam. I had to be Velcro'd in where I could not get away for the Angel that God had sent to me to get my attention. I literally had to be where I could not turn to the left or the right.

Here is what Angel Carrie has taught me - -

- If God says NO - - take NO for an answer!
- God's time is always on time!
- You're not "Charlie in Charge" anymore - - get over it!
- When your ego says GO and your body says NO - - follow your body. It is God's way of telling you to slow down!
- Even though you have been the "fire horse" all your life - - next time the fire bell rings stay in the pasture!
- Follow for a while and let others lead! Remember Albert Camut's great advise (Don't walk in front of me, I may not want to follow. Don't walk behind me I might not want to lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend!)
- Eat healthy!
- Read labels!
- When your burden gets heavy, and it will, tell God that you are turning it over to him, and learn to let go!
- Remember you cannot fix every thing that is wrong!
- Get regular exercise (nothing to jar your innards, go at your own pace)!
- Don't be a couch potato!
- Learn to say NO with grace and meaning!
- Take your prescriptions on time!

- Don't rush! If you don't get there on time - - that's OK.
- Follow the sage advise of ole' Satchel Page - - "Never look back, something might be gaining on you!"
- There is absolutely nothing worth risking your health and well being for!
- God will forgive you!
- God loves you!

There is a story of several years ago about a man who was sitting on the roof of his house as the waters lapped at the eaves. Two guys in a boat came by to offer help to which he replied, "God will take care of me." The boat went on to help someone else. The waters continued to rise until the water was at his feet. Another boat came by to which he repeated, "God will take care of me." Time passed and by now the water was up to his chin and he was treading water. A helicopter flies over and lets down a rope ladder. He waives them off and says, "God will take care of me."

He next finds himself at the Pearly Gates spitting out water and complaining to Saint Peter that he had always thought that God would "take care of him." To which old St. Pete says, "Well, we sent two boats and a helicopter to save you and you refused our help."

Don't ignore the angels that God sends into your life!

From an unknown author on the Internet -

What Do Angels Look Like?

Like the little old lady who returned your wallet yesterday.

Like the taxi driver who told you that your eyes light up the world, when you smile.

Like the small child who showed you the wonder in simple things.

Like the poor man who offered to share his lunch with you.

Like the rich man who showed you that it really is all possible, if only you believe.

Like the stranger who just happened to come along when you had lost your way.

Like the friend who touched your heart when you didn't think you had one to touch.

Angels come in all sizes and shapes all ages and skin types.

Some with freckles, some with dimples, some with wrinkles, some without.

They come disguised as friends, enemies, teachers, students, lovers and fools.

They don't take life too seriously - they travel light.

They leave no forwarding address - they ask nothing in return.

They wear sneakers with gossamer wings - they get a deal on dry cleaning.

They are hard to find when your eyes are closed, but

They are everywhere you look - when you choose to see.

7. MY FRIEND EVON:

I have a new friend. His name is Evon. Evon is Jewish by birth and Christian by choice. He put together my desk, which arrived unassembled. When he came to our home, I noticed that he had both a Star of David and a Christian fish symbol on his shirt, I asked him about it and he told me his story. It turned out he was kind of like Harry Denman, a layman who formerly headed the Methodist Church Board of Evangelism, who was known not to wear a watch so he could ask people the time and then tell them about Jesus!

Evon truly believes that Jesus Christ is God's Messiah! He is a Jewish Christian.

His parents and siblings are Jewish both by birth and faith practice. Evon also truly believes that in God's kingdom - this same God who is both revealed through the Old Testament prophets and through Jesus Christ - that they will be reunited! He believes that the same Holy Spirit unites us all - Jew and Gentile, slave and free, woman and man.

Our brothers (and it was mostly brothers) in the Southern Baptist movement wanted to proselyte in the Jewish community during a meeting they were having one summer. Now ain't that something! I am sure that Jesus was gently smiling and saying, "Hey, my earthly mother and father and grandparents were faithful to Yahweh and followed all of God's commandments. Their ancestors do not need converting to be claimed, by name, by a loving and gracious God."

In the Spring of 2001, a United Methodist clergyman in Marietta, Georgia, refused to let a high school baccalaureate service be held in "his church" when it became known that a Jewish rabbi was to speak. However, the student-parent committee in charge of planning the service moved its location to a civic center, where the Jewish rabbi was the speaker.

The United Methodist pastor's decision not to let the Jewish Rabbi deliver the baccalaureate sermon for the high school students at the church generated a public debate and a media frenzy that raised charges of religious intolerance on the one hand, and, on the other, questions about how much diversity can be accepted without compromising one's faith. Although the United Methodist clergyman expressed regret that "any of God's children should be upset or pained in any way," he stood firm in his belief that only Christ will be preached from the pulpit of "his church," which had grown five-fold in membership during his 13 years as senior pastor. "We are Christians," he said, "and the only deity we exalt is God personified in Jesus Christ. When it comes to denying who we are, that's where we draw the line." Let me quickly add that the United Methodist leadership in Georgia was quick to distance themselves from this decision by a "pastor-in-charge."

This really begs the question: Would this United Methodist clergyperson deny Jesus, who was a Jewish rabbi, the right to speak from his pulpit?

"We are Christians, and the only deity we exalt is God personified in Jesus Christ. When it comes to denying who we are, that's where we draw the line."

Do you remember when Jesus, this Jewish rabbi, drew a line in the sand? A woman, caught in adultery, deserving of the death penalty, was at his feet where she had been cast down. What did Jesus do? What would Jesus do?

Oh, the arrogance of it all, when we Christians want to cram God into our "Christian box." One of my clergy friends says that is "universalist" thinking. God is not only a universal God - God is the Alpha and Omega of what we know and more important, of what we do not know, see or hear!

8. WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT - - OPEN HEARTS

We are the church of the “Warm Heart”

John Wesley described his experience at the small mission on Aldersgate Street in London in terms that we understand. We know what is like to have our “hearts strangely warmed”.

God’s Holy Spirit just comes over us, envelopes and hugs us, and we feel love all around us. A young mother than I know uses this phrase, “I just get Holy Ghost bumps all over!”

John Wesley had gone through all the motions, he had been to preachers school, he had been to college, he was an Anglican Priest. He says that he went most unwillingly to a small gathering of lay folks who were having a store front meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. I imagine he sat on the back row since the meeting was going on when he got there. Tradition has it that a man who was a house painter by trade was reading from Martin Luther’s Preface to the Book of Romans. While a scholarly piece, it would hardly incite anyone today. Dull as dishwater!

But, God works miracles in our lives at the most unexpected times when we least expect it. John Wesley rejoiced in the fact that he felt his heart “strangely warmed”. For the first time ever his salvation became personal - - he felt HIS sins were wiped away.

A WOW moment for sure! Well Brother John was never the same again. History records that a religious revival overspread England all because a diminutive Anglican Priest “felt his heart strangely warmed”.

That Revival Fire came to America, and spread from shore to shore. At one time around 1900 we were opening two new Methodist churches a day

An Open Heart is a loving heart, a caring heart, a healing heart, a welcoming heart, a listening heart, a hugging heart - - a heart that is always open!

Mark, the gospel writer, tells the story of Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the transfiguration experience only to witness a squabble amongst his disciples, the town folk and some of the high church officials. The other disciples had been trying to cure this poor kid with Epilepsy and had been highly unsuccessful. These same disciples had cured others on many other occasions. What went wrong this time? They tried to remember what Jesus had done and mimic him. The desperate father came to Jesus and the boy was healed. Later the disciples asked Jesus what happened. He told them that their prayers were just not getting through because of their lack of obedience and faith. They were depending on and trusting in their own power.

Jesus was talking about power that only comes by the Holy Spirit. To pray “in the spirit” we must have the “strangely warmed heart” that has been set on fire by the Pentecostal Fires of God’s Holy Spirit.

And that is what I believe about - - Open Hearts!

9. WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT - - OPEN MINDS

When the United Methodist Church says that we believe in and practice - - Open Minds - - what do we mean?

John Wesley is quoted as saying something like this - - “If your heart is as my heart then take me by the hand” In essentials unity and in nonessentials charity. Think and let think has been our mantra for a long time. That is the reason our church is so rich with diversity.

Ours is a global church with many languages, cultures and many ways of “being” the church.

I have met United Methodist folk from all across the theological spectrum. Some march to a very different drum beat - - than I do. Does that mean that they are “wrong” and I am “right”. Does that mean that we cannot commune together at the table of Jesus?

Those of us of the “Southern Tradition” think that “The Kingdom” rises and sets in our back yard. We have our great revival tradition of camp meetings and evangelistic fervor. We are mostly evangelical and hold to very traditional standards.

My travels around the world attending World Methodist Conferences have convinced me that we who hover under the Wesley umbrella are about as diverse a group as you will find.

While we might be different in dress, speech, color of skin, culture and way of approaching the “Throne of Grace” - - we are all alike in spirit. We yearn for the same freedoms, and we yearn to breathe free. We are all “God’s Kids” and God loves us all just the same.

Our mission as a church is to produce Disciples who love and serve Jesus Christ.

We can tell all those who stand outside our doors - - come on in! You do not have to leave your brain at the door as you enter!

We are a church of an Open Mind!

10. WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT - - OPEN DOORS

“Behold I stand at the door and knock” our Savior says. Our desire is that Jesus never has to stand at the doors of our churches and knock - - and find no one home. Or find us unwilling to open the doors wide to welcome the sojourner who comes our way.

A popular movie of a few years back had the line of “Build it and they will come!” While that might work for baseball fields - - it seldom works for churches.

Having a church of an Open Door is hard work.

We must thrust open the doors of our Churches, as we go out in ministry and service. We need to quit sitting around in meetings talking about what we ought to do - - and get out and about and be in ministry. If every church would declare a moratorium on meetings next year and send the people out - - equipped and prepared to offer Christ to their world, what do you think would happen? United Methodists who are dispersed for mission and ministry onto the highways and by ways of our global community - - just think about it? Folks, it should be obvious by now to everyone that we can't, as Wesley said, "Offer them Christ" - - by sitting in the Churches waiting for something to happen.

Our doors should always be open and the lights on every night. We can no longer afford tabernacles that are used on Sunday's only!

Mission Stations - - Saving Stations - - Empowering Stations - - Equipping and Sending Stations

First, our Churches must become "full service mission stations". Centers for spiritual renewal and personal commitment. Stations where the sweet, Holy Spirit of God has permeated and engaged a whole community of believers. Stations that are community centers of wholeness and healing. Stations that serve as a welcoming beacon to all God's children who are seekers of The Way. Stations where everyone "standing in the need of prayer" will find love, forgiveness, acceptance and haven.

Second, we must become United Methodist "saving stations" where love abides, and all God's children can find salvation, healing, wholeness and safety. We shall offer Christ as Savior to God's people, to the community and to God's world. We shall be centers of fellowship where all people feel included, loved and valued - - a place where everybody knows your name! We must create a myriad of programs of ministry and healing for young, old, men, women, boys, girls, married, single, senior citizens, persons with disabling conditions, all persons who are hurting - - ALL God's children.

Third, we need United Methodist Church "empowering stations" to offer vital and exciting opportunities for worship and learning. We are people of The Book. It is absolutely essential that we know and understand our Book.

Let's take a really honest look at how we conduct our worship services. Do they communicate the Good News gospel? Do they lift up the excitement and call of the Pentecostal fires of a Church in mission and ministry? Do they offer Christ? With God's help, do we lead persons to conversion and commitment? Do we have an opportunity for conversion and commitment at every service? Today worship must be exciting and vital. Worship must address our heart felt and gut felt needs with the integrity of Holy Scripture.

We must feed others with God's manna and lead them to the well with the water that will quench their thirst forever. We must meet the spiritual needs of our people! Let us challenge each other to ministry and service as Disciples of Jesus Christ. Let us "Lift high the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim!"

Fourth we must become "equipping and sending stations" where we equip persons for ministry and send them out into the community and world for mission and ministry. Equipping the Saints for ministry is one of our most challenging tasks. Hands-on training for ministry and skill building events are what we need for the 21st century. Every Church should have a part time or full time Director of Volunteers. This person must be a dedicated church worker who has caught the vision and is willing to be equipped and sent and to equip and send others into mission and ministry in the Church and in the community and world.

We must learn to listen to all our people. Our best ideas for ministry come from those who live out their lives in the everyday world who have seen the struggles and injustices. People who see ways out for those who are in need and who are hurting. We need to help these with vision, sometimes far beyond our own, to translate their ideas, hopes and dreams into ministry.

And that is what I believe about - - Open Doors.

11. GOD'S REVELATION:

Jesus Christ is my way, truth and light. I teach about Jesus Christ and I witness to others about my faith in Jesus Christ. But, at the same time, I also truly believe that this same creator God is revealed to many cultures in many different ways - *all revelations as valid as mine.*

What did Jesus mean when he said in John 14:6:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

To whom was it said? Into what historical and cultural setting was it said, experienced and understood? Have our best scholars interpreted it succinctly from that language, understanding and culture into our language, understanding and culture? Out of context "proof texting" is not helpful to our understanding of this Biblical truth.

How do we understand this truth in light of our belief and understanding of the Holy Trinity?

There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus truly uttered these or similar words to the people of the day in which he walked among us. His mission was to reveal God to all who would believe. Some believed but, alas, most did not. Their hate, ignorance and intolerance put Jesus on a cross of crucifixion at the town dump.

I am continually amazed at the revelations of the universe we live in. I am not naive or self-centered enough to believe that God's marvelous, fathomless creation was put in place for just this grain of sand that we call Earth. Our best telescopes now reveal to us that there exists thousands of galaxies just like our own with their own star/suns and planets revolving around them. Worldwide studies reveal that there is life-sustaining capability on these planets.

Rev. Jesse Jackson once said, "God don't make no junk." All that God is revealing to our scientists about our neighboring galaxies is not junk either. There is a God intent for all that we know and all that we do not know.

God has been revealed in some rather miraculous ways to every age and stage of humankind. Archaeological discoveries are revealing that God's creation is eons older than we even imagined. This spaceship that God has created for us - we call it Earth - is just filled with God. You want to know the real miracle? God is not done with it yet. Yes, we are still being created - moment by moment, day by day.

Ever seen a UFO? I have. A neighbor and I were standing on the sub-flooring in his new home just being constructed across the street from ours. We were looking across the Ranch Estates valley and all of sudden there it was - a small UFO that made a big circle in the sky and disappeared. I have not seen one since. No, I am not some kind of UFO / alien nut! I do not believe that there is some kind of vast conspiracy to keep UFO secrets from us. I could not see any "beings" in the craft, and it appeared almost transparent.

Have we been visited by alien beings? Gosh, I don't know. I've never seen anyone or anything I would identify as an alien. I did see a teenager with green hair once, and gold rings everywhere, and I do mean everywhere, but I think he was just being "cool."

How was the Creator revealed to creation in other galaxies and dimensions? How do they understand Creator? Was there a living revelation? Did they experience a Jesus? Do they have an indwelling presence (Holy Spirit) that sustains them?

Some folks are convinced that what you can see with the "naked eye" is all there is to God. God has revealed to us through such tools as the Hubble Telescope and other "eyes into the sky" that we are indeed not alone. There are perhaps thousands of galaxies almost identical to ours. Could it be that God, the omnipotent creator, also left footprints of "God Love" in those places? Who knows what those creations might be like and just exactly how God chose to be revealed. I sure hope that when God was revealed to them that they didn't put that love on a cross, and try to kill it, like we did!

Sure there was and is a God for all of creation! God cannot be boxed in by planet Earth. Creation was let loose and there is no ending to it! God is still the Alpha and Omega!

No, it is not "turtles all the way down." It is God!

12. JESUS IS COMING SOON!

“Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon!”

These words from a popular pop gospel song echo throughout our lives in the sermons we hear, books we read, songs we sing. We read about end times in our Bible.

Old-time revivalists used to scare us kids to death by talking about end times when we might be left behind. None of us wanted to be left behind, so many of my friends walked down that aisle to give their life to serving Jesus - not so much as a spiritual walk but simply wanting to remain a part of the warm and loving family they were experiencing. All of us long for that. Nobody wants to be left behind. When I heard my first sonic boom in the early '50s, I thought, “Well this is it!”

A third-grade Sunday School teacher was talking to her charges about heaven one Sunday morning. She ended by asking all who wanted to go to heaven to hold up their hand. Everyone did except Eric! She was taken aback and asked him why he did not want to go to heaven. To which little Eric replied that his Momma had told him to “come directly home from Sunday School.”

Yes, Jesus has come, is coming and will come continually in the lives of those who profess him as Lord and Savior.

Will there be an abrupt end to time as we know it? Will Chronos time cease to exist? Will the cosmic scenes from the Book of Revelation be let loose at some point in our history?

Where is heaven? Is it a dimension of kairos time that we cannot even comprehend?

What happens to the soul when our physical bodies die? I am convinced that upon death our soul is wrapped in a warm, loving, heavenly light through which we pass into God's Kingdom. Nothing magic or mystical there, just God's all “huggin'” love!

Much research has now been done on “near death” experiences. The most common recollections of persons who have “died” and then been brought to life are these two things. First, they see themselves as outside their own body. Secondly, they experience a warm, loving, welcoming, beckoning light that makes them feel safe and secure and loved. Some say they felt anger when they were jarred back to physical life and left that warm, loving light.

Abounding grace to live by and to die by.

In the book “In The Grip of Grace” by Max Lucado, we are brought face-to-face with the fact that we are always in God's amazing grip. A grip that will never let us go. Sometimes we let go but God never does!

Jesus continually stands in front of us beckoning us into life, abundant life.

Beloved, Jesus is here NOW!

13. THE FOOTPRINTS OF GRACE -

In his book “The Will of God,” Dr. Leslie D. Weatherhead, English theologian of the 20th Century, defines the “Will of God” in these ways:

God’s Intentional Will

God’s Circumstantial Will

God’s Ultimate Will

What an awesome idea - the ultimate will of God!

Weatherhead had it right. The ultimate will of God is that all of creation be enveloped into the loving arms of God - into that welcoming, beckoning, inviting and loving warm glow.

John Wesley defined Grace in these three ways:

Prevenient Grace / Justifying Grace / Sanctifying Grace

Prevenient Grace is God’s action throughout our lives to keep us “wrapped up” in God’s Ultimate Will. We have seen evidence of that when we have recognized God’s angels as they surrounded us with loving care.

My sight is always “hind sight” when it comes to recognizing God’s grace at action in my life. I have described prevenient grace as “rear view mirror” grace. It often only becomes evident to us as we look back onto a life situation and say “Aha, God was there and I just did not see it.”

My best friend in high school was Ron. We lived not so far apart and did everything together. He was my best-man when I married. Ron had a black and tan Dachshund named Frisky. Frisky was a “rabbit huntin’” dog. Frisky would even chase rabbits in his dreams. His little short legs would start churning away when he was asleep. When Ron, Frisky and I would go fishing, one of us would always have to hold Frisky’s hind legs to keep him from jumping out of the car to chase rabbits when we would be driving down the lake roads at 30 mph, with his nose stuck outside the window and those ears flying in the wind. One day Ron and I took Frisky rabbit hunting. Needless to say he was having much more fun than we were. Ron and I were standing about 50 yards apart in an open field with short brush and small trees when we heard Frisky’s deep-throated bark. We knew he was on the trail of a rabbit. Sure enough in about a minute here came the rabbit. He ran right between us. When he was about 50 feet in front of us, Ron took a bead with his double barrel, pulled the trigger and the rabbit dropped in his tracks. We could hear short-legged Frisky coming up the trail, so we just stopped and watched to see what he would do. Here he came, nose to the ground, barking and running as fast as he could go. Old Frisky ran right over the rabbit, almost fell, made about ten more steps and stopped, nose in the air. He had lost the scent. He looked back and there was the rabbit that he had just stumbled over.

I am just like “Frisky”. I sometimes lose the trail and stumble along. I often have to look back on a situation to see God’s grace at work in my life. How about you?

John Newton writes about grace this way:

*“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now I am found, was blind but now I see.*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come,
‘tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home”*

This is the faith that I live by! A faith that sustains me in a world and universe of many people, not like me, whom I know that God loves and calls by name. God loves me and knows my name, my full name. God just might have my picture on Heaven’s refrigerator door.

God has called my name many, many times. Some times I hear and sometimes I do not. God keeps calling! Peace!

STUDY GUIDE

This Study Guide is to be used with “I Ain’t Staying in Any Box! . . . God.”

It is designed for 13 sessions of one hour each. They may be formed and used in small group studies or in a Sunday School classroom.

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Class Date</u>
1. Hoi Polloi	_____
2. The God Box	_____
3. God’s Time	_____
4. God’s Word	_____
5. God’s Creation	_____
6. Angels - God’s Messengers	_____
7. My Friend Evon	_____
8. What I Believe About - Open Minds	_____
9. What I Believe About - Open Hearts	_____
10. What I Believe About - Open Doors	_____
11. God’s Revelation	_____
12. Jesus is Coming Soon	_____
13. The Footprints of Grace	_____

Chapter 1

Hoi Polloi

Chapter Summary

1. Growing up in a “porch society”.
2. Early faith role models and mentors.
3. Faith Formation.
4. Reconnection to the church family.
5. Jim Lane’s Credo

Discussion Questions

1. What are we to learn from the “generation” that each of us are born and nourished in?
2. Can we re-create a “porch society”?
3. How was Sam Hester significant in Jim’s life?
4. Does our early faith formation “mark us” for life?
5. What does it take to get a person “back in church”?
6. How would you change Jim Lane’s credo to make it your own?
7. What would you do in order to lead people to Jesus Christ?

Chapter 2

The God Box

Chapter Summary

1. God Box People.
2. Ecclesiastical Prozac.
3. Open Doors, Open Hearts and Open Minds.
4. Brother Harry Pray for Us, Again
4. Heaven's Elevator
5. I Ain't Staying in Any Box!

Discussion Questions

1. Who are "God box" people?
2. Is Industrial Strength Ecclesiastical Prozac just in the "medicine cabinet" of the God Box groups?
3. How do highly disciplined and educated people get all wrapped up in the God box groups?
4. Can the United Methodist Church be of an "open mind" and still be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ?
5. What are the limits of an open mind in the church of Jesus Christ?
6. Can we truly "love the sinner", but "condemn the sin"?
7. Do we need Harry Denman to come back and pray for us again?
8. Is it deja vu all over again!?
9. Do we have go gouge each others eyes out?
10. What does "your heaven" look like?

Chapter 3

God's Time

Chapter Summary

1. Chronos Time
2. Kairos Time
3. Y2K
4. How Old Are We Anyway?
5. In the beginning - - God

Discussion Questions

1. How do you live in kairos time in a chronos world?
2. What was significant about the time and place of the birth of Jesus. Why not sooner, why not later?
3. How did you survive Y2K? Did you fall for any of the hype?
4. How old is this space ship that God provided for us?
5. What is your understanding of "In the beginning, God"?

Chapter 4

God's Word

Chapter Summary

1. Bible believin', totin', quotin' Christian.
2. Bible winners and losers.
3. Scribes being scribes.
4. New tools.
5. Bible of the next millennium.
6. Bible beginnings.
7. The Word continues.

Discussion Questions

1. Are you a Bible believin', totin', quotin' Christian?
2. How does God speak to you through the pages of your Bible?
3. Identify some Bible "winners" and "losers". What did God see in them that you and I missed?
4. Is it important to you to have the benefit of the very latest of translation scholarship in your Bible?
5. What do you think that the "Bible" of the next millennium will look like?
6. Is God's Word continually revealed to us? How?

Chapter 5

God's Creation

Chapter Summary

1. Big Bang and the seven day theory.
2. Evolution / Creation.
3. The IMAX version of creation.
4. Is it turtles all the way down?
5. God's creation continues.
6. The God's of earlier eons.

Discussion Questions

1. How long were those days anyway?
2. If you were an elementary teacher what would you want to teach your students about God's creation?
3. How does the IMAX version of creation sound to you?
4. Does it "fit" the idea of creation?
5. Are "big-bang" and "creation" compatible with your idea of creation?
6. Is stem-cell research where God wants us to go?
7. Is the "deity" identified by early civilization the same "deity" that the Hebrew people called Yahweh?

Chapter 6

Angels - God's Messengers

Chapter Summary

1. Angels all around.
2. Jim Lane's 4th of July Angel.
3. Angel Missions.
4. God will take care of me.
5. What do angels look like?

Discussion Questions

1. Why are angel images so popular?
2. Are there indeed God's angels "all around"?
3. Does Satan also have angels and are they also "all around"?
4. Is Jim Lane's "July 4th Angel" for real - - or was all of what happened just an insignificant string of non-directed incidents?
5. Have you ever felt God using you for an "angel mission"? How did you feel?
6. Have you ever met one of God's angels face to face? How did you react?
7. What do angels look like?

Chapter 7

My Friend Evon

Chapter Summary

1. Evon and the Star of David.
2. Proselyting in the Jewish Community.
3. The only deity we exalt is God personified in Jesus Christ.
4. That's where we draw a line in the sand.

Discussion Questions

1. Was Evon right when believed that his family would, one day, be reunited in God's bosom of love?
2. Are people of Jewish faith in need to spiritual redemption?
3. Is proselytization a "fair practice" for Christians?
4. How did you react to the story of the United Methodist clergyman in Georgia who refused to let a Jewish Rabbi in his church and pulpit?
5. How would you have handled the situation had you been "pastor in charge"?
6. When is it time to "draw a line in the sand"?

Chapter 8

What I Believe About - Open Minds

Chapter Summary

1. John Wesley's Aldersgate Experience
2. The Revival Fire the spread across America.
3. The disciples could not heal the epileptic boy.
3. Trusting in your own power.
4. This kind of healing needs real prayer.

Discussion Questions

1. What happened to John Wesley that night in the store front mission?
2. What is important about realizing that your OWN sins are forgiven?
3. What kept the Methodist revival fires going across the expanding frontier?
4. What could the Disciples not heal the day Jesus, James and John came down from the mountain?

Chapter 9

What I Believe About - Open Hearts

Chapter Summary

1. John Wesley's teaching on diversity.
2. Who is right, and who is wrong?
3. The Kingdom
4. We yearn to breath free.
5. Come on in.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Wesley mean by "If your heart is as my heart then take me by the hand"
2. What are "the essentials" of the Christian faith?
3. Which drummer do you march to?
4. Where does the kingdom rise and set?
5. Is Jesus standing at the door of your heart?
6. What do you have to do to let Jesus in?

Chapter 10

What I Believe About - Open Doors

Chapter Summary

1. “Behold I stand at the door and knock.
2. Built it and they will come.
3. Offer them Christ.
4. Mission Stations.
5. Saving Stations.
6. Empowering Stations.
7. Equipping and Sending Stations.

Discussion Questions

1. Does Jesus knock at the door of your church and find it locked?
2. If you build it will they come?
3. How can we offer them Christ?
4. How can your church become a “Mission Station”?
5. How can your church become a “Saving Station”?
6. How can your church become a “Empowering Station”?
7. How can your church become a “Equipping and Sending Station”?

Chapter 11

God's Revelation

Chapter Summary

1. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".
2. What is out there?
3. Is God done yet?
4. UFO's and aliens.
5. Footprints of God's Love throughout the universe.

Discussion Questions

1. Are there "other" ways to reach the "throne of Grace" other than "through" Jesus?
2. How is God "revealed"?
3. What does our United Methodist understanding of The Holy Trinity teach us about revelations of God?
4. Is God still creating and revealing? How?
5. Are we really alone in all of this vastness?
6. Do you believe in UFO's and aliens?
7. How was the Creator revealed to creation in other galaxies and dimensions?

Chapter 12

Jesus is Coming Soon

Chapter Summary

1. Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon!
2. End time scare tactics.
3. Where is heaven?
4. Near death experiences.
5. In the grip of grace.

Discussion Questions

1. If they were getting up a load for heaven today, would you be ready to get on board?
2. How does Jesus come to us?
3. Will there be a “final battle of Armageddon”?
4. Where is heaven?
5. What happens to us when we die?
6. What does Grace have to do with it?
7. Is Jesus here, now?

Chapter 13

The Footprints of Grace

Chapter Summary

1. God's Intentional Will.
2. God's Circumstantial Will.
3. God's Ultimate Will.
4. Prevenient Grace.
5. Frisky, the rabbit huntin' dog.
6. Amazing Grace and a faith to live by.

Discussion Questions

1. What is God's intentional will?
2. What is God's circumstantial will?
3. What is God's ultimate will?
4. What is your understanding of "prevenient" grace?
5. What lesson did we learn from "Frisky:?"
6. What is amazing about Grace?
7. How would you define "a faith to live by"?
8. Is God still calling you?
9. How have you been called out by God?

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the church where I am loved, prayed for, lifted up, fed, called out by name and sent out to serve -

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- Past President of the National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders.
- Delivered the Laity Address to the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church
- Former Conference Lay Leader of the North Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church
- Member National Association of United Methodist Evangelists

Back cover comments

"Jim Lane is without question one of the finest servant leaders I know. Committed, faithful, perceptive, talented, personable, reliable, gracious, articulate...Jim Lane is all of those and much, much more. He writes as he speaks...and lives...with faith, hope, love, wit and conviction."

Dr. James W. (Jim) Moore, Senior Pastor
St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas
Author of "Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses," and many other books

"When Jim Lane speaks or writes – people listen! His deep faith and appreciation of others is as obvious in his actions as in his words. Whether he is delivering the Laity Address at General Conference, speaking to a local church on Witness, or serving with Nell as a volunteer at a local hospital, Jim is dedicated to being faithfully in ministry. In "I Ain't Staying in Any Box! – God" we see a glimpse of the creative mind of Jim Lane and his deep "soul" feelings. Thank you Jim for being our partner in ministry and sharing with us this thought provoking book and study guide."

Paul R. Ervin, Jr., Executive Vice President of The Foundation for Evangelism

"Jim Lane is a terrific Christian layman with a powerful testimony! Reading his book is like visiting with him in his living room - so gentle, so easy, so clear. Deeply Biblical, with strong convictions, Jim still leaves room for the opinions of others, even on the most controversial topics. Here is a must read by a life long churchman who shares his deepest thoughts and feelings."

Richard B. Wilke, Retired Bishop, The United Methodist Church, Bishop in Residence,
Southwestern College, Winfield, Kansas
Author of "And Are We Yet Alive?", and "Signs and Wonders"

"Jim Lane provides a witness that reflects thoughtfulness and grace. He has blessed the Church with the fruits of his faith journey. He offers his gift of accumulated reflection and faithful discipleship in the style of a friend who wishes to share a rich discovery with everyone. In receiving this work, you will come to know the author and the Christ he follows."

Kenneth W. Hicks, Retired Bishop, The United Methodist Church, Bishop in Residence,
Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

**"I Ain't Staying In
Any Box!**

--God"