Well, here we are. An Order of Elders meeting. What’s an ORDER anyway? Maybe that’s the first question we should ask. And what’s an ORDER for really?

Seems we are more familiar with Catholic religious “orders”...Franciscans, Benedictines, Augustinian nuns, Sisters of Mercy; but there are also Buddhist orders in Zen Buddhism and Islamic orders in Sufism.

So what in the world are United Methodist Orders? Are we like members of Catholic Orders who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? Naaaaaahhh...that’s not us! What do we United Methodists mean when we talk about Order of Elders and Order of Deacons?

And did we really want or need ORDERS...or, and this is what I’m wondering—was it just a case of debilitating ORDER ENVY that sent us into a tail-spin...so that when we looked around and saw that everyone else had ORDERS...well, we just had to have them too. ORDER ENVY can have lasting effects.

So here we are at an ORDERS AND FELLOWSHIP meeting. Trust me, I’m having a difficult enough time trying to define and understand ORDERS...so you can rest assured I’ll not be trying to define what a FELLOWSHIP OF LOCAL PASTORS AND ASSOCIATES is... or what it’s for!

Maybe the Order of Elders is our very own organized clergy labor UNION? We do affirm that Bishops and the Council of Bishops clearly have authority over all of us as Elders. Bishops have the Disciplinary “authority” but, as any good UNION MEMBER knows...we Elders have the “NUMBERS.”

So in authentic organized labor union fashion...we “Elders of the world could UNITE and go on strike...say. What would happen if we all didn’t show up on a Sunday morning? Can’t you feel the power? To the barricades! Or surely with our NUMBERS, we could petition for changes or, at the very least, we could get the Bishop’s attention. Now....I’m not, mind you, proposing such a strategy...but I’m just sayin!

OK...so now that I’ve gotten that little collective bargaining tip out of the way...to find out what our Order really is ...we’re turning to Section #306 in the Discipline (I hope it’s ok that I took this from a 2008 Discipline, it’s the only one I have...but that book really doesn’t change much does it...really?)

Anyway...in section #306 it says: “An order is a covenant community within the church to mutually support, care for, and hold accountable its members for the sake of the life and mission of the church. These orders, separately or together, seek to respond to the spiritual hunger among clergy for a fulfilling sense of vocation, for support among peers during this stressful time of change in the Church, and for a deepening relationship with God.”

Fortunately...not a single mention of the words: poverty, chastity, or obedience!

But I especially like “....for support among peers during this stressful time of change in the Church, and for a deepening relationship with God.” Very nice. So if nothing else...at least we have lofty goals and good intentions for the Orders!
But there is more in section #307…again quoting from my…“looks brand new”…I mean my “dog eared”
2008 Discipline:

Purpose of an Order—The specific and limited function of each order is to: 1) provide for regular
gatherings of ordained deacons and ordained elders for continuing formation in relationship to Jesus
Christ through such experiences as Bible study, study of issues facing the church and society, and
theological exploration in vocational identity and leadership; 2) assist in plans for individual and common
retreat experiences; 3) develop a bond of unity and common commitment to the mission and ministry of
the United Methodist Church and the annual conference; 4) enable the creation of relationships that
allow mutual support and trust; 5) hold accountable all members of the order in fulfilling these purposes.

And again…we’re in luck…no indication of poverty, chastity, or obedience!

I especially like the phrase under #1… which says that part of the task of our Order of Elders is the
“….study of issues facing the church and society.” And I find # 4 very appealing also “….enable the
creation of relationships that allow mutual support and trust…”

Let’s think together for a moment about “mutual support and trust”.

How can we…how do we mutually support and trust one another as Elders? How can we support each
other even when we have differences and disagreements? How big is the theological, Biblical and social
issues “tent” under which we can all gather? What does it mean to stand with someone who doesn’t
share my particular theological, Biblical or social issues perspectives? Even when our heads aren’t in the
same place…can our hearts be? How can I learn from others…and grow and mature in my faith and
understanding if I’m not listening to those who might not think or believe as I do? How do we grow if we
only stand in one echo chamber after another?

Remember that creepy acting guy, Silas, in the Da Vinci Code movie who used those little wire pronged
things to mortify his flesh? They were under his clothes poking into his leg causing pain and
suffering...getting under his skin. It’s true that sometimes we too can get under the skin or even into the
flesh of those who are different from us and we can cause pain and suffering. I know… I’ve done it more
often than I care to admit.

It’s easy to stand with my clergy “friends”…it’s more difficult to stand with clergy colleagues with whom
I have strong differences and disagreements. How can we stand together…all of us…and support each
other…all of us…all of the time. I’m convinced that it’s the key to a healthy and vibrant Order of Elders.

I’ve found that the COVENANT GROUP in which I participate, often weekly, offers me the mutual
support and trust I need. I hope you’re in a COVENANT GROUP. At one time, years ago, the Lincoln
United Methodist Senior pastors in large churches decided they didn’t like each other because of various
differences; and so they engaged in this terribly destructive and remarkably stupid behavior for years
and years.
The pastors who came later to these same large churches decided not to let that craziness happen ever again.... and so I benefit from a covenant group that was started a long time ago and is still going strong. Now... it isn’t competition and bad-mouthing...it’s mutual support and trust.

Are you in a covenant group? If not...I suggest you find one... or start one.

So what does it mean to stand together in our religious Order ...to keep covenant with each other, especially when it’s not entirely clear what Orders even mean for us ...and given that we all have our differences.

Lets also look for a moment at that phrase in #1 under section #307 where it states the PURPOSE OF AN ORDER.

It says that one of the purposes of an Order is to “...study issues facing the church and society...” These are quite good purposes actually...yes, STUDY ISSUES FACING THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY.

I suppose the ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM here is our continuing deep division regarding the United Methodist Discipline’s statements about homosexuality and how Elders, Bishops, and local churches interpret these disciplinary statements, especially in light of the most recent events, one of which was a church trial for a clergy person who was an Elder.

This continues to be a “defining moment” issue for the United Methodist Church and it isn’t clear how it will all end up. If one of our purposes as Elders is to “...study” issues facing the church and society...I’m assuming this means, for us as Elders, talking out loud together about these issues.

What kind of conversations should we be having together about this issue? What are the appropriate solutions to this deep divide which tears at the very fabric of our patchwork Order of Elders? How should these matters be settled?

I’ve been asked to encourage us in covenant making and covenant keeping as Elders. I’m certainly trying to do that and I hope when I’m finished you’ll think I’ve accomplished my task.

Yet I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge out loud the ongoing difficulty of keeping covenant around these hotly debated sexual orientation issues. And so with the same breath that I affirm our covenant and encourage covenant keeping as Elders...I also have to say: Far be it from me to discourage dissent or even disobedience for conscience sake on either side of this volatile issue. Our Christian tradition is steeped in dissent and disobedience because God has always led us to and through the most troubling church and society issues which have affected God’s people in various times and places.

It’s easy enough to know what the rules are ....just look at the Discipline (preferably the newest one!). It’s easy to know what the rules are; but it’s more difficult indeed to interpret the rules and requirements for our own time and place.....reflecting and acting upon what God is calling us to do... and say... and be in the 21st century.
And it’s even more difficult to stand together in all of this when we have deep differences of opinion. But I would ask, with appropriate humility...is there room among us for PRIESTS and PROPHETS, “rule keepers” and “rule benders”? I say this because...well, wasn’t that Rabbi from Galilee...the one who stands at the center of our faith and our lives...wasn’t he both priest and prophet...wasn’t he also a rule keeper and a rule bender?

I would suggest that the rule keepers among us need the rule benders and likewise the rule benders among us need the rule keepers. Therein lies our struggle together.

If you think I’ve given sufficient ammunition here for your cause on either side of this issue or any of the other theological, biblical, or social issues that affect our unity...then you haven’t been listening very closely.

So how can we stand together, when there are deep divisions? I think it’s only by God’s grace and mercy that we can acknowledge and then work within our differences...through holy conferencing, listening attentively, speaking bravely and humbly, being vulnerable, and holding each other within this ongoing sacred tension of now and not yet. And all the while remembering that the church and its clergy have historically never been of one mind when it comes to these profound moral/social/Biblical or theological issues.

I believe that we can do this together as Elders...to bring the necessary stability and the vital changes which will move us forward into a new future for the church and for us as individual pastors in our Order.

How can we in the Order of Elders in the Great Plains Conference contribute to the dialogue and mutual discussion that is and will be necessary for our life together?

This is what I’m interested in. Not in fulfilling some requirement that we have an Order of Elders meeting every year; but in seeking to bring us all together within the circle of God’s love and acceptance...to find friends, mutual support and trust among our many colleagues...and to stand firm with sisters and brothers who share our circumstances and our calling.

I’ve been in ministry for a long time...as you can plainly see! I’ve learned at least one thing through the years about being a pastor. I can’t do this by myself. I’ve needed a clergy mentor (I’ve had a wise one), I’ve needed verbally supportive clergy friends (they’re marvelous), I’ve needed an understanding Spiritual Director (she’s been a life-saver for me) and I’ve needed an affirming covenant group where I can vent and laugh out loud (they keep me sane)....and I need all of you (in spite of our differences we can stand together!)

So... let our lofty Order of Elders covenant be a bond of love and friendship and forgiveness and mutual support that holds us together, as brothers and sisters in spite of our differences... committed to each other, committed to the church, and committed to God’s unfolding grace-filled purposes for all. Thank-You!