

District Superintendents' Report to Annual Conference
Western New York Conference of the United Methodist Church

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One of the Disciplinary responsibilities of the District Superintendents is to give to the Annual Conference a report reflecting the state of the conference. We are also to submit recommendations for greater effectiveness.

Before I begin that report, I and my colleagues would like to report to you that we believe that we have been faithful in leadership development and the use of the funds available to us for making missional appointments. Several churches received pastors who could not have been otherwise appointed. Without your commitment to the budget and our use of designated conference monies designed to help make these strategic placements this could not have happened. Several churches have also benefited from conflict management work and the enhancement of communication skills within the parish.

These too were partially funded by our use of conference budget monies designed to help create healthier churches. Others, again using similar funds, have been helped to enter into analysis and definition of mission. We ourselves will be in training for intervention and mediation work early this summer. Your superintendents concur with the strategic plan that leadership development for both laity and clergy is a key factor in the health of our conference. We are committed to do our part "to recruit, resource, refresh, and release excellent spiritual leaders to strengthen and multiply places where Jesus is proclaimed and served in our world."

This year as we begin this daunting task of commenting on the state of the conference, we have considered that we could take many approaches. We could emphasize the positives, and there are positives. Churches are trying new methods of ministries and some show real promise. We see churches trying new parish alignments that will enhance ministry through sharing. In other places we see churches gaining new members, many of whom are younger than the church's present most prevalent age group. We are excited about the Small Church Pastoral Leadership Project and working

on the pilot project with the General Board of Discipleship. We need to note these positives.

Another approach would be to lift up the names of churches and their leadership and make a list of “those with great accomplishment,” but this often unintentionally pits us against one another, and besides, Jesus seems to have taken a dim view of disciples determining who is the greatest. We could do hard-nosed diagnosis and call for radical and elaborate reform, but grand concepts often result in too little concrete action and add to the general malaise that seems to hover persistently over our ecclesiastical atmosphere.

So instead, we have chosen to offer a reality check, for unless we deal in reality, we will miss the mark of being faithful to the One who has called us to be the Church. Our report then can be summarized in this fashion: “The Church is in just about the same shape it was in no fewer than 60 years after the first Pentecost.” As Eugene Peterson in his book entitled Under the Unpredictable Plant, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan , 1992) has said it:

“In two thousand years of practice we haven’t gotten any better. You would think we would have, but we haven’t. Every time we open up a church door and take a scrutinizing look inside we find them there again – sinners. Also Christ. Christ in preaching, Christ in the sacraments, but inconveniently and embarrassingly mixed into this congregation of sinners.”

We believe that most of our problems, and in fact most of our Conference anxiety, stem from a partial denial of the Biblical and existential reality of the Church.

We submit that if we look at the New Testament and church history, the Church has but for a few short years in the Camelot of early Pentecost been on a journey marked by frequent turmoil, and intermittent success.

In fact, the New Testament is not only the Word of God, but much of it is also a chronicle of the church trying to deal with its problems. What are the problems? They are problems that are strangely familiar to us. They are problems of organization and ministry. They are the problems of trying to keep theology and profession of faith on track, and true to the revealed nature of Jesus Christ. They are problems of dealing with church order as the church awaits the return of Christ. They are problems of dealing with church squabbles and sometimes downright rebellion. They are dealing with problems of behavior, and problems of abrogation of the covenant. They are problems with dealing with the church's tendency not to be differentiated from the prevailing culture, and issues of how to do its work of transformation without itself being transformed into something other than the likeness of Christ. They are problems of appropriate social action as the church encounters the world.

We submit to you that the Bible is telling us that dealing with these issues is the work God has called us to in this time and place. Our lot is no different than it has ever been for the church. This business of being the church is often messy and always challenging. Rarely is it as slick and as trendy as the prevailing environment of today's marketing world. Donald Trump and Jesus are on entirely different pages when it comes to methodology and assessment of effectiveness. If not we would have been "fired" long ago.

We lift up Peterson's words again in regard to the church's historic and present state:

"It is to be expected in these situations that with some frequency certain persons will come forward with designs to improve matters. They want to purify the church. They propose to make the church something that will advertise to the world the attractiveness of the kingdom. With few exceptions these people are, or soon become, heretics, taking on only as much of the gospel as they can manage and apply to the people around them, attempting to construct a version of the church that is so well balanced and efficiently organized that there will be no need for God."

We submit to you that we need to get out of the fix-it mode, into the faithful mode. By the faithful mode, we mean engaging the issues placed before us with integrity. Rather than constantly being anxious about the unperfected state of our local churches, our conference, and our denomination, we would call upon us all to simply and actively take on everything placed before us as though “dealing with it” is in fact our ministry rather than a distraction.

Some of us remember one of our previous Bishops, Joseph Yeakel, reminding us that “the interruptions are in fact our ministry. We would add to that saying “interruptions force us to do our ministry rather than avoid it.”

Disciples of Christ are not made in the vacuum of a perfect church. If they are made at all, they are made in the midst of the turmoil of the real world. “Dysfunction” is a popular word today that implies there is a more normative wholeness and health. The Bible, however, tells us there is no such thing as this wholeness and health except for a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ, and the completion of that work while begun is not yet finished.

So what does it matter that our “newest revised edition” of the conference structure has had a hard birth and came out limping? Getting it organized can be a venue for making disciples, allowing new people to find their place and ministry. We have seen that happening already. We invite you to get into the process and mix it up! No doubt the process is more important than the destination. Have we not learned from previous attempts at organizational perfection that we are foolish to expect more or less than for it to be an opportunity to make disciples?

So what does it matter that our denomination has some critical theological battles? Some of the church’s finest moments have been when people have stood up and said, “This I believe! I can profess no other thing.” Theological debate is an absolute necessity in the Body of Christ. A Church that is fearful of theological debate is in fact a church that in

the end tolerates every whim and notion and becomes so ill defined it represents nothing, and certainly not Jesus Christ.

So we say to our churches, rather than hunker down in local or regional theological bunkers, complaining about what might be, “get up and engage in the debate.” In the process you may discover that your preconceived notions of what “those other people” think are not what you assumed, and even if it is, the engagement is an opportunity for faith sharing and refinement. Difficult to do? Yes. Painful at times? Yes. Necessary if we are not all to become Unitarians? Yes. This is the work of the Church. We would not even exist as a church if this theological refinement had not taken place during the Wesleyan movement. Of what are we afraid, reformation?

Likewise, what does it matter if our conference boundaries change? We hear rumors that people are not engaging because we do not know what our conference will look like in a few years. We ask, “what difference does it make where imaginary lines are drawn?” Do any such lines prohibit us from being faithful to our call, proclaiming the faith, and making disciples? We think not. In fact, a bigger conference simply gives us more space to do our work, and we believe better appointments will be able to be made effectively with more choices. We are reminded that one key to our missionary movement said, “The world is our parish.” We guess a bigger conference isn’t going to harm that reality.

We place before you the point that our Conference is not better off or worse than it was 196 years ago. The state of the Church is not a corporate report full of statistics on gains and losses. For in the Church there is only one shareholder, and that is Jesus Christ. He is, in fact, our sole corporate identity.

From the beginning ministry has emerged from problems and the opportunities that resulted. We must stop trying to perfect the church attempting to as Peterson says “construct a version of the church that is so well balanced and efficiently organized that there will be no need for God.”

The problems we face are our assignment, should we choose to accept them. We can find guidance and help by moving the Bible to the forefront of our reading list, and moving the latest church growth model to its appropriate place further down the list.

Then maybe we will cease the idolatrous pursuit as laity and clergy to find the perfect church by moving our membership or working for an appointment change, and engage the problems in our midst with the transforming Word of God, and complete optimism in the grace of God. Then we feel confident we will see real growth as a result of faithfulness rather than reliance on technique, because we will have stopped trying to make the church in our image, and rather work in God's messy fields where stories are made that tell of redemption and grace.

Let us arise then to be the Church set loose in the world. Let us stop being paralyzed and immobilized by issues and problems that have been with the church since its beginning. Let us put our latest initiatives in perspective, engage in them as opportunities to be faithful, but not relying on them to be the magic key that will usher in the Realm of God. Only Christ can do that, and he just asks for our help.

“Get up and follow Jesus” as Bishop Fisher has preached, pick up whatever ecclesiastical tools would seem to work on the problems you encounter and get at it. Then when the tool wears out throw it out or declare it a valuable antique. We commit to being there with you resourcing, cheering, prodding, sharing in critique and encouragement.

Then one day, when we run out of problems we will know there is no longer any need for our temporal assistance in helping the Lord accomplish his goal, and then let us be fortunate enough to hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into my perfect Church, without blemish or flaw.”

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