

State of the Church 2015

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton with Rev. Greg Cox

Rick Warren once wrote: ***“Transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It’s a journey of discovery - there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair.”***

When I read this quote I believe that it accurately describes what I witness taking place within the bounds of our Annual Conference.

Transformation, the changing of our systems/structures/approaches and very lives is a process. While, from a spiritual standpoint, conversion can be an instantaneous event, quite often conversion is a process of discovering how, where, and to what extent Christ plays a role in our lives.

The same could be said about the work of our Annual Conference and the ministry of our nearly 830 local churches. As Warren suggests, there are plenty of ups and downs in that journey toward discovery: mountaintop moments where the presence of Christ is undeniable and valley experiences where you cannot help but wonder where God is at that moment.

- I. It has been an interesting year in that regard in our Annual Conference. The paradox between mountaintop and valley experiences are being witnessed everywhere:
 - We have seen in the last year some amazing stories of growth and faithfulness in some of our churches. That growth has happened in both predictable and unexpected ways. There is a piece of legislation coming before you this week to bring two churches into our AC from the Susquehanna AC. Conversations about how to facilitate the ministry of these two little churches led us to a joint belief that we could do that here in a way that our sister conference could not. Likewise, in the last year a church satellite has been planted from our Crossroads Church into Weirton, WV, within the bounds of the WV Annual Conference. Collaborative conversations between bishops, superintendents, and pastors led to the conclusion that the staff and vision of Crossroads could make an impact in that particular region that would make and nurture disciples. The driver was not church imposed boundaries but a vision to see the heart of God offered to people who need it most.

One of the greatest joys I had this year was being a part of the re-opening of the Mill Run UMC under the leadership of Randy Newell. This church burned to the ground on February 13, 2012. But on Friday the 13th, 2015 we dedicated to God a beautiful new facility that was only part of the story. This was a church that learned how to be a congregation without a building. They learned about what matters most and how to make the most out of unfortunate circumstances. Their pastor’s only fear is that the church will once again become reliant upon its building and lose the lessons it learned in the midst of their hardship.

The other blessing of that night was to see a church full of pastors and parishioners from other churches in the Connellsville District showing up to bear witness to the connection of love and prayer that binds us together. When I greeted people, two ladies said to me, “We are Baptists from down the street.” My reply was, “We’re glad you’re here. You

know, we believe in conversion.” Their quick reply to me was, “Why do think we are here – we believe in conversion too!”

We are seeing signs of vitality and growth in many parts of our Annual Conference and we are seeing increased activity around things like mutual ministry, growing staffs, and building programs.

- Yet, we are also experiencing a growing number of churches that are ending their ministry and discontinuing their life as a congregation. These once vital and independently driven churches can no longer sustain a ministry and maintain a building and are closing their doors.
 - Some of those churches are effectively talking about their legacy – how the next expression of God’s work might be blessed by the resources, support and prayers that they can provide.
 - Others can only see their immediate future and are unwilling to discuss how God might use them to usher in a new chapter of what it means to be church in that region. The struggles here are deep and emotional.
 - Last year at this time I had a hard conversation with you about the struggles of racism and sexism within our Annual Conference. Today I can report to you that the paradox of discovery continues: In some places there has been intentional and admirable progress made in addressing the prejudices and bias’ that many people have toward persons of color and women in ministry. Those places have studied and prayed and worked to bridge the gap between “what I feel” and “what I know to be true.”
 - Yet, sad to say, we continue to face significant pockets of resistance where unhealthy and unjust behaviors have caused significant and long-lasting hurt to persons, both ethnic and women, who have accepted a call to offer Christ to the world. These stories continue to pierce us and cause us to continue to wonder what we can do to change these deep-seeded feelings and attitudes.
 - Throughout the course of this year, we have seen the church at its best: random acts of kindness, extravagant demonstrations of hospitality, sacrificial acts of giving, and unbelievable gestures of love. I joyfully report to you that there are places within the bounds of this Annual Conference that are bearing witness to their faith and offering visible signs that Christ is at work in their midst.
 - Yet, we have also experienced the valley. Concerns over the future of the church have led others to act with bitterness, reluctance and fear. These places at times require more attention than any one person can provide and they continue to take the life out of those who attempt to provide supervision and care for them.
- II. Yet, in the midst of the hills and valleys of ministry, I continue to discover a resiliency and a determination among the people of Western Pennsylvania that I will stack up against anyone in the connection of United Methodists.

Some would describe it as stubbornness. But I like to see it as an attitude that “by golly, God is not done with us yet.” When someone says “you can’t,” we are the people who rise up and show the world that “we can.” Whether it’s a fifth straight year of paying 100% of our connectional apportionments, or being a leader in giving and supporting missions, or the

ongoing demonstration of support for those who experience tragedy and setback in their lives, you are to be commended for your determination to find a way to be a light of hope in the darkness of cynicism and despair.

I could name place after place that, on paper, don't look like they stand a chance to make a difference or be faithful to their obligations for another year. Yet, they press on – you press on to be the church of Jesus Christ. I applaud you for that.

III. One of the fruits of your faithfulness is the ability to put together a cabinet and a staff that are focused on “making disciples of Jesus Christ” and “facilitating the ministry of the local church.”

This is a team that is very new and very much in the process of learning one another and learning you. This is a cabinet that is anything but uniform. If you ever want an unanimous decision from a group of people about anything – DON'T ASK THIS GROUP.

I go home at night and say to Sally, *“this group is wearing me out with all of their questions and inquiries.”* And my wife looks at me and says, *“And who put them together?”*

And when I think about her words, I give God thanks for the ability to have such a group. They love you, represent you well, desire to get it right, and are unafraid to ask whatever it takes to pursue their role as *“conference superintendents”* and *“district missional strategists.”* I am proud to be associated with these people, commend them to you and give God thanks for giving us the opportunity to be together and to work on your behalf.

IV. Likewise, I thought it was important to have in front you today the conference staff that serves you from day to day. These are people with specific job descriptions and who are being held accountable by the manner in which they facilitate the ministry of the local church.

Look at what they do: Pensions, Finances, camping, communications, statistics, IT, Zimbabwe, New Church Starts, Volunteers in Mission, Youth, Discipleship and Spiritual Formation, Administration and Leadership Development.

Likewise, I am very proud of this group of people. They have genuine hearts and attempt to give their all for the work that we had set them aside to do. They are young, energetic, and have a vision for a better church.

V. Together, the cabinet and the program staff have spent nearly the last year in joint meetings around the theme “Finding Our Voice.” Any team that works together has to learn how to play off of and with one another. It is a significant challenge to carry out what your job description says, and yet trust one another and know about one another's work as well.

Through mutual interaction, “Strength Finders” discoveries, and fellowship this group has been attempting to “find our voice.”

VI. Much of their work this year has been around Bishop Robert Schnase's book: The Seven Levers. The cabinet and staff began by giving our Annual Conference a grade around the seven levers:

- Starting New Churches
- Clergy Peer Learning
- Congregational Intervention
- Cultivating Clergy Excellence
- Aligning Budgets and Resources
- Creating Technically Elegant Governance Systems
- Reconfiguring Conference Sessions

Some of them received good marks. Others did not. About the same time, the latest Church Vitality report came to us and revealed some strong affirmations but two very glaring weak points:

- Small Group Development
- Missional Engagement (it was revealed that while we are a strong mission giving Annual Conference, we are among the weakest in engaging our people actively in mission).
- Because of our emphasis on spirituality, we added a tenth lever, Spiritual Formation and because of our focus on dismantling racism, it too was added.

Throughout the fall and winter, this group has aggressively worked on the creation of a robust list of “Key Performance Indicators” or KPI’s if you will, that are the basis upon which we are being held accountable for their work and our ministry together. These KPI’s, for the most part are a short-term plan to make a significant burst of impact within the Annual Conference and among our local churches.

They highlight our opportunity and our need.

a) We are an Annual Conference that has not really done much more than give lip service to a robust plan for New Church Starts. Amy Wagner and our Parish & Community Development Committee is doing great work in our midst to lay a solid foundation for this transformation.

b) Clergy Peer Learning and Excellence in Ministry continues to need emphasis and priority. This work led us to create a staff position around Clergy Excellence and we look forward to working with Susan Moudry in the intentional development of opportunities for learning, engagement, and leadership development among those in ministry.

c) Congregational Intervention is, as our DCM Greg Cox has noted, is on one hand intervention when there is a crisis and, on the other hand, intervention to assist a church on the journey toward excellence. We have divided these two out. Many within this group and a number of others have completed the Lombard Mediation Training around church conflict and are prepared to be inserted when needed to mediate conversations and solutions around conflict. Others have been creating models of intervention for coming to local churches around issues of vitality and are preparing themselves to assist those churches in the creations of models and ministries that lead to excellence.

d) The work of our Treasurer, the Council on Finance & Administration, and the Board of Pensions has created an ongoing platform of trust as we look at budgets and resources that will facilitate our ongoing ministry. I especially want to give a shout out to our Board of Pensions: this spring they offered to us a series of health care grants where we could go to a place of vitality and promise and say to them that our Board of Pensions is granting them money to pay for their health care so that other funds can be freed up for ministry. This is a tremendous

initiative filled with creativity. Likewise, our UM Foundation under the direction of Ed Bailey continues to embark on new visions and possibilities for collaboration and our Credit Union under the direction of Patti Columbe continues to provide assistance and pathway through financial challenges for those under their care. This is mutual ministry at its best.

e) Jessica Gamache and our Camping & Retreat Ministries have yoked up with our BOOM and passionate people like Keith and Alyce Weaver Dunn to see how we might improve the manner in which a life-changing camping experience might be transformed into a specific call from God to consider ministry as a life vocation. This model of collaboration which is named, "Called and Sent," is inviting young people to listen carefully for the potential of God calling them into ministry. It is breaking down the barriers and forming new models of collaborative ministry.

f) Last summer we were invited by our sister conference in Zimbabwe to be a part of an event called "Ebenezer." It was a revival gathering of sorts for the people of Zimbabwe. As a part of our ongoing partnership, we agreed that we would come. We began to vision out how our youth might get involved with this event. What emerged was an experience between our youth and the people of Zimbabwe that truly was life-alerting in nature. Our "Zim Camp" is happening again this year with another team of kids heading to Africa to see the church's mission and ministry in action. We believe that what we will get back in terms of called missionaries, ministers, and servants is yet to be fully realized.

g) The portfolio for dismantling racism has been intentionally centered in the Assistant to the Bishop's office for development and emphasis. William Meekins along with Dianne Glave are already working to provide awareness training, support groups, and models for intentional conversations in places where racism continues to be active and alive. Their work, we believe, will provide the long needed boots on the ground in the places where it is needed the most.

These are only a few of many examples of how these KPI's are driving our work on your behalf. They impact everyone of us and are informing how we go about our business and how we hold one another accountable on the journey. There is no doubt that Warren's quote fits us as well – there are mountaintops and valleys in this journey of discovery. But this is a group that has it's hiking shoes on and is working together to "find our voice" as an Annual Conference.

VII. In just a short year from now I will stand before you and say goodbye to a place that has become deeply a part of my life and journey in ministry. I do not know how to go about saying what I need to say in appreciation for the manner in which you have blessed my life and supported my ministry.

When I was first elected, someone said to me, "Tom, unlike many of your other colleagues who are running a sprint, you'll need to learn how to run a marathon." I have been blessed to be the only bishop currently in the NEJ that will have served twelve years in one spot. I cannot tell you what joy that has brought to me.

But today I stand before you with what is an unusual sight in front of me. For the first time in my ministry I know the exact time when I will be leaving an appointment. And, what lies ahead in this next year is not a marathon. It is a sprint.

There is much work to be done. There always is. And there is never a time when it will all be accomplished. It never happens. But my promise to you is that over this next year I will run as hard as I can to be in service and ministry to you.

In his book, The Cathedral Within, Bill Shore tells the story of Dr. Martin Luther King's sermon on March 3, 1968 at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta about a month before he died. That day Dr. King used as a scripture verse the seldom used passage from I Kings 8:18 where the Lord said to David, "Whereas it was in thine heart to build a house unto my name, thou didst well that it was within thine heart."

Shore goes on to explain that Dr. King's interpretation of that verse was that God had spoken as if to say, "David, you will not be able to finish the temple. You will not be able to build it. But I just want to bless you, because it was in your heart." Dr. King went on to catalog leaders from Ghandi to Woodrow Wilson to the apostle Paul, all of whom had not lived to see the fulfillment of their dreams. Slowly, but powerfully, he built to his conclusion: *"So many of us in life start our building temples: temples of character, temples of justice, temples of peace. And so often we don't finish them. Because life is like Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. At so many points we start, we try, we set out to build our various temples. And I guess one of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable. . . . Well, that is the story of life. And the thing that makes me happy is that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time saying, 'It may not come today or tomorrow, but it is well that it is within thine heart. It's well that you are trying. You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it's just good that have a desire to bring it into reality. It's well that it's in thine heart.'"*

Friends, we have many great mountains to climb and many challenging valleys to navigate together if we are to be faithful to the call that God has placed on our lives. It is a work that has been and will remain unfinished. But we press on, knowing that God will use us for this slice of the journey to do what we can to bring about the realization of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

I pledge to keep this call in my heart as long as I am with you. I stand among a staff that makes the very same pledge. And we stand in the midst of representatives of over 800 churches who are trying to do exactly the same thing. Won't you join us in re-committing ourselves to the work that lies before us?

Reuben Welch once wrote:

"It is all of us: in love, in care, in support, in mutuality – we really do need each other.

Let us pray: Oh, Lord Jesus, bring us together, keep us together – seeing, hearing, aware, sensitive. We need to look at our children and listen to our parents and be sensitive to one another and aware of each other. Teach us to know that it is thy will that we go together. Teach us to know that it is not our mutualities and congenialities that bind us – it is the life of Jesus Christ that bind us – and so we belong together and we must go together. Amen."

Thank you.