

## **State of the Church 2016 Grove City, PA**

- I. This is the season of “conferences.” Every four years our church goes through a cycle of meetings that are, on the one hand, eagerly anticipated by some, and, on the other hand, not even on the radar of screen of others. Frequently, the cycle of these meetings (General Conference, Annual Conference, and Jurisdictional Conference) come and go with little fanfare and notice. The decisions that are discerned usually have some impact on some body of people but, on the whole, life does not change.

It does not seem to be the case this year, however. As we find ourselves in the middle of this conference season, there is some concern and anxiety moving forward and there isn't a person in this room who isn't affected by the results of those meetings. What specifically do I mean?

- II. Let's fast forward and look to later this summer. In July, the Annual Conferences of the Northeast will gather in Lancaster, Pa. for their quadrennial session. The primary purpose of this meeting will be to elect two new bishops to replace the vacancies anticipated later this year and to appoint all of the bishops to their new assignments for the next four years. This meeting has a significant effect on you here in Western Pa. because one of those assignments will be your new bishop. According to church discipline, a bishop can only serve in one area up to 12 years. I have reached my limit and will receive a new assignment at the same time as you receive yours. Most people around here are aware of that although some of you have very sincerely wished me well in my impending

retirement. I know the gray hair is deceiving but I still have time left to serve in another place!

This year's Jurisdictional Conference will impact all of us. For you, it is the anticipation and anxiety of receiving a new leader. How will that person lead? What will their emphasis be? How will they view the ministry of the local church? What will be the manner by which they evaluate a person's ministry and make appointments? Will they be a Steeler fan? What will their opinion be of "gobs," pierogis, and Primanti's? Will they understand yinzer?

Much of how your new leader leads will depend upon the manner in which you are willing to be led. One of the things that accurately describes Western Pennsylvania is that once something is established, it becomes entrenched into the psyche of our souls. Antonio Brown could make a double somersaulted one handed catch with no time left on the clock to win the Super Bowl and someone in Western Pennsylvania would say, "Yea, but it wasn't the Immaculate Reception." It will be important for you to not throw anyone under the bus and to not immortalize the past. Let your new bishop lead. Respect their authority. Trust their instinct. Offer her/him Christ even as she/he offers Christ to you. Even now, let's offer up a prayer for that person who is yet to be named (pray). I am sure that God will send you a called, very gifted servant who will joyfully take you into the next chapter of your life.

And what is that life? It is a life of wonderful people who are filled with great conviction and resiliency. It is a place where religion has seeped deep into the soul of its people and caused those people, on one hand, to stand firm in their beliefs and, on the other hand, to honor the "holy mystery" of what is yet to be. It is a life that is filled with great challenge however. Your next bishop will be faced with the challenge of addressing a consistent decline

of the mainline church in this region and the need to continue to explore what it means to offer new places for new people. This is an area that, in the very near future, will deal with declining sustainability, rising costs of health care, theological divides that threaten the future of the church as we know it, and the ongoing struggles over racism and gender bias. Western Pennsylvania is a microcosm of the wider church and it is here, in this incubator of spirituality, that this Annual Conference will, in partnership with your new leader, face these challenges head on.

III. That leads me to this meeting: The Annual Conference session of 2016. It is a significant meeting for me because it my last with you.

Greg Cox asked me a few weeks ago, “*What are you not going to miss about Western Pennsylvania?*” It was one of the hardest questions I have been asked in the last 12 months. My answer to him was as honest as I could be. I can’t think of anything.

It’s true. While I have been frustrated with things like racism, gender bias, parochialism, and rigidity among some, those have all been challenges that I have relished over the last twelve years. I wish we had more time to address them together.

The far easier question is, “*What are you going to miss?*” The answer to that question marks one of the answers to Greg’s other question to me, “*What will be the hardest moment you’ll face at Annual Conference?*” This is one of those moments. I just love Annual Conference. From my vantage point on this stage over the last 12 years, you have represented the best that I could imagine of the church at work. Your passion for mission, your commitment to the ministry of this Annual Conference and your local church in particular, your willingness to let me lead (even when I failed you and make mistakes in your midst), and the honest desire among many of you to let me and my family have a relationship with you

and be a part of you and your family, . . . those are things that that impact me most. They are the things that make it so very hard to say goodbye and the things that make it very easy to say that I will never forget you. Your grace and love and support have been very evident and for that, I am thankful. I look forward to this week, to say in public settings and in hallway conversations that “I love you” and am very very grateful for you. How good it is to be together at Annual Conference.

IV. Okay, that’s two meetings. There is still one more to talk about. Just last month, the twelve clergy/laity who you elected last year, joined me and a whole host of others from around the world in Portland, Oregon for our General Conference. Those 800 or so delegates represented the 12 million United Methodists from across the world in an assembly designed to set the future course and landscape for our denomination. In my time at this event over the last 32 years (yes, I’ve been to every one during that time frame), we have put together new hymnals, re-ordered the process for ordination, embraced a mission statement that has become widely known and recited, elevated the role of local pastors in decision making, addressed our neglect through acts of repentance for reconciliation around racism and gender bias, authenticated the role of the church in Africa and the Philippines, created a pension program for the poorest pastors in the world, and strengthened our commitment to worldwide mission, just to name a few. While those decisions have had some impact on some body of people, on the whole, life has not changed.

Such was the case this year in Portland. We acknowledged our heritage: this is the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of John Street Church, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Francis Asbury, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Methodist Women, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary

of granting full clergy rights to women, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of voting rights for the Oklahoma missionary conference, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of DISCIPLÉ Bible Study, and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Africa University. We sure can look back with the best of them.

At General Conference we celebrated our ecumenical partnerships as we move to full communion with the Uniting Church in Sweden and the Moravian Church.

We continued our acts of repentance with a presentation from the Cheyenne & Arapaho tribes concerning the Methodist involvement in the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre.

In legislation we voted to removed United Methodist membership from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, approved a new cloud-based hymnal (which, by the way should be where hymns are produced anyway), created two new provisional Annual Conferences in Southeast Asia and Mongolia, continued to authenticate the work needed in creating a worldwide church approach and structure, increased accountability measures for bishops, changed “One Great Hour of Sharing” to UMCOR Sunday, continued guaranteed appointments for pastors, passed a \$604 million dollar budget, and, by the way, celebrated the unprecedented success of a little effort called “Imagine NO Malaria,” which has raised \$68.5 million dollars to eliminate malaria related deaths across the world.

Business as usual.

- V. But there was a different mood in Portland, one that was hard to read and even harder to react to with adequate leadership and responses.

It is no secret to most in this room that the debate over Human Sexuality has, in some circles, been the undeniable “elephant in

the room.” The line in the sand seemingly has been drawn and the rhetoric from the extreme viewpoints has, at times, dominated the conversation. Yet, the rhetoric from the extremes has, in some measure, ignored the mass in the middle, the extreme center, the voices of the church that have longed for peace in the midst of discord, hope in the midst of despair, and unity above all. They are the ones who have questioned, “What are we Fighting For?” given all the amazing work that is being done through the mobilization of 12 million Methodists who, in and through the work of the Holy Spirit, can accomplish exceedingly, abundantly more than anyone can ever dream of or imagine.

Yet, the fighting has continued and the struggle to determine “what matters most” in this complex denomination filled with conservatives, liberals and moderates remains. What is essential? What is non-essential? And how can we find a way to love one another in all things, even when we don’t always like the actions that take place “from the other side.” It seemed that all of that reached a crescendo in Portland.

If I’m honest, when I look at the delegates elected to General Conference, I see in that crowd some of the best minds and hearts God has created: people of conviction, spirituality, and Christ-like motivation. Yet, if I’m honest, I also see in that crowd people who have been deeply hurt and alienated by the church and others whose agenda it is to fracture not unify. And I wonder sometimes, are the right people at the table?

The combination of those emotions and viewpoints resulted in some conversations in Portland about how much longer can we exist in our current makeup. For the first time in history, the General Conference did something that broke down the separation of power in our church. The delegates asked the bishops to no longer be the “potted plants” who do not have voice or vote. They asked us to help.

As a result, the General Conference heard a specific proposal from the Council of Bishops regarding our way forward as a church. Here is a summary of those thoughts:

- **The Council of Bishops is committed to the unity of the United Methodist Church and will seek to strengthen it in our leadership.**

I will say to you personally that this is not only the strong expectation that I have for myself, it is the essential expectation that I have for each of you. We must preach, teach, and live as a demonstration of the unity that is only possible through Jesus Christ our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It is not possible if we only rely on our own devices. Our human tendencies will splinter and fracture us. It is not just a possibility but a reality when we put ourselves, our leadership and our churches in the hands of a God who will not let us go, a God that I have studied in the biblical record who expects God's people to mirror their behavior after the one he sent to us to show us the way. Let me say this again: *We must preach, teach, and live as a demonstration of the unity that is only possible through Jesus Christ our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst!*

At the heart of our issue as a church is a matter of spirituality and the need for each of us *to fall on our knees in surrender to a God who created us all*, different as we are, and who longs for Eden, a place of joy and serenity where only God is worshipped and adored, not the systems and structures and agendas that so easily dominate the fabric of who we have become. As I have said to many of you these past few months, our greatest public witness is not a demonstration that we all agree. Our greatest public witness is a demonstration that we love one another in the midst of

our disagreements. We are called to work and pray for more Christ-like unity with each other rather than separation from one another.

If there is any of you in this room who are working toward a separation rather than unity, in the name of our God I call you to stop that behavior immediately and work with me and others to preserve our greatest witness – an outward expression of an inward and deeply spiritual grace that honors our diversity, loves all of God’s created children equally, and longs for unity at all costs in the body of Christ.

Our role is to lead the church in times of worship, study, discernment, confession and prayer for God’s guidance rather than our own.

- **The Council of Bishops recognizes the deep divide that exists related to the issue of human sexuality.** There are, no doubt, various viewpoints that are represented in this room – we are a true representative slice of this church. For that reason, in lieu of addressing the nearly one-hundred pieces of legislation related to those various viewpoints on human sexuality, the bishops proposed that those items not be dealt with at this General Conference. After lengthy debate, this item was agreed to by the delegates. In its place, the Council of Bishops has been authorized to form a separate Commission to deal specifically with our unity, our way forward as a church, and the issues of human sexuality. This Commission will only be formed after the 15 new bishops who are to be elected this summer, are in place and able to be a part of the discernment moving forward.

- **Working closely with the Council of Bishops, this commission will be entrusted with the responsibility of drafting a way forward that could represent the re-ordering of our life together as a 21<sup>st</sup> century church.**

As a result, the Council of Bishops may call a special session of the General Conference some time in 2018 or 2019 to deal only with the recommendations of this Commission.

- **As a Council of Bishops, we also recognize that we have specific responsibilities in the midst of these deep conversations:**

- We will initiate conversations about how the church can best live in grace with one another, especially in relation to complaints against one another.
- We will uphold the discipline of our church while these conversations take place.
- It must be noted that all provisions of the Book of Discipline remain unchanged and will remain in place until such time as the General Conference changes them.

Now, I acknowledge right up front, the awkwardness of this next statement. I am not promoting my “stuff” but I would ask each of you to utilize all of the resources that I have put together in “What are We Fighting for?” in a study within each of our local churches that can result in an intentional, spiritually driven discernment around “what matters most” in our work together as a church: what is essential in our unity, what is non-essential in our diversity, and how we can love one another in all things. I’m not looking for sales. I’m looking for conversation, discernment, and spiritual revival.

There is an old phrase that simply says, “If the shoe fits, wear it.” If you are an agitator, you know it. If you are a peace maker, you know that too. If you lead out of an agenda, you are fully aware right now what that agenda is. If you lead out of the heart of God, you are fully aware right now of your inadequacies as well as the mystery of how God has and will use you to be a blessing. If the shoe fits, wear it. All of that says to me, quite simply:

- Stop polarizing and start preaching.
- Stop making excuses and start dreaming.
- Stop accusing and start confessing.
- Stop hurting and start healing.
- Stop Satan and start Jesus.

Start Jesus. The One who has shown us the best slice of who we were created to be. The One who consistently demonstrated how to put Satan behind him and put God’s glory in front of him. He is our GPS for navigating these uncertain times and he is the guidebook in our quest for truth in midst of confusion.

Oh, these meetings, they can bring out the most interesting parts of us. I’ve heard for years people say, “We Methodists sure do put a lot of stock in our meetings.” We over exaggerate their importance and use our “methods” at times to our fault.

Sure, we are in the midst of three big meetings. This time around, they DO have an impact on our lives and our future together. But you know what, we are more than a meeting. We are more than an issue. We are more than an agenda.

We are more.

(INTRODUCTORY VIDEO – “[www.wearemore.faith](http://www.wearemore.faith).”)

There are stories all around us that demonstrate that reality.

(VIDEO: Neal Garrett's Story, [www.wearemore.faith](http://www.wearemore.faith))

But those stories exist in abundance right here in Western Pennsylvania. Today in Hyndman there are ministries that are reaching out to the economically depressed and poor. Today on the North Side of Pittsburgh there are homeless that are being fed, lonely persons who are being welcomed, and young children who are being taught to read. Today in Johnstown, there is a church that is growing by leaps and bounds as it relates to the community and offers words of grace and hope in the midst of uncertainty. Today in Erie there is a bottom-up rather than top-down attempt to pull together congregations and their leaders in a conversation that might lead to a strategy about how they might work together to deal with an area that has deep seeded needs for the hopefulness of a way through. Today in Beaver Falls there is a ministry of relevance around addiction and destructive habits that is paving a way for someone to see a different way than their current path. Today in Knox there is hope around a growing ministry that is leading them to build a new building to house the growth they are experiencing as a result of offering Christ to the community. Today in Indiana there are hundreds of tiny churches who are demonstrating an unbelievable resiliency. In Washington there are robust and intentional conversations around the sin of racism and the desire to eliminate it from our behavioral patterns and lifestyles. In the Greensburg District there is a prayer walk that has taken committed servants around this Annual Conference, circling it in a concert of prayer believing that transformation will only take place in the midst of the holy. In there is a church in the middle of a corn field that is attracting seekers and disciples in an ongoing celebration of joy around a God who has claimed them, called them and will not let them go.

We are not just about a meeting. We are not just about a budget. We are not just about a bishop or a transition of leadership. We are more.

(VIDEO – Rev. Robert Johnson’s Story)

When we are tempted to put our emphasis on meetings, agendas, and structures, we will lose sight of the day-to-day difference that people like you and I can make when we engage a broken and dysfunctional world with a gospel of hope and grace that proclaims in a culture of less, that there is something more. We are more.

- VI. Even though I am often accused of being a naïve optimist, an accusation that I am always more than happy to assume, I am an unqualified realist. I know that there are some of you who will begin to cite the numbers of our decline, the gorge that separates us from unity, and the odds that seem to be stacking against us as a movement that historically has spread scriptural holiness over the land.

There is another old phrase that has long-lasting meaning. The phrase is, “what goes around, comes around.” In a marvelous article by Chris Ritter, he acknowledges that it was only a generation after the death of John Wesley that Methodism experienced its first significant decline. Meticulous in recording their numbers, British Methodists at the Liverpool Conference in 1820 were alarmed to note a net loss of 4,688 members in a single year.

In their analysis the early Methodists began to doubt the effectiveness of its institutionalization and its current leadership. The next three years, however the Methodist movement would experience a remarkable turnaround that would eventually lead to

the tripling of the movement in numbers over the next eighty years, interrupted ironically by a denominational split in the mid-1800's. The expansion had nothing to do with population growth and everything to do with new conversions and the ability to take the gospel to the people. It was the conference in Liverpool that developed, what many have described as the first-ever Methodist turnaround strategy. It was at that conference that business as usual was put aside so that they could chart a more fruitful course. To put it plainly, they forced themselves to put aside business and agenda and decided that they would do nothing less than reverse the decline. They would not allow themselves to over analyze their situation and described that the issue and the solution were both spiritual in nature.

The delegates to that conference adopted 31 resolutions in response to decline. Those thirty-one resolutions were summarized into Seven Strategies.

Are you ready? Here was their prescription for reversing their decline:

**1) Renew the Preachers**

*“We on this solemn occasion devote ourselves afresh to God and resolve in humble dependence on his grace to be more than ever attentive to Personal Religion and to the Christian instruction of the families under our care.”* They vowed to eliminate any distraction from the work of saving souls and spiritually shepherding the flock.

**2) Renew the Preaching**

The preachers committed to renewing their preaching and agreed that it would be refocused on the vital doctrines of the Christian faith. They agreed that their preaching would be evangelistic, practical and zealous. They agreed to pointedly and passionately offer an invitation at every service to

receive Christ. They agreed to reclaim preaching in the field and proclamation in public.

### **3) Prayer and Fasting**

They prayed and fasted each week for a reverse of the decline and the renewal of the movement. Prayer meetings were convened and Watch Nights for all night prayer vigils were organized. They gave their movement to God.

### **4) New Places for New Faces**

Extension of the work was to be the job of every preacher. They were assigned to not only their circuit but to the communities where those circuits were located. They were held accountable by the number of ministries they established in any place underserved by the Movement. Lay leaders were employed to preach in rural locations. New classes and prayer meetings were established in homes in neighborhoods throughout the community.

### **5) Recommitment to Children & Youth**

*“Let us at least in every town establish weekly meetings for the children of our friends according to our ancient custom and let us pay particular spiritual attention in public and private to the young people of our Societies and Congregations.”* They set up a commission to create a new form of Christian Education and confirmation with young people.

### **6) Cultivate the Existing Membership Spiritually**

The preachers recommitted to visiting the sick, the “careless,” and the lukewarm. Class leaders were to recommit to visiting the members in their care weekly and inquire personally about their spiritual state. During

pastoral visits, families were encouraged to practice private spiritual disciplines.

## 7) **Renewal of Teaching**

The Conference made a specific declaration to avoid small-minded arguments over theological minutiae. There was a “spirit of strife and debate” that had crept into their life. The 1820 conference committed to driving this spirit out. They recognized the need for high-quality, relevant, and practical instruction.

Friends, these are the very things that we need to be talking about and emphasizing. In this fast paced ever moving world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are looking for new answers to new problems, when in fact, when it comes to offering people an invitation into the heart of God, the answers are quite simple: preach, teach, love, pray, and renew. The answers are already provided. As we search for answers to our big problems, the solutions are not in the the places where we have placed our emphasis. The solutions are found right here (heart). The answers are within our grasp because they dwell deep within each of us, created and planted by our God and brought to light and fruition when we open ourselves once again to the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

*John Wesley once said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this, undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out. What was their fundamental doctrine? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice.”*

Friends, every issue is a spiritual issue. Are these perilous times for the church? Perhaps they are. But these challenging times

will be more so if you and I do not take seriously and assume spiritual leadership.

Politics will only frustrate you.

Agendas will only alienate others.

Structures may give form but they don't always function.

Secularism may enable you to relate but will not address the issues.

Politics are a part of the church. So are agendas, structures, and secularism.

But, but, . . . We Are More!

May it be so. Amen.