

Report of the Conference Lay Leader
New York Annual Conference of the
United Methodist Church
Friday, June 12, 2009

210th Session

Renata Smith

Conference Lay Leader

Bishop Park, Bishop Johnson, Bishop Nhanala, Invited Guests, Members of the New York Annual Conference: Greetings.

What a difference a year makes! I thank God that in this my first year as Lay leader of the New York Annual Conference, His grace has been sufficient. To God be the glory!

The Board of Laity, charged with the task of representing and advocating for the laity, embraced the challenges facing us prayerfully, and with the confidence that the God who had called us would resource us.

Bishop Park, at our first meeting in September 2008, referring as he always does, to our Mission Statement, reminded us that Jesus' charge to His disciples in Matthew 28: 18-20 to go and make disciples were intentional words, and he charged us to make Jesus known by the life we lead. He described the Lay Speakers as an untapped resource, and urged us to recognize our call to be not just a connectional church, not just an institutional church, ...but rather a connecting church. Bishop Park, we the laity of the New York Annual Conference thank God for your leadership, and your accessibility to us!

To our visionary Director of Connectional Ministries, Rev Ann Pearson, Peter O'Neill, the Conference director of Lay Speaking, and all the members of the Board of Laity, thanks for your dedicated, capable and hard work. The laity of this conference can be assured that advocating for them is a group of men and women who know that they are called by God to be spiritual leaders, and who understand that their ultimate role is to see men, women, boys and girls become transformed by being in relationship with Jesus Christ and to grow in that relationship. They are indeed Vessels of service...Vessels in service!

I will use these remaining few minutes to affirm and to challenge the laity to continue in ministry ...because our ministry matters. Our ministry makes a difference!

There is a saying we use in Jamaica, West Indies where I am from which describes people who are involved in everything. 'If it's an egg, they are in the red' That could be said about the laity in our conference.

From serving on committees, too numerous to mention, from speaking to leading in worship, Bible study, prayer meetings, to conducting workshops and leading retreats, from ministering to the sick, homeless and homebound, to advocating for the voiceless, from engaging in the ministry of hospitality, to bearing the witness of Jesus Christ in communities both local and global – and the list goes on...the laity of this conference working hand in hand with clergy, are to be affirmed for their work in service to Jesus Christ and the Church.

Ever since being asked to serve as lay leader, an honor which I humbly accept and do not take lightly, references are frequently made as to how huge a task this is...and I agree. However, this is not only an individual task, but really a communal one. The following words will be familiar to many here! ‘to develop a creative and supportive fellowship’..... These words taken from the ‘purpose of the United Methodist Women, underscore how I feel. Supported. The United Methodist Women is one of the strongest and most consistently growing lay organizations in our conference. They support the global and local mission of the church through hands on mission, study and consistent giving. The leadership training which we receive through that organization benefits the entire church as United Methodist Women can be found providing leadership and service in all aspects of our denomination. A reminder that the School of Christian Mission coming up in July is not for women only, but is open to all...men, women, children and youth. There is still time to register. This year’s study topics will be Food and Faith, ‘Sudan’ and Giving our hearts Away- Native American Survival. We particularly miss the presence of the men at School of Mission. It is not the same without you! Manning the prayer room, sharing about the Scouting ministry and enlisting members, as well as adding that necessary dimension to our studies and discussions.....Please make this the year to come back in numbers!

We affirm the United Methodist Women, and issue a challenge to those churches which still do not have an organized unit to get on board. The UMW also needs to find ways to attract more women, more diverse women and younger women. Come and go places with the United Methodist Women. My reason for singling out this group is that I am standing here today in this capacity because of the influence on my life personally of the UMW. You have similar stories, witnessing to various ministries and their influences on your lives, be it the United Methodist Men, Youth groups, Walk to Emmaus, Lay Speaking Ministry, prayer groups, and the list goes on.

Whatever our area of ministry, we must remember that we are all vessels in the service of our Master, Jesus Christ. As vessels, we both receive and give. We serve next to other vessels, some new, some that have served for a long time. Vessels vary in size and shape. Although they serve different purposes, they all fulfill a role. Just like the vessels in our homes, some are decorative, some are for special occasions and some are for everyday use. It is the same with us.

By far the most significant thing about us as vessels is what we contain. Or who we contain! Joyce Rupp who has written a treasure of a book 'The Cup of Life' puts it this way. '.....we are containers designed to hold the Divine Presence'.

1 Corinthians 3:16 reminds us that God's Spirit lives within us, that we are God's temple. We are told in the gospel of John that apart from Him, we can accomplish nothing. Whatever area of ministry we must remember that we are vessels of Jesus Christ.

Realizing this is the beginning of true service. A vessel pours forth what it contains. It is the same with us.

Fueled by God's Spirit within us, we should approach leadership with a sense of call. Not only clergy, not only Lay Speakers, but all of us are called .WE are all disciples of Christ This is how our Discipline puts it:

'The ministry of the laity flows from a commitment to Christ's outreaching love. Lay members of the United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every lay person is called to be missional. The witness of the laity, their Christlike examples of everyday living as well as the sharing of their own faith experiences of the gospel, is the primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Christ and the United Methodist church will fulfill its mission'.

But in order for vessels to be of worthwhile service, they must be kept clean. Can you imagine drinking from yesterday's unwashed cup or eating from yesterday's unwashed dish? We need to clean up after we have messed up. When we leave traces of hatred, envy, malice, selfishness in our vessels, these traces multiply and attract other similar unwelcome vices. We become vessels that cannot be used productively.

We need to do daily upkeep and cleansing of our vessels through prayer, the kind that is not punctuated by a particular time or place, although that is important. The kind that is not relegated to a particular posture or set of words, but prayer that is the very breath and pulse of our lives. We need to devote time daily to personal study of God's Word. We need to take out our hymnals or our songs of praise books and sing praises to God ...not only when we gather for corporate worship. We need to heed the words of the psalmist to sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs to the Lord. We need to restore the passion for God in our lives. Only then will it spill over into our gathered times together.

There are no short cuts. But that is what makes service sweet. That is what encourages the spirit. The inside work must be done before the outside work can be effective!

Finally, work with your pastors. They are your shepherds. Work with each other. We together are the church.
May God bless you as you continue in His service, , CALLED, CLEANSED and FILLED.