

**New York Annual Conference  
State of the Church  
2018**

*“He dipped his hands into the icy water and took a long, cool drink. Fifteen months of hard travel, a seemingly endless string of days of back breaking, upstream slogging had led to this moment. . . . Nervous nights in a strange land. Mosquitos galore. A dark, cold winter. Grizzly bears. A month-long portage around an immense waterfall. The death of a companion.”*

This was the story of a team called the Corps of Discovery. Their leaders were a team that forever in history are linked as one phrase: Lewis & Clark.

Lewis and Clark and their team were sent out by President Thomas Jefferson to discover the Northwest passage, the water route to the Pacific Ocean that would open up economic trade for the new United States.

Their route of passage was the Missouri River. They were all expert canoers. They navigated the Missouri in search of its headwaters believing that once they did, they would discover the flow of water in the opposite direction that would lead downhill to the Pacific Ocean. “Meriwether Lewis believed that he would walk up the hill, look down a gentle slope that would take his men a half day to cross with their canoes on their backs and then they would see the Columbia River,” . . . that would swiftly whisk them to the Pacific Ocean. “They could not have been more disappointed, . . . In front of him was not a gentle slope down to a navigable river running to the Pacific Ocean.” What was in front of him were the Rocky Mountains.

And in that moment, the canoers had to figure out how to be mountaineers. The expert boaters had to learn how to ride horses. The planning that had led them to that point had to be scrapped in favor of a new course that had no plan and plenty of adaptations along the way. Lewis and Clark had to go off the map into uncharted territory.

II. This vivid illustration is the basis of a book that is suddenly being widely distributed across the church entitled Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory. In this book, the author Tod Bolsinger, weaves a deep comparison between the perils and possibilities facing Lewis & Clark with the 21<sup>st</sup> century dilemmas facing the church.

Bolsinger says that there were five hallmarks of the Lewis and Clark Expedition that made it ultimately successful:

- a) The Corps of Discovery had to realize that way in front of them was nothing like the way behind them.
- b) The only way that Lewis & Clark motivated their team to move forward into uncharted lands was they had built trust with the team in the charted lands.
- c) Lewis and Clark understood that the only way to lead off the map was to adapt to everything.
- d) They built relationships and endured resistance.

e) In order to meet the goal, they had to change. They all had to change.

It's those five things that I want to use as the platform for this State of the Church address.

Understanding #1:

***The World in front of us is nothing like the World Behind Us.***

We have been talking about deep change for decades now. We've all known that something had to be changed if we were to maintain our growth and relevance as a church. The upheaval of cultural change consumed us in the 60's. The organizational positioning of the church dominated our thinking in the 70's. The beginnings of secular competition started to creep into our consciousness in the 80's and 90's but we still had enough people to lull us to sleep and convince us that we were still sustainable. That trend carried us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but with each passing year our decline has revealed that we cannot continue to sustain ourselves like we used to. Children and grandchildren have moved away, young families that remain have more interest in things out there than things in here, people searching for meaning question why it is that the church says one thing on Sunday but demonstrates something else on Monday, and the rise of the internet and social media culture has given people access to more information than they ever have and, as a result, permission has been granted to say and do whatever anyone wants to say or do.

Yet, there is still a desire on the part of the church to do things like we have done it in the past. Bolsinger says, and I agree, that just trying harder at what we are already doing isn't going to result in any measurable change.

Over the last year I have preached in small, medium, and large churches all across our Annual Conference. I have met some of the most wonderful people I have ever met in some of the most amazing places I have ever visited. I know you are probably getting tired of it, but I am fascinated by the vast array of diverse culture and thought that make up the place we call home. There is an amazing uniqueness in our home. Cultural and theological contexts exist here that blow the mind.

But what is it that transcends our culture and our theological persuasion when it comes to describing our churches? What are the common ways that we can describe our churches?

When it comes to this subject there are only two things that come to my mind. Sitting in this Annual Conference session today, the church you represent can be described in one of two ways: you are either still trying to do the same thing you have done for years, or you are pressing the envelope of new discovery. Our churches are either in denial that the world is changing more rapidly than we can handle or keenly aware that something has to change and that something is us. The attitude out there about the church has changed and it is changing so rapidly that once we hit on an idea that works it's time to begin exploring the next right answer immediately.

This is exhausting work. And it's uncertain. There is no guarantee that anything we try will work. But it's like I've said for years, "*I don't like the word failure. If something doesn't work, it's not a failure, it's just a stepping stone to an eventual success.*" If we buy into the fact that the world in front of us is uncharted territory that we don't know how to navigate, then we have to learn how to fail. It's not all going to work, but if we don't try, we know for sure that that effort won't work.

Frankly, we have been paddling in a canoe for a long time. But sitting in front of us are the Rocky Mountains. We know how to canoe, but it's time to become mountain climbers.

It is this theory that has given expression to our Mission, Vision, and Core Values. We have come to realize very quickly that we have got to make a major investment in leadership if we ever hope to bring renewed vitality to our church and, more than that, to our area. Putting our leaders in relationship with a coach, providing training that is not cookie cutter but appropriate for the context, exposing ourselves to the best practices around us, urging the intentional formation of Covenant/Accountability Groups, and giving support for well-grounded experimentation are all goals that we have set for this next leg of our journey together. We must help leaders lead leaders who lead.

Understanding #2:

***No one will follow you OFF the Map unless they trust you ON the Map***

Lewis and Clark demonstrated real leadership among their Corps of Discovery while they were navigating the Missouri River. They made good decisions and made sure that their team was well cared for each step of the way.

That reality enabled the Corps of Discovery to say "Yes" when they were confronted with navigating the Rocky Mountains. It wasn't that Lewis & Clark knew how to do it. It was that they had built trust among their team that made them willing to go where they were being led.

Bolsinger says that at the heart of this reality is one key word: **Competence.**

As leaders, we have to demonstrate competence and knowledge. One of the key issues we face as a church is as a result of the various illiteracies we are facing: biblical illiteracy, historical illiteracy, and polity illiteracy. Our inability to tell the story of Jesus or to assure people with the time-honored words of hope and comfort found in the scriptures, or to weave the historical story of Methodism into the modern context, or to help our people understand how our church works only breeds contempt, skepticism and mis-understanding, and an inability to follow where the leader leads.

We also have to be competent in the manner in which we care for souls and communities.

In one of my visits to a local church this year, I was told that it was “Law Enforcement Recognition” Sunday. I was more than curious about it but at the 11:00 a.m. service, the sanctuary was populated with local borough police officers. The whole purpose was to thank them for their service. I found out later that the pastor is a part of team that involves officers who go with the pastor to persons who are just about ready to go over the edge and provide pastoral care and advocacy in an attempt to reach them before they fall over that edge. It’s a wedding of sacred and secular that demonstrates competency in the caring of souls and communities.

And we have to demonstrate competence with teams and tasks. Let’s commit ourselves to being the best we can be at what we do. Let’s not be autocratic but relational. Let’s not shy away from doing whatever we can to be the best at what we do.

Quoting historian Steven Ambrose, Bolsinger writes,

*“What Lewis and Clark and the men of the Corps of Discovery had demonstrated is that there is nothing that people cannot do if they get themselves together and act as a team. Here you have thirty-two men who had become so close, so bonded, that when they heard a cough at night, they knew who instantly had a cold. They could see a man’s shape in the dark and know who was. They knew who liked salt on his meat and who didn’t. They knew who was the best shot, the fastest runner, the one who could get a fire going the quickest on a rainy day. Around the campfire, they got to know about each other’s parents and loved ones, and each other’s hopes and dreams. They had come to love each other to the point where they would have sold their lives gladly to save a comrade. They had developed a bond, become a band of brothers, and together they were able to accomplish feats that astonish us today. It was the captains who welded the Corps of discovery into a team. Indeed, a family.”*

And then, when they most needed it – when they were confronted with going off the map into the depths of the Rocky Mountains – they could rely on their deep trust in each other.

IT IS MY LONGING AS I SIT IN THE BALCONY OVERSEEING LIFE AMONG US ALL HERE IN NEW YORK AND RELATING TO ALL OF YOU. I long for you to make it your point to love each other. Korean spirituality, Caribbean worship, Ghanaian resiliency, African American heritage, etc. etc.

This is the reason why I’ve been promoting a sense of common mission among us. We are walking into unchartered land friends. I don’t want to walk into the woods alone and I don’t want you to do that either.

In this room we need to make the commitment to do all that we can to be the absolute best that we can be.

And, above all, we need to work hard, very hard, to nurture ourselves spiritually AND, in the midst of it all, exert Spiritual Leadership above everything.

We need to exhibit a New York/Connecticut pride and determination. And that doesn't mean that it requires a uniformity of thought as much as it requires a deep sense of love for God, and an intentional commitment to learn how to love and trust one another. It's unprecedented. But it's possible.

I don't know how the next year is going to turn out. But I know it will turn out better if we have a sense of being able to walk into uncharted territory together.

Understanding #3:

### ***In Uncharted Territory, Adaptation is Everything***

For years, I have been a person who has wanted more and more technical capacity. I have been a problem-solver and the best way to solve problems is to get more technical answers to the problems we face.

Many of you know that I am a golfer. Golf has a lot of technique associated with it. There is a right way to hit a driver and a wrong way. There are techniques associated with chipping and putting and hitting out of sand traps. And much of that technique is honed in practice.

It's been a humbling venture. Once I took a lesson and the guy who came out to give me the lesson said, "Okay, mister, just swing the club a few times so I can get a sense of your swing." After a few swings, he interrupted me and said, "Mister, there is so much going on from the time you take that club back till the time it hits the ball, I don't know where to start. I've got to go get some help."

I've worked and worked and worked on my technique. I've spent hours on a driving range and have reached certain points where I believed that I was ready to tackle the course. But it was then that there was another revelation. It's one thing hitting a ball off of a mat in a predictable environment. It's another to hit a golf ball lying on the side of a hill or in the woods. It's one thing to putt a ball on a flat surface into a hole but it's another when there are ridges and different levels to putt through. Everything I learn on a driving range does not, cannot prepare me totally for playing the game itself. I have to learn how to adapt.

Few would argue today that as a church we are walking into uncharted territory. Years and years of preparation and practice, honing our technique of worship and study, administration and pastoral care, are helpful but largely irrelevant if it hasn't been or can't be adapted into the modern context or, more particularly, into the specific context out of which you are serving.

We've heard and felt for years now that seminaries and LPLS schools are not preparing us for what we are facing in the churches we serve.

They can't teach you how to deal with the desire for independence and isolation out on Long Island. There isn't a course on how to minister to a commuter crowd in Connecticut and along the Hudson River valley that gets on a train at 6:00 a.m. on

Monday morning, gets home at 7:00 p.m. that night and repeats that rhythm five days a week only to come home on a weekend to soccer and swim practice, a yard that needs mowed, and a mind that needs decompressed. There isn't a seminary class on how to do evangelism in the heart of New York City when the bulk of your congregation travels in from somewhere out there in the five boroughs or New Jersey and when walking the streets relating to the context has very little impact on recruiting people to come to your church. There isn't a CEU available for dealing with Appalachian small membership churches with five members who are all over 70, who still want to keep their church open. We haven't yet seen a class offered entitled, *"Declining attendance, reduced sustainability, and Jesus."*

When I came here almost two years ago, one of the first things I heard was, "Bishop, please don't promote another cookie cutter approach to ministry. One size doesn't fit all here." And it doesn't. But the real challenge is to not allow ourselves to be paralyzed staring at the mountain in front of us when all we know how to do is canoe. The reality is, either we adapt or we die.

But it's deeper than that. You've all had people in your churches who have faced grim realities. I can hear the chorus of comments: "I know I'm overweight and I need to do something about it. I know I need to stop smoking because it isn't doing me any good. I know I'm a diabetic but I just can't stop eating candy." And I've watched over the years within myself and within others the inability to change behaviors.

Systems strategist Ron Heifetz says, "We have the technology to fix the heart, but not change it."

Heifetz goes on, *"Adaptive processes don't require leadership with answers. It requires leadership that create structures that hold people together through the very conflictive, passionate, and sometimes awful process of addressing questions for which there aren't easy answers."*

What are the questions you are facing for which there aren't easy answers? And how are you going about answering them? It may be the time you worship or the structure of the service itself. It may be creating a storefront ministry or doing a Bible study in a Tattoo parlor. It's not easy to make that break and discern those answers.

Friends, we need each other more than ever. But what we don't need is someone trying to convince us that they have the technical answers to our complex issues. What we need is an environment of discovery. And that requires an investment of time and energy in one another. With declining sustainability, we are going to be challenged with doing ministry cooperatively like we never have. I know you love your church building and I know you feel comfortable with the people who come to your church. But just down the road is a church with people who are facing the very same issues you are and, for the sake of the mission to transform the world, won't you join hearts and hands in a ministry of discernment and discovery together? Pastors, this work breeds a deep sense of isolation. Our mistake has been to say, "Here's your new appointment" – "good luck" – and then breathe a sigh of relief that another grueling appointment season has come and gone without providing the linkage necessary to keep you from feeling all alone.

But the challenge you face is offering yourself to a covenant group or an accountability network that will put you face to face with others who facing the very same issue you are. For the sake of the mission to transform the world, won't you join hearts and hands in a ministry of discernment and discovery together?

That leads to Understanding Number 4.

Understanding #4

***You can't go it alone but you haven't succeeded until you've survived the sabotage.***

Adapting to a changing culture alone is terrifying and, like a chain smoker, you probably won't change if it's just up to you. But with a strong network of relationships and trust, can we not walk together as we canoers try to navigate the rigid mountains of something we have never seen before?

Bolsinger says, *"The ability to innovate, to be creative to consider new options, to 'shift habits, beliefs, or values' requires 'sturdy, trustworthy space' fashioned out of healthy relationships.' I am not advocating that church leaders compromise on essential tenets of faith, but a number of cherished beliefs or convictions WILL be challenged in a change process."*

In her book, When Change is out of Control, Margaret Wheatley writes, *"It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another."*

This is one of our biggest challenges in the year ahead. My sense is that on a good day we vacillate to the people and groups we feel most comfort or affinity with. And, when we do spend time with groups we don't feel have an affinity with we spend more time talking than listening, trying to convince the other side that we have the right idea on our side.

I have said to you before that one of the greatest gifts afforded to me in this office is that I have the opportunity to see and interact with all groups. My testimony to you is not naïve or child-like. It is true. There are wonderful people in all of the groups represented in this room. And those wonderful people who look, act, and believe differently than you do have something to offer to the building of the kingdom of God here on earth. And, from a purely relational angle, these are people really worth knowing.

I believe that the only way we will be able to navigate the high mountains of change that we are facing is if we choose to walk together.

It means that we have to do the hard and deliberate work of knowing one another and the patient and earnest work of listening to one another. Anything less will hurt our

public witness of faith and anything less will leave the ground strewn with victims of a vicious winners vs. loser's game.

Friends, it is time for us to say Christian words backed with Christian actions that directly combat unchristian words and actions that are taking place outside and, at times, inside. Now, more than ever, we need to use our voice on behalf of one another:

- We need women in ministry and empowered women in this world who are treated with equality and respect.
- We need to declare that racism on any and all levels is wrong and needs to be addressed on all levels by leaders, parishioners, and citizens.
- We need to say that immigrants are welcome here, in our churches and in our communities, and that we will provide safe spaces for you to be a part of our fellowship.
- We need to stop the harmful words and actions that have made those in the LBGTQIA family less than welcome, accepted, and loved.
- And we need to be able, with courage and grace, to carry the banner for others. For example, if the only persons who carry the banner for dismantling racism are the persons of color in this room, the quest for a must just and loving world will never find fulfillment. I am a white male, in a room where there are many people who have benefitted from privileges afforded to us for years because of the color of our skin. WE need to carry the banner, state the injustice, couch it with loving kindness, and humbly let God lead us into what it means to advocate for one another.

One of favorite parts of the Appointment Book this year is found on page 14. When you get it, be sure to look it up. A couple of years ago, the appointment read: Bayside, Senior Pastor: William F. Wendler. Bayside Korean: Jung Un Moon. The appointment book now reads: Bayside, Senior Pastor: Jung Un Moon. Bayside Associate: William F. Wendler. That, for me, is a classic example of collaboration and relationships. It has taken great ego strength on Bill's part to transition from Senior Pastor to Associate in the same setting and it has taken great patience and understanding on the Part of Jung Un to allow the congregation at Bayside to still love their long-standing pastor. It's a part of climbing a mountain that you've never dreamed you would have to climb. But it's so much easier when you do it together.

I remember once going on a Volunteer-in-Mission trip to Argentina. On the trip were preachers who, in addition to working on homes in the area, would be preaching in area churches. There were also well-seasoned construction workers who would be using their expertise to guide us through our various work assignments. And there was a 78 year-old woman. When we left, I wondered, "What is she doing here?" She's not going to preach. She's not going to be able to climb up on roofs? When we got there, the local home owners were so grateful that we had come. Their self-imposed job was to cook for us. Early in the morning when we would arrive at the worksite, they would be in the kitchen hard at work while we worked. And I noticed while we were working the elderly woman. She was walking around all day holding the kitchen worker's babies. She was sitting in a chair playing with the kitchen worker's children. And one day she looked at me and said, "I've been doing these trips for several years. And I love my job. I am here

to take care of the children because wherever you go, the children need to be taken care of.” Everyone is trying their best, using the gifts they have been given.

But Bolsinger is not naïve in this fourth understanding. He says, “you haven’t succeeded until you have survived the sabotage.”

He’s right. Laity, you will be receiving a pastor on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Some of them will be in your midst for the first time. Others of them will be returning to you. Some of them are very well qualified. Some of them are still in process. Some of them have great gifts that are very noticeable. Others have gifts that are still be honed and refined. All of them have been approved to serve in your midst. And all of them have rough edges that need refined. They all love the Lord and want the best for the church but none of them know how to do exactly what they have been called in their hearts to do. Every one of them will make a mistake in the next year. They will disappoint you and fail you in some way. But I believe they will try their best in your midst.

They long for an environment of discovery and will work for a breakthrough that will bring the church renewed purpose and vitality. They won’t succeed if you sabotage them and refuse to work with them. Love them please.

Clergy, on July 1<sup>st</sup> you will be assigned to a church. Some of you will be in a setting for the first time. Others of you will be returning for yet another year to the same setting. There are pockets and places in your assignment that have great potential. There are other pockets and places that have grown stale and need revived. In your assignment there will be people who have undeniable gifts and callings that need used and nurtured. But in your assignment, there will be people who have come to the church out of a longing, a need, an empty spot. They are driven by insecurity and spiritual immaturity. You have been assigned to serve all of them. All of them have rough edges that need refined. But all them love their church and are trying to find a way to love the Lord. None of them know how to do what their heart longs for. And, as a result, every one of them will make a mistake in the next year. They will disappoint you and fail you in some way. But I believe that their heart is genuine, their longings are real, and they will try their best. Love them please.

And in our midst are colleagues representing a vast array of cultures, ethnicities, histories, genders, and theologies. WOW. Are we one complex place. But sitting around you are people, like you, who have responded to a calling that they believe with all their heart God has placed upon them. A calling not to be a lawyer or a physician, but to be a pastor. Every one of them have made and are making huge sacrifices of finances, family, and personal capital in order to do what they have been set apart to do. They love God, like you do. They attempt to serve faithfully, as you do. Their context may be different and their theology may not align exactly, or at all, with yours. But they are created in the image of God, and like you, their heart is warmed when they are called a child of God. Some of them around you have exceptional gifts. Some of them are trying to discover their gifts more fully. Some of them are deeply spiritual and mature in their emotions. Some of them are struggling spiritually and find, at times, that their emotions get in the way. Some of them you know. Many of them you don’t. But all of them have a love of God in their hearts. All of them, including you, will make mistakes in

judgement in the next year. They, like you, in their humanness, will struggle at times. But they are your sister, your brother in Christ. Love them please.

I say all of that because, frankly, what distresses me most in my work is that it seems that, at times, we reflect the culture more than we reflect the Christ. We judge so easily and freely. We criticize more than we affirm. At times we claim that we when we do so we are “doing Justice,” but somehow, we have left out of the post something that demonstrates that we “love kindness,” and that “we are walking humbly with our God,” so much so that perhaps our approach, if not our viewpoint, might not be the will of God after all. My Dad always says, “If you can’t say something good perhaps you should consider keeping your mouth shut.”

I don’t know if you’ve noticed but the sabotage has gotten really bad and no one is immune to it. I’ve never been so tempted to cancel my Facebook and Twitter accounts because I read less and less about “good news” and more and more about what someone or some group has done wrong. It has fed a virus that is quickly growing into a terminal disease.

The other day I read a post on Facebook from one of my dearest friends. His post was a rant against the bishops. What in the blank are the bishops thinking? Bishops are nothing but stupid was at the heart of his message. I couldn’t believe what I was reading. Comments attached to the post built on the theme and used words and phrases that bit hard. I called him. His response was, “Oh, I hope you know that I wasn’t talking about you, I was referring to everyone else.” And when I hung up, I wasn’t convinced that was true.

Some days I know exactly how to serve and, with increasing frequency I am, like you, trying to figure out how to serve in a rapidly changing culture. Some days I get it right. Some days I get it wrong. But I have a love for God in my heart and a depth of call like you do. That love and that call has never found a more satisfying place that it has in the role that I humbly assume. I love what I do. And I love the opportunity to serve you. Sometimes I will bless you. Sometimes I will fail you. When I succeed, I pray that it might be humbly seen as God at work. When I fail, I pray that you will forgive me.

It is so easy for us to sabotage one another in favor of our viewpoints and perspectives. We won’t make it, friends, if we don’t do it somehow together. But we will fail in our togetherness if all we do is bite, and criticize, and complain and sabotage one another.

But how do we change that bad habit? To change it, like the habit of chain smoking or over eating it’s easier said than done.

That leads to the final understanding.

Understanding #5

***If transformation is to really occur, everybody will be changed, especially the leader.***

When I was in seminary one of my new testament professors was an absolutely brilliant scholar but his real brilliance was in his ability to speak and relate in practical terms.

Dr. Efird would often remind us, *“When you are in a bible study and someone asks you a question that you can’t answer, the worst thing you can try to do is fake it. The best three words you will ever use in a bible study are these three words, ‘I don’t know.’ And when you use them, go and find the answer as best you can. You will gain more credibility using those three words than any other three words in the human vocabulary.”*

Gosh, friends, I wish I had a crystal ball that would reveal what is going to happen in the next eight months or eight years. And because I don’t have the answers, I’m just guessing and wondering like you are. I have to use those three words, “I don’t know” and I hope the use of those words, in some way, helps us to understand that we are all in this together and that we all, every one of us in this room, are faced with the same dilemmas and opportunities.

The church we love cannot stand still or remain the way it is. If that is our choice, we will die. But if transformation is really to occur. If we are able to put down our canoe paddles and put on our hiking shoes in order to climb a mountain we have never climbed before, we all are going to have change.

Friends, this is a very tender and vulnerable time for our church and for every one of us who are a part of that church. A year from now, someone in this room is going to be unhappy. Maybe all of us will be unhappy. Maybe someone will be thrilled. But regardless, if we keep on beating each other up and living in our silos of comfort, if we keep on pointing the finger at the mistake someone else has made and don’t in the same breath admit a mistake we have made, if we keep posting anger and fail to post joy, if we don’t seek a transformation in ourselves as long as we hope for a transformation in someone else, we will continue to witness declining sustainability and a rising sense of anger and frustration. I’ve said pretty loudly in recent months, “What we need is a good old-fashioned revival here in New York.”

So how do we bring about the transformation of the heart we need in order to transform the world around us into the image of Jesus Christ?

When I was in Junior High, I was a little short fat kid. I was five foot-five and weighed 185 pounds. I was portly at best. Every day at my locker, Darryl Anderson would hit me as hard as he could on the left arm. My arm was black and blue all year. In gym class, I was often the slowest. I got verbally ridiculed every day. And in the shower room, wet towels were spun into a weapon and I would go home with red welts on my back. The bullying happened every day and the threats about bodily harm after school let out struck fear and terror into my insecure body. I couldn’t understand why anyone would be treated like that. It pierced any sense of security I had and it created an enormous sense of self-doubt as my worth was lessened each day.

At the end of class every day it was my quest to get out of school as quick as I could and run as fast as I could for one block. At the end of that block there was a 1963 green

Buick. In that car was my grandfather who would pick me up every day. In those days, that Buick was my salvation, my refuge from the storm, my place of acceptance. In the Bickerton house, you went to church on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. And while I didn't always want to go, when I walked into that sanctuary, I knew right then and there I was loved. Mom/Dad sat on the back row and my grandparents sat on the seventh pew on the right. When service was over, while everyone was leaving church, I was going into church so I could greet my grandparents. On the way down that aisle, I was greeted by the people of the church. I think it's why I have a bald spot. They rubbed the hair off of my head. It was an atmosphere of love, of grace, of acceptance.

But there was still a missing piece. The world out there was not compatible with the world I was experiencing in there. My elders treated me with kindness but my peers were mean and ugly. You can sense perhaps why I was so reluctant to go to church camp with peers that I had never met. But what I experienced at church camp was the next step in the real transformation of my heart. For the first time, I found love from my peers, acceptance for who I was, and a belief that I mattered. And at an altar rail in a church on Thursday night at camp, I understood what it meant to be a child of God, loved and affirmed as someone who mattered in the eyes of God.

I think that story alone is why I grieve so much for the church, its decline, and our struggle to find through our problems and get back to the mission and ministry that has significantly blessed and changed the lives of people all over the globe. My worry isn't so much about the adults who come to church just to get their batteries charged as much as I worry about the children, and the adults, who are being victimized by a world that is filled with vitriol and hatred, a world that demeans and demoralizes, a world that highlights the problems and rarely posts the possibilities. I was one of those people, and my salvation came because of a church that decided that it wouldn't be like the world as much as it was going to be like Jesus. A church that stopped naval gazing and did all it could to say to a little, short, fat, insecure, bullied kid, "You are wanted and loved here." It changed my life and I know it changes others too.

Bolsinger says that "The Mission Trumps Everything." Isn't it a shame that you have to hesitate to use certain words today. But Bolsinger says that in order to canoe the mountains, Lewis & Clark had to maintain their core identity.

Friends, we cannot, dare not lose our core identity. We cannot transform the world by becoming the world. We transform the world when we become like Christ and demonstrate to the world in our posts and in our interactions, in our preaching and in our relating to others that there is a way through this mess and it won't be found anytime soon if we keep relying on our own ideas and pursuits.

It's only found when we come to the font.

I love our theology. It is the absolute best. When I come to the font, I am reminded of a symbol the church has offered to the world with a belief that does nothing less than transform the hearts of others. Our baptismal theology, and it's at the heart of why we baptize babies, says that before a baby can ever say "I love you God," God has already

said, “I love you” to that child. God’s love for us is never dependent on our love for God. God has claimed us, as we are, loved us in spite of our failures, and will never, ever let us go! The waters of the font cleanse us from our failures. The waters of the font give us life and purpose. If you are in the LBGTQIA community, you matter to me. If you describe yourself as a conservative evangelical, you matter to me. If you have suffered the pain of gender inequality, you matter to me. If you have endured the lingering and constant pain of racism, you matter to me. The waters of the font say to us all of us, you matter to me dear child. You matter to me.

So how do we stay focused on the Pathway & Possibility of Transforming the World?  
*We come to the font.*

How do we find strength when the world in front of us is nothing like the world behind us?  
*We come to the font.*

How to find a deeper trust in one another as we walk off the map into uncharted territory?  
*We come to the font.*

How do we find the courage to adapt rather than to always think we have the right answer?  
*We come to the font.*

How to resist being sabotaged and what do we do when we have sabotaged and demeaned others and said more things that hurt than we have things that heal?  
*We come to the font.*

Oh, and when we do, when we have the courage to lay it down and come freely and willingly into the heart of God, when we experience the life-giving waters of our God’s claim on our lives, everybody will be changed. Everybody.

One of the greatest days of my ministry happened a few years ago in a place called Fox Chapel, PA. It was a rather elite little church, plopped right in the middle of a very affluent part of that world. Money was no problem, but vision was. The church had never really grown and did more accommodation to the desires of the people who attended than it did to the needs of the broader community.

One day the new young pastor of that church invited me to come to a meeting of their Administrative Board. “*Thrill of thrills, I thought.*” But because I had an emerging relationship with the young pastor, I went. We had lunch and then the pastor spoke, “*Bishop, this is not just an Administrative Board meeting. It’s a discernment group. We are trying to figure out God’s right answer for our church. We’d like for you to come with us.*”

We piled into vans and went down the hill to a community right next to Fox Chapel. It was a former steel town that had fallen on hard times economically. The poor and homeless in that town were in large numbers and because our existing UMC in that

town couldn't adapt and change to meet the needs of the emerging population, it shut down and closed.

When we got there, Tom said, *"Bishop, we have been doing a weekly prayer walk around this town. We have just been walking, praying, and talking to people along the way. We don't have the answers, but we know that God does and we are searching, looking for where God may want us to be. We'd like for you to join us today."*

And so, we walked. We came to a Catholic Church. We stopped there and prayed for the priest and his people. We came to a very run-down neighborhood. We stopped and prayed for the residents. We came to a senior citizens high rise and school. We talked to people who passed by and we prayed. At one point we reached the city center. On the corner, in the heart of the city, was a storefront that housed a Karate business. I said to the pastor, *"Tom, there's your spot. Wouldn't it be great to start a church right there?"* *"It would,"* Tom replied, *"but they've been in that spot for years."* We prayed and moved back to the city park where we had started. We got into a circle. Tom took out a basin and some water. We came to the font. Renewed our baptism and we prayed.

About a month later, the pastor called me and said, "You'll never guess what happened. The karate business has left that space, and we just rented it." Today, in that spot there is a new church. An afterschool-program. Tutors who are helping children learn. A support group for the unemployed and a feeding program for the homeless. They study the bible and pray and worship with joy.

Tom says, "We don't have the answers Bishop. But we know that God does. That's why we walk and that's why we pray."

Friends, we don't have the answers. There is great anxiety and turmoil, acting out and spouting off. We don't have the answers.

But we know that God does.

That's why we walk. That's why we pray.

That's why we come to the font, a common place with a universal love from a God who will not let us go

I don't have the answers. I wish I did. This next year will be challenging for us, perhaps even formidable.

But I genuinely look forward to walking with you and searching for the way that God will lead us through it all. As we hold it all and, in the process, attempt to hold us together, won't you join me?

Maybe we could start, right here, at the font.

May it be so.

Amen.