

## **State of the Church Annual Conference 2019**

- I. As most of you know, for the past fifteen years I have taken the Elder/Deacon candidates that I have ordained to England each year. This trip is designed, in large part, to build relationships with those that I ordain AND to explore a series of events around the life and work of our founder, John Wesley.

Each year that trip has been filled with good conversation and somewhat light-hearted reflections on the life of John Wesley from birth to death.

But this year, the trip took on added meaning and significance. Given the current state of affairs within our church, it became very clear that at this point in our history, perhaps we need John Wesley more than we ever have.

I am convinced that most of what developed as Wesleyan Theology grew out of Wesley's own struggle with life and ministry. His understanding of God grew not only out of his upbringing at the stern and intentional hands of his parents, Susanna & Samuel, but also as a result of his life experience.

John Wesley was not the most exemplary person the world has ever known. Sure, he was Methodical, hence our name. Sure, he was a master of organization, hence the connection. But John Wesley was a person of contrasts. His highs and his lows were dramatic, and each of those experiences served to forge how he understood life, call, and the exercise of ministry.

I like to say that John Wesley was a "resistor."

Later this week we will have the opportunity to baptize two infants, recognize confirmands, and ordain clergy here at Annual Conference. And when I do that, I will ask the parents and the persons standing before me one very basic yet fundamentally critical question: "*Will you resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?*"

The word "resist" means "to exert force in opposition," or "to withstand the force or effect of something." To ask someone if they are willing to resist evil, injustice and oppression is to ask them if they are willing to withstand or exert force against the evils, injustices and oppressive behaviors that are all around us. That is a critical question for parents seeking to baptize their children. Will you stand in the gap for your child? It is a critical question for confirmands. Will you forge your belief around that which is good & right & holy? That is a critical question for anyone in pastoral leadership, whether you are a layperson or a clergyperson. Will you, as you lead God's people, work against the things around us that are evil, unjust, and oppressive? That's a pretty tall order.

And, truth be told, it is something that John Wesley struggled to overcome his entire ministry. John Wesley had to learn how to be a resistor.

One of the hallmarks of our theology, or God-talk, is this Wesleyan emphasis on Personal Holiness and Social Holiness. These two concepts are critical in our

understanding of who we are as United Methodist Christians. We believe that our faith must be groomed with a Personal Holiness, an inner search for God that results in confession, piety or dutifulness in living our faith, repentance, and revival of our inner spirit and soul. But we also believe that our faith must be experienced, or lived out, with a focus on Social Holiness. It's how we demonstrate our faith publicly, how we live out this integration of faith with practice. It's how we receive our appointments as clergy (to the community) and how we structure our churches as laity (outreach, mission, and justice ministries). It is how we roll as United Methodists, this duality of personal holiness and social holiness.

It would be nice to say that our founder, John Wesley, was a master of this concept that he devised, with the help of many people in his past. But he wasn't.

II. John Wesley struggled with his own personal holiness. And, in order to lead this movement called Methodism, Wesley had to "RESIST" his strong human tendencies that tempted him to be more in the world than of it.

- We know that Wesley had a series of personal crises when it came to his spiritual and personal life. His marriage was basically a failure and his missionary trip to Georgia was more about his own personal desire to prove himself than a response to some calling within him. We all know how that worked out. *John Wesley had to resist the temptation to respond to his own desires.*
- We know that Wesley was ordained a pastor long before he ever really had a conversion experience. Ministry was acting out the motions of obligation for him more than it was an outgrowth of a spiritual conviction. We know that he was humbled by the faith of the Moravians when the ship he was on nearly sunk in a storm. We know that he inquired of a Moravian, Peter Boehler, about how he could ever preach faith if he didn't have faith. We know that in his journal, Wesley wrote that he went "very reluctantly to a society meeting on Aldersgate Street," and that there his heart was "strangely warmed" by the revelation that he did have faith in Christ. *John Wesley had to resist his own hesitations to give his life completely into the hands of God.*

III. We also know that John Wesley struggled with his own ability to engage in social holiness. And in order to lead this movement called Methodism, Wesley had to "resist" his strong human tendencies to conform to the existing patterns rather than initiate and carry out a new movement.

- We know that while a student at Oxford, Wesley formed a group called the Holy Club. One of their practices was to meet with regularity as an accountability group and go out in the community to visit in the prisons. The other students called Wesley and band, the "Method-ists," mocking their practices and intentionality. *John Wesley had to resist conforming to the criticism from outside that could not embrace his methods.*
- We know that the Anglican Church was dying in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England. They had grown stale and rigid and exclusive. Their practices were so engrained that they even criticized any efforts to proclaim the gospel in settings other than an established church, considering those efforts "evil." With the encouragement of

George Whitefield, John Wesley was pressed to experiment with “field preaching,” in direct defiance of his own church practices. On April 2, 1739, John Wesley wrote in his journal, “*At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people.*” Just the very use of the word “vile” suggests the struggle that Wesley had in getting out of his comfort zone. *John Wesley had to resist the practices of his own church in order to proclaim the gospel.*

- We know that this field preaching began to take John Wesley all throughout England on horseback. Throughout 1739, John Wesley preached each morning to the poor and marginalized miners who were returning from working all night long, proclaiming the gospel and ministering to the workers whose tears could be seen streaming down their coal blacked faces. And, as result of those efforts, John Wesley received a letter from the Anglican bishop of Bristol who basically told John Wesley to leave town because he was interfering in his diocese. In responding to the bishop, John Wesley penned these famous words: “*I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.*” We know that three years later, John Wesley returned home to Epworth and attempted to preach at his father’s church, St. Andrews, but was rejected because of his vile and non-conformist practices. He was refused entrance into the church and so, at 6:00 p.m. that evening, John Wesley gathered a throng of eager disciples, stood on his grave, *John Wesley had to resist the call to conform to standard church practice in order to give birth to a new movement.*
- We know that when Wesley DID settle in to a regular practice of ministry it was anything but normal. In 1748, John Wesley established in Bristol, England, the New Room. It had no windows on the first level in order to hold back the violent outbursts of people who were angered at Wesley’s preaching against slavery in a place that was the originator of the vicious and evil slave triangle. It had no pews but had moveable benches so that the space could be used for preaching, Christian education, day care, and a medical dispensary. It became a shining example of organized resistance because the architecture conformed to the needs of people rather than expecting people to accommodate to the existing architecture. It was a place where personal holiness yoked up with social holiness every day when the doors opened. *John Wesley had to resist evil, injustice and oppression as it threatened his very life in the exercising of his ministry.*
- We know that the Methodist movement gained tremendous traction as a result of this innovative intersection of personal and social holiness. That traction gained momentum not only in England but also in the new colonies. The pressure exerted on Wesley by Methodists in America was a direct result of the rejection of the Anglican Church in the new United States as a result of the Revolutionary War. The Methodists in America wanted to receive the sacraments and the only way that it was possible was if ordained clergy could administer the elements. They petitioned Mr. Wesley to ordain. He resisted. A year later they asked again. He resisted. But in September of 1784, John Wesley secretly ordained Thomas

Coke as superintendent of the Methodist Church in the American colonies with power to ordain other superintendents in the new world, namely one Francis Asbury. For several years, Wesley had tried to persuade the Church of England to ordain Methodist bishops. His requests met with rejection. Events in America forced his hand. The Anglican church had virtually collapsed in Virginia after the Revolutionary War, and the Methodists, who received the sacraments from Church of England ministers, had nowhere to go. Searching Scripture and historical precedent, Wesley concluded that presbyters like himself had authority to ordain bishops. And despite the objection of his own brother, Charles, John Wesley stepped out in faith to enable the new expression of faith called Methodism to flourish in another land. It's interesting to think that if each of you who are pastors trace your ordination lineage roots, you will find that you were ordained by someone who was ordained by someone who was ordained by someone who was ordained by either Thomas Coke or Francis Asbury, two illegally ordained Methodist clergy. We are all illegal. *John Wesley had to resist business as usual in order to allow the Methodist movement to flourish and grow in the midst of great change.*

- IV. Now, what does this historical exercise have to do with us, the New York Annual Conference, the pastors and laity representing local churches in the region, and what does this have to do with where we are as a United Methodist Church in 2019?

I would argue that it has EVERYTHING to do with where we currently find ourselves. It is clear that John Wesley was the architect of a movement that has transformed millions of lives. He would, no doubt, be amazed at the manner in which this movement spread over the world since those days in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. A part of Mr. Wesley's amazement, I believe, would probably only happen in the still of the night. It is well documented that John Wesley experienced repeated struggles with his own personal holiness. He was an imperfect human being. He had his flaws, his shortcomings, his doubts, and his failings. Even on the day of his spiritual conversion, Wesley says he went "very reluctantly" to the place that converted his soul. And yet God still used him, like God used any number of unlikely characters in the biblical record, to impact the lives of others.

I have come to believe with my whole being that we in this church are experiencing our own version of **a crisis of personal holiness**. I would even go so far as to call it a spiritual crisis. Personally, I have been writing and reflecting quite a bit these days around the theme of "The Fifth Conversion." I have said for years that I was converted on June 23, 1972 but I have been in the process of being converted every day since. If I'm accurate, I believe that I've had four significant moments of conversion. And if I'm really accurate, at least two of those conversions have been related to me investing and giving my total self to the church as an institution. I mentioned some of those things yesterday in my opening sermon. But what I have had to come alive to is the reality that I have invested myself in human institutions that have failed me rather than continually nurturing myself in a God who makes all things new. I have wrongly placed my spiritual well-being in the hands of a system rather than the hands of a savior. And I am in need of a fifth conversion.

And I do not think that I am alone.

It seems to me that in the practice of the church on all levels, we have invested more of ourselves into the tangible practices of ministry, the “how,” rather than thoroughly investing in the foundations of ministry, the “why” of church. On a personal level, I believe that we have tried to work out our own salvation through a series of things that make us feel good or worthy rather than placing ourselves willing in the hands of God and surrendering ourselves to the will and direction of God’s guidance. I sense among us a human hesitancy to go into the mission field of our community and a human stutter step to say yes to new opportunities and placements to serve. On a local church level, I believe that we have misappropriated our allegiance, placing more significance on the padded pews, the stained-glass windows, and the historical building on the corner than we have on submitting “*to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city.*”

On a broader church level, we are attempting to fix the problems of the church through a legislative process that was, in its original organization, patterned after the United States governmental system. Have you noticed lately how well THAT system is working for us? We are attempting to solve the churches deep-seeded problems with a VOTE that has, by default, winners & losers, and lately nothing but losers because of the pain and hurt that is felt on both sides of the religious political aisle. And as a result two things are happening.

- 1) We are continuing to beat each other up.
- 2) We are making John Wesley’s own words become prophetic. Wesley 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.***

Friends, it is high time for a spiritual revival in this thing called Methodism and, more specifically in the PEOPLE called United Methodist. If every “holier than thou” person in this room combined with every humble and pious spirit in this place and honestly gave yourself the time necessary to examine your life and realize that you have not yet arrived at the sanctified life, that you to cower in the corner of a ship called the church that could very easily sink, that you go very reluctantly to places where someone will touch the depth of your spiritual life and call you to conversion, that you, like John Wesley, doubt your ability to be used as a vessel for God’s work in the world, if you would give yourself a chance to think that you, like me, are in need of a new conversion FROM the things that are killing us TO the things that are giving us life, then this make-shift altar would be so filled with people giving their lives over to Christ again that we have to do it in shifts that would completely dismantle the agenda of this human driven and contrived Annual Conference session!

We need Personal Holiness!

And I have come to believe with my whole being that we in this church are experiencing our own version of **a crisis of social holiness**. We are struggling to find how it is that we might, as a body, respond to the world around us with the gospel that confronts us.

And it centers around this word “resistance.” Some of us in the room are resistant to change. You resist any thought that the time has come for the church to adapt itself to the changing tide of society. Your resistance is a fervent attempt to preserve doctrinal purity, biblical inerrancy, and the current practices of ministry as described in the current United Methodist Book of Discipline. Your resistance is strong and determined and unwavering and you will not change.

Others of us in the room are resistant to conformity. You resist the thought that there is or should be a cookie cutter, one size fits all ministry. You resist the thought that anyone is or should be excluded from the church and your resistance for the sake of inclusion and justice leads you to work tirelessly for change in the systems and structures in the church that you believe are oppressive and unjust. Your resistance is strong and determined and unwavering and you will not change.

And there are some others in this room who are resistant to the conflict. You find yourself as someone who just can’t stand chaos and you just want this church conflict to go away. Please just make it go away.

But the clear reality is this: It will not go away. With each passing General Conference emotions get emboldened, anxieties get accentuated, and we enter once more into what has become a deepened posture of beating each other up. Neither can we or should we continue to allow ourselves the opportunity to digress into that posture any more. Shane Bishop, a pastor in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference recently wrote an article entitled, “Shaking Hands While We Still Can.” In that article, Bishop writes, *“We build a narrative for 2020, but it won’t matter. Relationships will be further damaged, crafted rumors will circulate, conspiracy theories will abound and any remaining trust receptors will be fried. Guaranteed.”*

That’s a very true statement. And it exists in this very room. One of the blessings and curses of my style is that I try very hard to be very open, transparent, and available. And, as a result, I am aware of a lot that goes on. While I don’t notice or hear reports of groups being in one another’s faces about our disagreements, I DO know that you are after one another in private. Someone doesn’t like what this group does or doesn’t do and it enflames into an emotional posture that draws people in and further lessens our ability to be the body of Christ. We are beating each other up. I know it because I’m right in the middle hearing about it all the time.

After the Council of Bishops meeting in Chicago a few weeks ago, the council issued what I thought was a very poor and inadequate statement. It was a statement that did not acknowledge the deep and thorough discussions we held. Neither did it acknowledge the deep divide that exists within that body as well, as bishops from across the country and the world reflect the constituencies that elected them. And even though the statement issued was woefully inadequate, there was one simple word used in that letter that described and describes the mood that I find wherever I go. The word is “untenable.” We are in an “untenable” situation.

The word “tenable” comes from the Old French “tenir” and the Latin *tenere*, both which means “to hold.” To be “untenable” then means that you cannot hold it. It is a position that cannot be occupied, a position that is not defensible, and a situation that you cannot hold. We are in an untenable situation.

In that same article, “Shaking Hands While We Still Can,” Shane Bishop generated a list of realities in his mind. Some of those clear realities he shared were things like:

- 1) Our differences are unreconcilable.
- 2) Our present situation is unsustainable.
- 3) Our dysfunction is ingrained.
- 4) There is no middle ground.
- 5) Fear, coercion and legal threats are not functional ways to hold a denomination together.
- 6) We have failed in our attempt(s) to stay together.

Those are hard words but I find them to be true. And rather than continue to foster a posture that is creating deep hurt and harm to those within the church no matter your position and lessening our effective Christian witness beyond the walls of the church as people watch us kill each other like an epic battle sequence from “The Game of Thrones,” it’s time for us to find a way forward and explore seriously what it means to “bless and send rather than fight and rend,” for the sake of the mission of the church.

Since we were last together during the Special Session, I have been a part of a multitude of conversations across the church in various attempts to deal with this untenable situation. Those conversations have been clarifying, energizing, and hopeful. But they have only been conversations. There isn’t much to report on them with the exception that everyone believes we cannot continue to go on like this in the form that we have been currently operating with. The conversations that have been out there have got to begin finding cohesion and clarity so that we can find a way through this morass.

There are some who are still putting their eggs in the basket of legislation for the next General Conference next spring in Minneapolis. I am not. Some want to make the current legislative stricter and more punitive in nature. Others want legislation that will once again attempt to reverse the current situation. And others want something to pass that will enable us to split.

The problem with legislation is that we are putting our emotional and spiritual lives in the hands of a system that is broken. It is a human generated process that cannot do what an Annual Conference or a local church can do, build relationships that enable us to personalize every conversation we have with a living breathing example of who it will help and who it will hurt. If legislation is passed that stricter and more punitive, people will be hurt and victims will be lying on the side of the road. If legislation is passed that changes the current position, people will be hurt and victims will be lying on the side of the road. Neither is an example of how the body of Christ should operate.

It is time for a new model and a fresh way. It must be a way that provides a pathway for those who embrace a more traditional conservative approach to ministry and also provides another pathway for full inclusion of all God’s children. We must begin to pray and discern and work intentionally for a way to “bless and send rather than fight and rend,” a way that, “for the sake of the mission of the church,” we bless one another as we head in different directions.

That work has begun. And I believe that as soon as this time next year, we will begin to see those potential pathways emerging, pathways that have as a common core a care for one another and a passion to have as few victims on the side of the road as possible.

Beginning this week, we are formed Cooperative Parish clusters in every district in our Annual Conference. We will be training leaders and engaging in deeper conversations on more intimate levels about a way forward for us here in New York. I am fully preparing myself for involvement in these more intimate settings with laity and clergy in think tanks of possibility for how a church or a group of churches might align in a way that will better care for the people in their midst. I will visit with you in those settings. We can talk together and you can ask questions and help in the exploration of what might be. These configurations are not going to be places of forming forced accountability groups. Those kinds of groups cannot be forced. We are forming these groups now knowing that we have to train leaders and begin conversations about potential models of support and ministry in regional settings. More intimate conversations have to be held as we go through these difficult times of discernment and decision making.

Beginning next week, I will be hosting the first Next Steps Roundtable meeting, a gathering of 35 leaders from across the conference and across the theological spectrum to begin conversations about how to create models or expressions of how we live out our various viewpoints in venues that are safe, non-judgmental, and focused once more on the mission of the church. The circle of that conversation will grow larger as the weeks unfold as we attempt to build momentum around the various expressions that need to emerge in this very diverse place.

In addition, work is being done across the connection of the church to create alignments of similar thought in other Annual Conferences. Re-alignments will be necessary especially here in New York because our small numbers will not lend themselves to sustainable models in any expression.

What I am trying to say today, colleagues, is that I believe that there is an emerging vision of what can be in our short-term future. We are a 12 million-member, multi-billion-dollar institution. You cannot expect that an amicable conversation about multiple expressions of Methodism will happen in the snap of a finger. But I believe that there is a pathway that is emerging, something that we can look forward to as a way of stopping this endless fight of judgement, skepticism and accusation in this untenable situation.

But the real question is: What do we do in the meantime?

I don't mean to be presumptuous. And I'm the first to admit that often I don't get things right. But two years ago I saw this storm on the horizon. And as a new bishop in your midst, I was very concerned that as a group we did not have a central core of hope and expectation. We were floundering with our "how." How are we going to do this? How are we going to survive? How do we revitalize? How do we sustain? It was all about our "how" because we had not spent time talked about our "why." Why do we exist as a church? As a conference? Why did I accept this call to ministry? Why do I serve in the capacity that I serve?

As a result, we developed what I consider to be a strong WHY. And, in the midst of the controversies that beset us, we run the risk of forgetting our why, de-emphasizing it because we have more important things to do, and reverting back to a desperate attempt to solve our HOWs without remembering always our WHYS.

Here is our Why. It is called our Mission/Vision/Core Values:

**MISSION:** We strive to share God's love by **creating** safe places where all are accepted and welcomed, **connecting** the needs of people to the presence of God, and **transforming** the world through Christ.

**VISION:** We are strong leaders who develop vital congregations that **eagerly make** new disciples, **actively nurture** existing disciples, and **passionately advocate** for the needs and concerns of all people.

**CORE VALUES:**

- **Deep love for God** and unconditional love for all people.
- **Collaboration and partnerships** that demonstrate God's love to a world that divides and alienates.
- **Relationships** that foster accountability, excellence and an ability to engage in open, honest, and respectful conversations.
- The **hope** that we have in Christ that, when discovered, brings us a unity of purpose, a joy that enlivens our spirit, and a peace that surpasses all understanding.

What do we do in the meantime? I believe we go back to our places finding ways to live out our Mission, Vision, & Core Values IN SPITE of the current circumstances. Perhaps we are more like Paul in Philippi than we want to admit. We are imprisoned and as a result of the constraints we feel we can either throw ourselves a pity party or we can get out there and demonstrate the love of God through Jesus Christ in every sermon, program, study group, advocacy group, food bank, day care center, hospital, funeral home, or sidewalk we journey on.

You know, we are together until we are not. And it seems to me that now, more than ever, we should be exhibiting a deeper care and sensitivity toward one another in this highly vulnerable and tender time. We are a massively diverse place with great variety of opinion. As your leader, I must say that I have come to love each of you in your various expressions.

- I love witnessing the strong gifts for ministry present in our LGBTQIA pastors and laity.
- My understanding of group intercessory prayer or group singing will never be the same as I love experiencing the depth of spirituality in our Korean sisters and brothers.
- I love the pure joy and depth of worship as it lived out within are Caribbean and Ghanaian churches.
- I love the resiliency that is so evidently experienced by many as we continue to find ways to sustain ourselves even in the midst of decline.
- I love the fact that we are only .7% behind in our apportionment giving this year so far, which is a stark comparison with other Annual Conferences that have experienced a drop in the double digits.

- I love the uniqueness of worship on Long Island, Connecticut, Manhattan, & the Catskills.
- And I love New York pizza and bagels (oh, that hasn't got anything to do with the church).
- I could go on and on. Sally and I talk at least once a week about how amazed and absolutely blessed we are to share ministry with you. We love you and cherish the journey that we share together.
- There are so many gifts present, so many callings that are being lived out, and so many strong opinions about how to go about doing church. Just because we don't agree with or even appreciate the gifts that exist on the other side, it doesn't mean that they are going to go away. We are going to be together until we are not.

What it means is that we need to go about our work here with civility and grace, knowing that there is something in the not too distant future that will enable us to live out our various callings, if not together, at least in respect for one another and the people in this region who do not need to see us fighting anymore and are discouraged from ever affiliating with people who do so. This civility and grace, combined with deep breathing and a calming center can, for the sake of the mission, begin to restore our purpose and our practice.

On the Sunday following the Special Session of the General Conference, I was more than curious about what would be taking place in our local churches. The reports I heard were amazing. And the stories I have heard and witnessed here in our Annual Conference has been inspiring. In all parts of our Annual Conference you and your people are doing work right where you are. Two weeks ago, I preached three times in a week: Setauket, Corona in Queens, and a combined service in Warwick. In each place there was joy, enthusiasm and a sense of purpose. And yes, in all three settings someone asked me about what was happening with the denomination. But it was not the dominate conversation. It was a sidebar, a hallway conversation, a question or two along the way. In these settings and in many others, you and your colleagues are leading responsibly and in a manner that demonstrates that our witness can be felt even in the midst of the struggle.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet acknowledges that God's judgement was coming on Judah and the nation would be left with nothing but a seemingly lifeless "stump." What seemed to be a dead, decaying stump might only serve to discourage those who had lost all hope. But then the prophet writes these words:

***11** A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

***2** The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

***3** His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;*

***4** but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;*

*he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
 and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*  
<sup>5</sup>*Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
 and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*  
<sup>6</sup>*The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
 and a little child shall lead them.*  
<sup>7</sup>*The cow and the bear shall graze,  
 their young shall lie down together;  
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*  
<sup>8</sup>*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*  
<sup>9</sup>*They will not hurt or destroy  
 on all my holy mountain;  
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
 as the waters cover the sea.*

This is what I want to encourage us to do. Proclaim in the midst of discouraging and confusing times that God will prevail and that hope can endure. Friends, the work on the re-framing of this denomination will continue with an end in mind that there will be new expressions of our life together in new and separate directions. Know that. And as a result, let's just try our best to settle down, not settle in, but settle down and let us love and respect one another in this meantime. And, while that work unfolds, I want to encourage you to go to your assignments this year and do the job of fulfilling your calling and our mission to make and nurture disciples on this journey. People are hungry for the gospel. They are hungry for justice and mercy. They are hungry for meaning in the midst of their confusion and hope in the midst of their despair. Over the course of the next year, someone you serve will suffer a death or be beset with an incurable disease. And someone else in the community where you are appointed will find themselves homeless with nowhere to go. A child will be sexually abused and a young woman will be raped. A boy will struggle with his sexuality and an elderly woman will lose the love of her life. Love them. Bless them. And show them that we have the capacity to love God and love others so deeply that not even the discord and division within our church can ultimately deter us from being difference makers in the places where we are called to serve.

Do not stir up controversy unnecessarily. Do not lead your people with any less than the love demonstrated by Christ himself. Do not stir them up and abuse their vulnerable spirits but stir them up with possibility of a better life, a better world, and a better church. And I pledge to you that I will do the same.

At the clergy session yesterday I shared these words from Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred Christian during World War II who wrote these very insightful and profound words:

*"Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious.*

*Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly. It is not we who build. Christ builds the church. Whoever is mindful to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it, for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess (GOD) builds. We must proclaim, (GOD) builds. We must pray to (GOD), and (GOD) will build. We do not know (GOD'S) plan. We cannot see whether (GOD) is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are the times of collapse are for (GOD) the great times of construction. It may be that the times which from a human point are great times for the church are times when it's pulled down. It is a great comfort which Jesus gives to his church. You confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is not your providence. Do what is given to you, and do it well, and you will have done enough.... Live together in the forgiveness of your sins and Forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.”*

May it be so.

Amen.