

## **Bishop Bickerton's Days on the District Fall 2017**

### **1 Corinthians 12:14-31 (NRSV)**

*<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; <sup>24</sup> whereas our more respectable members do not need this.*

*But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>*

*But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

In his book, The Undoing Project, Michael Lewis describes a problem that Delta airlines was having in the days before advanced guidance equipment in their airplanes. It seems that Pilots were relying on their instincts and, for some reason, were accidentally landing at the Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, airport rather than their intended destination, the Miami, Florida, airport.

It was only when Delta brought in a group of psychologists that they discovered the answer. The pilot was not asking the co-pilot for advice/counsel. It wasn't until they changed the culture of the cockpit that they started landing the right airplane at the right airport.

Now, I don't know about you, but if I'm supposed to land in Atlanta and the pilot comes on the intercom and says, "*I apologize, ladies and gentlemen but we have landed in Nashville by mistake. We're sorry for the inconvenience . . .*" it won't be long before I stand up and say, "*Excuse me! I'm changing airlines!*"

This may be a silly story but the point is well made – if the people think the pilot cannot see where she/he is flying, the people will find another airline.

We are here tonight representing the church – a time honored institution that we love and care for deeply. We in this room are the ones called to lead this church of ours – as laity and clergy in a partnership of ministry that honors and desires, as Paul writes, "the giftedness of all God's children." The involvement of God's children in the work of the church is absolutely necessary if we are going to be able to reflect the face of Christ in our communities and throughout the world.

- I. There are a variety of ways to approach this illustration of the pilot landing the plane in the wrong airport.

Some would argue that God is the pilot of our plane and we are the passengers. Others would advocate for the time-honored bumper sticker – “God is my co-pilot.” Still others would say that God put us here with free will and it’s up to us to steer the plane in the right direction.

I prefer to approach life as a combination of these theories:

- I believe that God has trained us through the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of modern day disciples.
- I believe that God has mentored us through the scriptures and examples of that which is good, and just and holy. God has blessed us with the gift of the church.
- Make no mistake. I believe that God IS the ultimate and sole pilot.
- But whether or not this plane called The United Methodist Church in the New York Annual Conference can maintain its altitude and reach its final destination safely is ultimately dependent upon how much we rely on the presence of God as we pilot this plane through changing times and turbulent winds.

In I Corinthians, Paul ends his discussion on the many gifts found within Christ’s body with one key verse:

*“But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” (I Corinthians 12:31, NRSV)*

The key word in this verse for me are the words **“DESIRE”** and **“EXCELLENT”**

Webster's Dictionary defines "desire" in this way: "***To Long for, to Wish, to Crave, to request or ask for***" and "excellent" in this way: "***The Best Quality; Exceptionally good.***"

To "Desire Excellence" then is to long for, to wish to be the best, to Crave to be exceptionally good in what we do. The question is: Do you desire excellence?

I have come tonight to ask you a series of questions. Here is the first one:

***"In what way(s) do you desire excellence in your Christian life, in your local church and in your Annual Conference?"***

- II. My conviction is that this very quality – "a desire for excellence" – is what is, in large measure, missing in many of our United Methodist Churches and among our United Methodist people.

We have, it seems, settled for mediocrity, for second best, or in some measure, resigned ourselves that we will never fill our pews again.

It is the reclaiming of our passion, our desire, for excellence, to settle for nothing less than the very best, that will enable us to pilot the plane through the climate of today's world.

Have you ever heard the remarkable story of John Goddard? At age fifteen, John Goddard sat down at a kitchen table and began writing on a yellow pad of paper. At the top of the list he wrote, "My Life List." The list contained 127 goals. During his lifetime, he accomplished 108 of them.

The goals were not simple or easy. They included climbing the world's major mountains, exploring the vast waterways, running a mile in five minutes, reading the complete works of Shakespeare and reading the entire Encyclopedia Britannica.

How did John Goddard accomplish so many of these amazing goals? He would say that he did it by keeping his attention focused on his why for living and on achieving his final goal. John Goddard was bound and determined to complete the list.

I believe that every person and every church needs to be able to accurately define and describe their "why."

Why do we have a church? Why are we so committed to it? Why do we believe in it so much? Why do we exist as a church?

I would like for you to spend a few minutes among yourselves, select someone to take notes, and answer this question:

***"Why do we exist as a church?" What is our "WHY?"***

### **WHY?**

- Because God love and grace has claimed us.
- To grow our spiritual lives and devotion to God.
- To build loving relationships with all of God's children.
- To represent Christ by advocating and caring for the need and concerns of others.
- To equip spirit-led disciples who, in turn, equip local church to make disciples so that God's love might be felt in our communities and throughout our world.

A part of our "why" is found when we realize that we are a part of a connection of local churches in a region and throughout the world. Our region is the eastern part of New York and the

Western half of Connecticut. That region is composed of the following:

- Six Districts
- 434 Churches
- 97,698 Members
- 1 Annual Conference Center
- 27 Full-time/Part-time employees

The purpose of the six districts is to provide oversight, direction, and facilitation of the churches under their care:

- Catskill Hudson      99 churches
- Connecticut          72 churches
- Long Island East      69 churches
- Long Island West      64 churches
- Metropolitan          62 churches
- New York CT          68 churches

The purpose of the Annual Conference Center and its employees is to provide leadership, connection, and resources in order to facilitate the ministry of these 434 churches.

The New York Annual Conference is an amazing place of giftedness and diversity. It could be argued that we have one of if not the most diverse Annual Conference in the entire connection of Methodism

<b><u>Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>Membership</u></b>	<b><u>Percentage</u></b>
Asian	8,395	8.50%
African American	19,283	19.70%
Hispanic	1,894	2.00%
Native American	87	0.10%
Pacific Islander	219	0.20%
Multi-Racial	709	0.70%
White	67,111	68.80%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>97,698</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

That diversity provides an amazing array of cultural understandings and approaches to ministry.

- It allows us to experience the wideness of God’s grace at work, providing an amazing depth of spirituality, a height of worship, a wideness of theology, and a focus of expertise.
- We can dance, sing, organize, pray, and embrace God’s children unlike any other place in the connection.
- United Methodist’s in New York & Connecticut are conservative, moderate, and liberal.
- We are wealthy, middle class, and very poor. We have doctoral degrees, bachelor degrees, and no degrees.
- We are urban, suburban, and very rural.
- When the cabinet recently had a three-day meeting in the Catskill Hudson District in the midst of the mountains where the sun rises at 10:00 a.m. and begins to set at 2:00 p.m., one of my more urban cabinet members said to me, “Bishop, it really gets dark out here!” In NYAC, there are places where it gets really dark and places where it feels like the sun is always shining.
- It is one amazing place of giftedness and potential!

I describe our Annual Conference like a firecracker. It's very powerful! It possesses an amazing amount of energy. There are a mind-boggling number of moving pieces in this dynamo of power.

BUT, when the fuse hits the explosive, the results scatter in all directions! What we lack is a unifying sense of mission and vision. We are not aligned together as a connected body.

The other night my family went to see the Radio City Rockettes for the very first time. What an amazing show. The lights, the music, the dancing. But what amazed me more than anything else was the alignment of the dancers. They were perfectly in sync with the music and, more importantly, with one another! When one leg kicked a certain way, they all kicked that way. When one rockette moved a certain direction, they all moved in that direction. They were perfectly aligned!

Without alignment, the Rockettes would have been one big pile of glitter and legs sprawled all over the floor. With alignment, they provided a beautiful show.

I have now been with you for a just a short 14 months. I have spent these past few months meeting with as many groups of people that I could imagine. I have been in each District twice, now beginning a third cycle, listening and responding and engaging with local churches and leaders in all sectors in a conversation designed to give me an idea, a picture, a glimpse of who we are and where we are going as a people called United Methodist in New York and Connecticut.

My humble assessment is that we are not as nimble and fresh as a church and as a people as we need to be. That stiffness has caused us to lose our groove to some extent and, as a result, we have

found ourselves in a desperate mode of survival where we are more re-active to things than we are pro-active about witness.

Most importantly, we are not in alignment. Can we clearly say tonight that we know the direction in which we are dancing? Are we kicking and turning in alignment? Do we know what direction we are going?

The numbers reveal that we are struggling with our passion, fire, and relevancy:

### **OUR DECLINE**

#### **Membership**

2007	120,404	
2017	<u>97,698</u>	
Decrease	<b>-22,706</b>	<b>-18.86%</b>

#### **Attendance**

2007	37,445	
2017	<u>28,295</u>	
Decrease	<b>-9,150</b>	<b>-24.44%</b>

#### **Professions of Faith**

2007	2,475	
2017	<u>1,805</u>	
Decrease	<b>-669</b>	<b>-27.03%</b>

## **Baptisms**

2007	1,815	
2017	<u>851</u>	
Decrease	<b>-964</b>	<b>-53.11%</b>

## **Confirmations**

2007	1,454	
2017	<u>628</u>	
Decrease	<b>-826</b>	<b>-56.81%</b>

There are three stages in the life cycle of a church that reflect numbers like these.

- First, a sense of desperation arises. That desperation leads a church to lose its joy, its risk-taking ability, and its desire to venture out. Things become calculated and internal focused. Some would say that is our current state.
- The second is a marked decrease in sustainability. The numbers drop and the resources decline and there is no ability to sustain life as we have once known it. Denial is real in this stage until reality stares you straight in the face with the awareness that you cannot do what you once did.
- The third stage is the worst. It's the death of the church – for us that's closure and abandonment. There isn't anyone left or those who are left realize that they cannot carry on.

Friends, this is gloom and doom talk. But it's real. How much longer can we sustain a 50% drop in baptisms and confirmations? How much longer can we hold on when we are losing 25% of our congregations every ten years?

I'm not a rocket scientist. I am just a simple, called preacher who later became a bishop. My language flows more out of my calling than it does out of a leadership manual. My deep-seated belief is that what we offer in the church is something that no one else in the culture can provide as well as we can: a sense of hope, the presence of joy, an unconditional love, and a message of grace in the midst of hopelessness, sadness, rejection, and judgement.

You see, if we lose our message, we just become like everyone else: depressed, cynical, accusatory, and bitter. Who would want to come to a church like that?

You can't strategize about these things. But you can DESIRE them. You can reach for them with an excellent effort. And you can believe in them in spite of all the other forces at work around you.

You see, in simple preacher language, I believe that we need to be talking about Jesus more than we have.

With a simple understanding of how the power of Holy Spirit works, I believe we need a spiritual revival. It starts within you. Where is the presence of Christ lying dormant in your soul tonight? Where is the power of the Holy Spirit not being utilized in your local church this evening? What do you believe God can do in our midst, really? What is the status of your faith?

That's why I've come this evening asking you the simple question: Why? Why do you exist as a church? We have to move pretty quickly beyond seeing that the glamor positions in the church are the head of the SPRC or the Board of Trustees and begin seeing that the best way we can serve our church is to get ourselves spiritually equipped so we can spread scriptural holiness, joy, and a powerful effective witness of what God has done in my life to the world around you.

So tonight, I want to ask you to address another question for me. I want you to become, for a few minutes, a dreamer. I want you to dream with me of a church and an Annual Conference that begins to realize God's dream for the church. What is it that you truly long for, desire, and dream of when you think of the church in its best form. Generally speaking, . . .

***What is your vision for the Church of Jesus Christ called United Methodism? What does the church and its people look like in its best, most excellent form? How will we behave? What will we do?***

Have you ever stood on shaky ground? I don't care how nimble you are, how well balanced you might be, how physically fit you might think you are, no one can remain in a stable position when you are standing on shaky ground.

In 1834, a Baptist minister by the name of Edward Mote wrote these now famous words:

**CLICK** 1. *My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

**CLICK** 2. *When darkness veils His lovely face,  
I rest on His unchanging grace;  
In every high and stormy gale  
My anchor holds within the veil.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

**CLICK** 3. *His oath, His covenant, and blood  
Support me in the whelming flood;  
When all around my soul gives way,  
He then is all my Hope and Stay.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

**CLICK** 4. *When He shall come with trumpet sound,  
Oh, may I then in Him be found,  
Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne!  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.*

We are, unapologetically, the church of Jesus Christ. We stand on the foundation of a lot of things that we have been given over the years. I believe with my whole heart that none of us in this room are self-made people. We are all products of that which someone cared enough to give to us. We have listened to countless sermons, sat in numerous Sunday School classes, read endless verses of scripture, prayed earnest and faithful prayers. And, as a result, we have a foundation, a core set of beliefs that drive us to still want to, or desire to, be a part of a loosely knit group of people in various towns and cities in this area who make up a thing called the church.

Tonight, I've asked you to tell me your "why." I've also asked you to state for me your "dream." Now I'd like for you to share with me your "core."

Any branch on a tree that bears fruit is connected to a trunk that feeds it. And connected to any trunk are a series of roots that anchor it.

When you think about living your life as a Christian and when you think about the role of the church as we have described it tonight,

what are the Core Values that are absolutely essential that should bind us together in common purpose and accountability?

What are the Core Values essential for the church?

Giving a sermon one Sunday morning, a preacher heard two teenagers in the back giggling and disturbing people. The pastor interrupted his sermon and announced sternly, “There are two of you here who have not heard a word I’ve said!” That quieted the two teenagers down.

When the service was over, the pastor went to greet people at the front door. Seven adults who shook the pastor’s hand apologized for falling asleep during the sermon and promised it would never happen again!

Friends, it is not time for us to fall asleep as United Methodists. It IS time for us:

- To assume responsibility for where we are,
- To desire and work with passion toward where we need to be,
- To confess our need for the power of the Holy Spirit to inform and guide us;
- To commit ourselves once more to searching for and find the next right answers that will bring us life and vitality once again.

Those are the things that will enable us to once again desire excellence in our ministry and begin to bear much fruit as United Methodist Christians in the New York Annual Conference.

So be it! Amen!