

## **Cabinet Address 2005 by Forrest Wells**

Text: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

(Slides will be viewable when they become available.)

## **The Circus of Circuiting for Culture and Climate Change that Celebrates Christian Vision**

We have been in the midst of a whirlwind of change.

(Slide 1) At annual conference in 2004, Bishop Rader had been with us for twelve years and the conference had a long history—including my 25 years of ministry—of having eight district superintendents.

(Slide 2) We were so comfortable with our familiar structures and ways of doing things.

(Slide 3) But the 2003 annual conference recognized that we had been comfortable unto death and decline. We had been heading the wrong way.

(Slide 4) Therefore, we adopted in 2003 a brand new idea that resembled in some ways a very old idea that was developed by a certain Wesley. We called that idea The Circuit Ministry Plan.

(Slide 5) The initial slide shown at regional gatherings over a year ago stated that at its core, the Circuit Plan would involve: strengthening the ministry of congregations and their leaders; clergy bound in special covenant; disciplined study; sharing of expertise; increasing clergy and lay effectiveness at making and multiplying disciples; and, encouraging growth.

(Slide 6) Structurally, from the cabinet level, on July 1, 2004 Bishop Rader’s cabinet consisted of three continuing superintendents and one new superintendent who, in addition to overseeing local churches, were now overseeing 55 newly formed circuits and circuit leaders.

(Slide 7) By the time Bishop Linda Lee arrived to her new appointment in Wisconsin, she came to embrace a new circuit plan, new circuits, new circuit leaders, a new cabinet configuration and about 100,000 clergy and laity to get to know who were all new to her!  
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Yes, what a whirlwind of change in the last two years and since last annual conference! The conference said hello to circuits and good-bye to the way things used to be. Clergy circuit teams took on the challenge of building relationships and working with people they did not know, and in some cases with other clergy who were their perceived enemies. Clergy circuit teams wrestled with figuring out how to build team, conduct church/charge conferences, support one another in conflict and trouble, and celebrate with each other in good times. Some circuits have been challenged with differences in languages where not everyone is fluent in English or Hmong or Spanish or Korean. Yet

even in the midst of language and cultural challenges, those circuit teams have celebrated the building of trust and community. Many of these clergy teams planned circuit celebrations, held circuit-training events, studied area demographics and began to look at new ways to reach out and work toward new faith. Some clergy have resisted and failed to really partner with their brothers and sisters in the circuit plan. For the most part, clergy have determined to make the circuit plan work.

The laity have had responses to the launching of the circuit plan which ranged from, “What circuit plan?” to “How can the laity be involved in this?” to “The clergy aren’t letting us in!” to “Where is the superintendent, doesn’t the conference care about us anymore?”

A whirlwind of change this past year! Change--even good change--raises anxiety. The anxiety was raised with many questions. Clergy wondered if the DSs, now four instead of eight, would be able to know them well enough in order to represent their gifts and skills in the appointment process. Laity wondered if the DS would now know enough about their congregations to be helpful during a transition time. Superintendents wondered, “How can we keep up with the lives and ministries of over 100 clergy and churches per region?” Yes, since last annual conference and before, we have engaged in change on the run! Circuit leaders wondered, “What are we supposed to do?” The clergy circuit team chimed in, “What is this about? What will we accomplish?” And the laity often exclaimed, “What about us!” “We have dreams and visions too!”

The superintendents have worked diligently to provide encouragement, support and new trainings. We led numerous trainings for the Pastor/Staff Parish Relations Committees as we lifted up new possibilities for circuit support and involvement in each others churches surrounding conflict resolution, appointment transitions and mutual new faith ministry development. We have walked with clergy circuit leaders in restructuring church/charge conferences and we have listened to concerns, particularly from smaller congregations who were grieving about their lack of contact with a superintendent and, therefore, “the conference” under this new plan.

In addition to venturing into Circuit Ministry, the cabinet has continued with normal administrative ministry of the church that includes working with district committees on ministry, district locations and building committees, providing direction for conflict resolution, supporting clergy and congregations in crisis and of course appointment work. We had the challenge of working on over twenty-five appointment changes between July and December. In January, the whole cabinet entered the new reality of making appointments and following through on those appointments with half the number of superintendents. In short, life and work have been busy here. Yes, the cabinet, along with clergy and laity, have been caught up in the whirlwind of change known as the circuit plan. We have all experienced uncertainty, anxiety, doubt, anger and busyness. There have also been incredible signs of hope.

Remember how we got to this point? In 2003 the Wisconsin Annual Conference faced reality. The United Methodist Church has been in a societal regression for many years.

Over 30 years of denominational decline was documented. We remembered that in order to address numerical decline there have been many programs, ideas and quick fixes proposed and tried over the years. Every few years the Wisconsin Annual Conference has seemed to change directions. We have tried adding staff, reducing staff, writing visions and changing visions. The results of such tinkering have been consistent. No matter what had been tried, the denominational decline continued. Why? Was our vision too small? Were we simply trying to do the same things, only working harder? Was our thinking not radical enough?

Scripture reminds us that, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

What is our vision? Where are we going?

(Slide 8) In 2003 the Wisconsin Annual Conference overwhelmingly adopted the Circuit Ministry Plan that was based on a vision for mission and ministry. On the one-year anniversary of implementing the circuit plan, let us remind ourselves of the mission:

We are called to witness God’s love and grace to the world.  
We are called to grow disciples of Jesus Christ.

We recognized that though this mission has long been basic to the Christian church, our churches and clergy and yes, we, ourselves, had gotten so bogged down in the institution that we were not focusing on the mission. Clergy, congregations and the institutional system did some good things, yet we also confessed some disturbing tendencies. Clergy tended to work individually and competitively. Congregations tended to focus on their own needs and not on needs of the surrounding communities. The institution, by its nature, was first concerned about its own survival. In other words, our mission focus had turned inward. The result has been a diminishing impact of the church on society and a dwindling enthusiasm to share the radical nature of God’s love and grace outside of our individual congregations. In other words, we had become a conference and a denomination turned inward.

The vision to accomplish the mission became more radical. We decided that we must change the culture of our clergy and congregations and conference structures from being inward focused to being outward focused. We decided that we could no longer passively work in isolation, but that aggressive teamwork must be used. And so the vision:

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- Affirm and build a new cultural expectation among clergy and congregations that our work would be focused on mission, not maintenance. “It’s not about me, it’s about them.” Such culture change would be nurtured in new teams called circuits.
- Direct decision making and responsibility for mission and ministry to the most local level possible. The annual conference would serve as a resource to help enable circuit clergy and churches to discover the tools that would help them carry out the passionate mission that they have discerned for their locale.

- Clergy appointed to circuits in which the clergy circuit team would provide peer accountability and support for building mission focused strong and healthy congregations.
- Clergy partnering with laity to examine their communities in order to strategize and implement “New Faith.”

We vision a new paradigm where the slogan “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” does not go far enough. Rather, in keeping with Jesus’ call for all disciples to be witnesses (Acts 1:8) and consistent with the example of Jesus in Luke 15 where he demonstrated that God’s priority is to seek out and offer hope and healing and help to the least, the last and the lost, the slogan of the United Methodists in Wisconsin could be:

Hearts that are open enough to walk out the door of the church building and to go into the streets and the world with minds open enough to meet the people where they are, in the name of Jesus Christ, and thereby bring mercy, hope and healing to a needy world.

The steps we have taken together in this first year have been both small and significant. Progress toward the vision has varied dramatically among the circuits. Yet, progress deemed “small” by some people is really significant for those in the midst of that change. The superintendents have witnessed:

- An increase in clergy sense of teamwork with each other and a decrease of clergy isolation.
- Bridge building and an increased sense of common purpose.
- Circuit celebrations that have helped local congregations feel more connected and in which the sharing of ministry stories have helped inspire vitality in other churches.
- One small church reports that it now feels like it has the best of both worlds--part of a mega church of the circuit for programming, while feeling the intimacy of a smaller worship setting.
- Several circuits have launched or are in the process of launching new faith efforts that address the specific needs of their communities.
- Circuits are beginning to be supportive to one another (both clergy and congregations) in transitions.
- Some clergy and congregations have worked together to address issues of conflict within churches or between clergy of the circuit.
- Some circuits have gathered for educational events that have focused on a variety of topics from congregational development, demographic analysis and the establishment of new ministry, conflict resolution training and more.
- Some circuits have established a way for both laity and clergy to be involved. Clergy focusing on peer mentoring and accountability and clergy and laity together focusing on new faith and new ministry.

Your cabinet is encouraged and thankful for the hard work being done as we work together to embrace this mission and vision for our conference. Again, we say thank you for strong effective ministry that we are seeing. Thank you. We are confident that there

will be much more to report in terms of new faith starts in the years to come. We will continue to lift up the mission and vision of Christ and the Circuit Plan so that we might be faithful witnesses of Christ in new ways to a world where the institutional church seems to be increasingly viewed with suspicion.

These have been hectic days. A whirlwind of change has been upon us. We have found ourselves in the wilderness between where we have been and where we would like to be. There has been confusion and anxiety enough for us all. There has also been some laughter and new relationships and new awareness of opportunities before us. Through it all, the superintendents appreciate the support, patience and care that have been demonstrated toward us by clergy and laity alike. We are grateful for the calm, consistent and deeply spiritual leadership of Bishop Linda Lee. She came to Wisconsin in the midst of a “vision in progress” and she has adopted us and the circuit plan as her own. We are most blessed to have her steady presence among us.

May God continue to walk with the Wisconsin Annual Conference and that we might be effective witnesses of the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ in our world for our day.