

MESSAGE OF THE LAY LEADER

We are gathered together celebrating our journey, continuing our hope.

WE are gathered here this day continuing our hope, stepping out in FAITH.

I don't believe WE have always meant WE! Webster defines WE as: oneself and others. I don't see where it says others must, walk, talk, look, act, drive the same kind of car, have the same theology, have the same economic status, or the same education as oneself. WE doesn't have any integrity if when spoken it doesn't truly mean: oneself and others.

Earlier this year the leadership of this conference was invited to gather together with the leadership of Bishop Lee and Dr. Orian Worden. This was an opportunity to take a look at "Where WE Are". This was an invitation to speak honestly about the things that keep us captive, hold us apart. Where there are deep hurts, we long for a deep spiritual connection with God.

WE talked about those things that are missing, things we need to stop doing and things we need to start doing. WE had genuine conversation, laying it all on the table. I'm sure this experience left some feeling a bit vulnerable, unsure of the future. Most would say that they came away frustrated and discouraged. I didn't feel that way. I came away with a new sense of HOPE. Our genuine conversations, getting honest with each other was giving us a new opportunity. So many things were felt, heard, observed, and acted out, but not spoken before this time. With all laid on the table we could now begin to deal with our struggles and our needs together. It became apparent WE would change the way in which WE do ministry together. Was this going to be an easy task? NO, yet WE were starting our journey of healing, listening, growing and working together. WE stepped out in FAITH.

I'd like to share a story: A few months ago in a small community several of the businesses had shut down, the loss of jobs had brought hardship on many families. Those who lived there did not always see the needs of the people in this community. Diane was being nudged to DO something, so she set out one day, first visiting the Lutheran church, then the two catholic churches, she asked for two volunteers from each of the churches. They gathered and decided to go and talk to the hospitals, schools, health and human services, nursing homes, senior centers, police and sheriff departments, and domestic abuse shelter.

They could NOT believe what they heard: there were homeless and hungry, right there in this small community, among many other needs. The group decided they could meet one of the needs of those in their midst by opening a food pantry. They didn't know how they were going to get all the money and support for the operation, yet they believed they were called to serve. WE will step out in FAITH. When the doors were opened in October of 2005, the shelves were stocked and there seemed to be just enough money to cover the needs they had for the one day a month they were open. The food pantry was open, yet Diane was still feeling a nudge: What was God calling for them to do?

She prayed, and the nudge kept getting stronger, until one day she called the group together again just to discuss whether it would be possible to provide more opportunities to meet the needs. As they began to talk, one said, "I don't know how we can open the

pantry more than we do now. We just have enough food and money to meet the needs of once a month.” Another said “We don’t have the volunteers to staff the hours.” Another said, “Let’s just ease into it.”

After a long discussion, Diane encouraged the group to think about when they had first opened their doors. They didn’t know how this was all going to work out. “Our community has supported us. I believe they will continue to support this need,” Diane told them. Diane reminded them, “WE stepped OUT in FAITH when we opened the doors for the first time.”

After this discussion, Diane made the suggestion that they take some time to pray about what GOD would be calling them to do. After each had time to pray, discerning what God wanted them to do in this place, Diane then suggested that they go around the room, each person having an opportunity to say if they thought the pantry should be open once, twice, three or four times a month. Others listened as each person spoke, the first person spoke, once, then the 2nd, once, then the 3rd, 4th person. The next person said “I don’t know what do. I want to vote with what most of the others want to do.”

Diane assured her she could wait and see what the majority wanted to do. The options at this point were 2 for once a month, and 2, 4 times a month. As they continued around the room, the next person said 4, now it was 2-3 and with the one person wanting to side with the majority, that made it clear, the pantry would be open 4 times a month. Once again they were STEPPING OUT, in FAITH. The food pantry is now open once a week. God has graced them with the support of the community, the shelves are stocked and there always seems to be just enough money for that week’s needs. They have 75 volunteers; 12 teams each team serve once every 7 weeks; they serve 90 adults and 45 children weekly! The Pantry is called.....”Kingdom Come”!!!

I have heard people say, ‘our circuit is spread across many miles.’ I have heard ‘our communities are very different.’ Are there children in your community? Teenagers? Older adults? Are there people with addictions? Are there people in need of food? The latest report I heard was we have 300,000 across this country who are in need of food! Are there families that are homeless? Yes, in our small communities. Are there families in need of clothing, or health care? Are there people who are in need of a job or job training? Are there single parents, are there people who are not walking with Jesus Christ? I heard about a community in the northern part of the state that has a population of 35,000 people and two-thirds do not have a church family! Our communities are not as different as one might think.

We are all called to serve! God has called us to serve. That’s all we need! Listen to the needs of the people around you: in your homes, in your church, in your community and in the world. God has called us to serve. We don’t need another invitation to serve, WE, oneself and others, HAVE BEEN CALLED BY GOD!!! WE NEED to STEP OUT IN FAITH and TAKE ACTION.

We have been on a journey together with the leadership of Bishop Lee. Thank you, Bishop Lee, for your guidance, your steadfast spirit, for your leadership, for helping us to continue our Hope!!!

I believe WE are getting closer to being authentic when we say WE, Oneself and others!!

WE are called to act with justice

WE are called to love tenderly

WE are called to serve one another,

To walk humbly with God!!!

God has called us to Step out in FAITH!!!

WE can LIVE, GIVE, LOVE...beyond all expectation!!

Dorothy Radley, Conference Lay Leader

MESSAGE OF THE CABINET

Text: James 1:22-25

So, I'm at fitness center the other day and I've just finished a workout. I'm looking in the mirror in the locker room, and let me tell you it's not a pretty sight! It dawns on me. I must be a member of the 2x2x20x30 club. I vow to get in shape and lose weight twice a year, my dedication lasts for two months, I lose 20 pounds, but in the Sabbath months I take from dieting and exercise I gain 30 pounds back! I'm like the person looking in the mirror that James is talking about, who sees reality, sees that truth, knows what he should do, but doesn't do it!

As United Methodist followers of Jesus Christ, we spend much time looking in the mirror. We have tons of meetings in our congregations, discuss with our circuits, gripe among our friends and plan and predict in the context of district and annual conference seminars and sessions. As an annual conference, we gather together every year, just like clockwork. We participate in inspiring worship, some not so inspiring debates, keep getting angry with the same people for what WE think is their wrong thinking, and then we go home. Rarely does anything change. We spend much time looking in the mirror.

When we look in the mirror of who we are as United Methodist Christians in Wisconsin, we know much that is wrong in our church. We see decline: shrinking numbers in membership and worship attendance. Our ranks have been decreased by folk who have left us because we are too liberal or too conservative, too traditional or too contemporary or too new age. We celebrate good people who have tried so hard for so long who have assessed and analyzed and debated and brought forth proposals who then wonder what difference their effort makes. We fear that when we come to annual conference we will once again focus on what divides us, issues that will likely never be resolved in this family squabble of ours. As we strut our stuff, analyze our dilemma and argue for our favorite proposal or resolution or theological issue do we really think that our focus on looking in the mirror and finding all the faults within us is really going to make us any better? Is all this introspection making the world any better? Or if we are really angry at the current realities of our church, do we think that breaking the mirror is really going to help? We spend so much time and energy on our own United Methodist insider's club stuff.

Friends, what is keeping the United Methodist Church declining in numbers and too often irrelevant in our world has been the focus on me, me, me, I, I, I. Sin is about too much vitamin "I."

Jesus did not come into the world just to correct the religious community, but to get on with God's mission. Friends, we need to get the "I" out, get over ourselves and get on with the mission! God so loved the religious institution that Jesus was given for the institution?? NO! God so loves the WORLD! Jesus' focus was not on the insiders of the religious community or political establishment. He focused on the outsiders. WAIT! There are no outsiders with Jesus.

Some people come to annual conference to make sure that their side wins, or the other side is humiliated and embarrassed, or that a pet truth is trumpeted for a day. We often resemble a political convention more than a holy community. We prefer attacking one another in papers and petitions rather than speaking openly with one another in Caring Christian Conferencing. We come to protect a favorite program, or get rid of what we see as a waste of time, or to protect our congregations from paying a dime more to conference than we have to. We are often eager to lift up our ideas of theological purity and moral correctness. And we are sure that our way, our interpretations are correct!

As members of the annual conference, like members in a local church, some of us come primarily for our own needs. We want to feel good, feel loved, feel important, and be assured that we are ok.

Theology and the quest for truth are important. Finding a place, a community in which to be nurtured and fed emotionally and spiritually are valid needs. But too often we have made these needs primary.

Dare we admit and proclaim that institutional and personal comfort needs are secondary to Jesus' call on our lives both as individual followers of Christ and together as the church?

Let the Master state the mission:

"When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

 If we aren't witnessing - living and telling the good story of God's grace in us, then is God's Holy Spirit really in us?

"I have come to seek and to save that which was lost"

 The people of Jesus Christ focus on God and people who need God.

"I have not come for those who are well, but for the sick."

 Who have we come for? To whom are we called to go?

"I have come that they might have Life and have it abundantly"

 Life is a gift for the people of God in the church of Jesus Christ. Our primary task is to point the world to that Source of Life; To seek, save, heal, witness. If we are not about the primary task, we have become only hearers of the word, and not doers. If we are not focused on the primary, fretting over the secondary is a waste of time and irrelevant to God's mission for the church.

Do you need more confirmation? When Jesus was asked by the messengers of John the Baptist whether or not he was the Messiah, how did Jesus respond? Did Jesus say, "Glad you asked, I've got an updated revision to the Torah and Talmud and these con-

tain the real truth and right interpretations?” No, Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you see and hear, the blind see, the lepers are healed, the dead are raised and Good News is preached to the poor.” Too often, my ministry has been talk without action. What about yours? Authentic ministry in the name of Jesus is action empowered by the Holy Spirit.

At this annual conference, the Cabinet implores us all to put aside the “I” and the institutional maintenance sins that entangle us and concentrate on the mission focus of Jesus. May we Live, Give, Love...beyond ALL expectation.

Let us LIVE filled with abundance and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The world outside the church is starving for Life. Rameesh is an owner of a motel in small town Wisconsin. A Hindu, born in India, he wants to learn about Christianity. Then, as we talked, he told me his story. He has put all of his earnings into buying that motel as an avenue of employment for his son. His son is deaf. They came to America from India, became citizens, hoping for good schooling for his son. They didn't find it. His perception is that America's educational system doesn't really care about his son. With tears in his eyes he described the life that he had hoped to find. He was thankful when I offered to pray for his family. As a Hindu he recognized that he needed Life beyond his life. As a human, created in God's image, he yearns for compassion, hope, life.

His story was similar to so many stories we hear in these days of controversy over immigration. As Dan Schwerin and Jorge Mayorga and I, along with many others, walked in an immigration demonstration in Milwaukee, we saw people seeking LIFE. What we need to remember is that people all over the world, in all countries, are starving for Life, seeking Life. Jesus offers life, abundant life beyond all expectation. Jesus' church is called to live that promise; to offer Life to a spiritually, emotionally and physically hungry world.

As God has given to us, may we give ourselves away for God and the world.

The fastest growing opportunity within the church over the last decade has been in the area of mission trips. Young and old alike, whether through volunteer in missions, conference Wildfire mission trips, or local church youth and adult mission trips have discovered that a key to really living is giving. It is an innate human desire to want to make a difference, to matter. It's all about living God's life and giving ourselves away to make a difference for God's world. It's not about us; it's about giving our lives away for others. Jesus said that if we seek our lives, we will lose them. If we lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, we will find Life. One of the reasons the circuit ministry was developed three years ago was out of the confession that our conference, congregations and clergy had for too long become introspective and ingrown. We cared deeply about our churches, but were seeking our own life. The invitation is that through circuit ministry we will discern new possibilities to give ourselves away in order meet real life needs in our communities and in so doing create new faith, new hope. This new way has already begun reaping results. Yes! Jesus calls us to give in such a way that is beyond all expectation. He used the analogy of being robbed. If our overcoat is being taken, offer our sweater as well. Jesus used the analogy of the widow who gave at the temple. She gave all that she had. She gave beyond ALL expectation.

Live, Give and Love. You might say, it's all about love. We can live fully, because God lives within us! We can give freely because God has first given to us. We are set free to love because God first loved us!

We all know the importance of love, don't we? In an old experiment, some babies at an orphanage were given love and attention, while others were cared for in a very impersonal manner. The babies that were loved flourished. The babies that were not shown love and affection were less healthy, less well adjusted and some even died. Love is life to humanity. Through love we receive Life. Love motivates us to give Life. We are lost without love. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. What did that mean? Jesus tended to the people on the street, the outcasts of society, the sinner in the midst, to all who sought healing and wholeness. Jesus love moved him to give life!

Look around us, friends. Here is an interesting tool from tenbyten.org. It lists the top 100 words and pictorial images that are in the worldwide news right now. Iran, Talks, Earthquake, Nuclear, Suicide, Killing, Peace... These are just world news stories that spark anxiety, sorrow, and uncertainty. Add on our national, state, local and family concerns and it all adds up to the world needing Help!! The world needs a Savior. Are we telling anybody? Jesus said "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall be my witnesses." Are we living what we are telling? The world needs hope, healing, forgiveness, laughter. Your world, my world, our world is crying out for the people of God to Live, Give, Love... Beyond ALL Expectation.

May I get over myself so that I might get on with making a difference in the world for Jesus Christ. May our annual conference become humbled by the Grace of God that we have received. May we put aside our family squabbles and focus upon the needs of the lonely and hurting and empty. May our congregations and circuits be renewed by the love of Jesus to the point that looking beyond our doors to touch the brokenness of our communities and our world becomes natural, instead of an afterthought assigned to a committee we call missions, or evangelism!

Yes, let us LIVE, GIVE and LOVE in the name of Jesus Christ in ways that are BEYOND ALL EXPECTATION. Are you with us? AMEN.

Forrest R. Wells, Dean

Jorge Mayorga, Nancy Moffatt, Dan Schwerin- District Superintendents