

2015 State of the Church Address

By Bishop Hee-Soo Jung (Wisconsin Annual Conference)

For well over three-hundred years, Christian believers following the principles of Methodism have gathered at least once a year. Being practical people of God, they call their gathering “Annual Conference.” Here we are in Middleton joining together for the 46th time as Wisconsin United Methodists, but our heritage goes much further into the past--back to the mid-19th century when the Oneida People were dislodged from their ancestor homeland in what we call New York, and made the difficult trip to the Wisconsin Territory where they re-established their Nation. Some who came were Episcopalian, some were Methodists, and some maintained the traditional belief system of their People.

At about the same time, European immigrants were also arriving in the Wisconsin Territory in large numbers and some of them too were Methodists, and some were Evangelical Association and some were United Brethren in Christ. Since then, the Church has expanded to include people of many diverse nationalities, identities, and personalities. As I look around this gathering, I see people with African, Asian, European, and Native American heritage. I also acknowledge the wide variety of diversity that is not apparent by simply looking at a person from the outside. We are as diverse in our theology, political point of view, and gender as we are in our cultural or national heritage.

So, we are part of a rich mix of diversity and differences. Some see this as a burden or something to overcome. I see it as a gift from God. From the very beginning, Jesus called a wide diversity of people to follow him. Some were Gentile, some Jew, some rich, some poor, some fisherman, some tax collectors, some extroverts, some introverts, some women and some men. From the very beginning, we have been a hodge-podge of distinct, unique and contradictory people...and I pray that never changes! Each year, we add to our numbers clergy from wonderfully diverse backgrounds and cultures. Nearly 30 percent of our clergy serving congregations are in cross cultural and cross racial appointments, bringing to the ministry new perspectives and gifts. These sojourners of faith can help us as we seek to reach out to others who are not already included. We can provide a witness to the world that our United Methodist Church is a place where we celebrate diversity and the multicultural nature of the Church, which was first experienced on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon all those gathered from the far reaches of the world. He united them in faith so they could understand each other. Many gifts, many traditions, many colors, many languages...one Spirit!

This past year, has seen many struggles in our world and in Wisconsin communities too. We are struggling to find our way through racial disparities in our society and racism in our everyday experiences. We struggle to affirm that there is a place for all, and we have a responsibility to look after and care for each other. I am thankful for the ways United Methodists have taken the

lead in seeking justice and mercy. I am so grateful that Wisconsin United Methodists lead the Church in giving for Africa University and Disaster Response. What a witness for peace and justice lived out! Thank you!

Since we gathered last, I have completed my visits to all of the United Methodist congregations in Wisconsin. It was an exhausting and exhilarating experience. I feel that now I know you better than I ever have before, and you know me. I heard your stories of mission and outreach and struggles. I danced here and there with young and old, and ate your wonderful cookies and other delicious food. Some things I saw and experienced brought me tears of joy and tears of sadness. Now I'm preparing for another journey around Wisconsin. This time, I will meet with our circuits in our five new districts, and we will share how together we are reaching the least and the lost in our communities. Working for a common purpose is part of the DNA of Methodism in all of our many branches. If we desire to thrive and bring more people into relationship with us and with Jesus Christ, we will succeed far more when we work together. I want to learn from you as you learn from each other, both lay and clergy, about what you are doing and what we will do together to reach out in Christ's love to our world. Circuit 2.0 is what we use to describe this learning journey with laity and clergy building a framework for outreach to our neighbors.

With this Annual Conference, we move forward with five districts and five District Superintendents. This isn't simply the adding of one district superintendent. This is another step that moves us forward as we pursue our Kingdom vision together. Today, I announce to you that we are moving from casting the vision of Imaging Wisconsin Anew to living out the vision. United in love and trust, serving God and Wisconsin communities, towns, villages, cities, along our beautiful rivers, bluffs, and mountains... focusing our time and energy on how we witness together by living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Everywhere I go in Wisconsin, God shows me new possibilities and new capacities. This change that you have supported will enhance our shared ministry; yes to get the job done of being the Church in our communities, but also to nurture our spirits and strengthen our connections. Your bishop and superintendents, directors and all Conference staff are committed to lead and serve, act and love through their professionalism and gifts demonstrating shared values in supervision ministries, common vision, and God's kingdom goals as they reach out to all of our congregations and the great wide world.

I invite you to join me in a reimagined Wisconsin. We must leave behind the mindset of fear of failure, tight control, constraints, decrease and decline, solipsism and "stuck-ness." We take with us our invested life and covenant together. We look for positive opportunities to change, freedom to learn and act in new ways, and innovation with risk-taking. In our future, Wisconsin United Methodists will bring new competencies, a focus and refocus on new capacities, and new learning. Always and everywhere, we will remind ourselves that our core commitment is making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I am also so pleased to see that we are ready to launch our Institute for Church Development.

Since coming to Wisconsin, Enrique Gonzalez has been a tireless worker along with the District Superintendents, District Strategy Teams and Conference Strategy Teams in helping us set the groundwork for developing new faith communities. We are experiencing success in Milwaukee with Urban Poiema and with our new Korean ministry in Madison; new Hispanic communities are being launched in Monroe, Sheboygan, Fox Valley areas, and the Vine new faith community nested in New Richmond.

I am so excited that our system changes are already being made visible in creating and joining a new cultural climate for new church planting for new people, diverse people, and young creative people in so many and varied places in Wisconsin. They join a long list of successful new church and new faith ventures, and I pray are only the beginning of a wave of new faith reaching some of the 65-plus percent of people in most of our communities who are unconnected to a faith community, or have never connected.

One year ago, we set a goal of raising one-million dollars to help in the fight against malaria. You have already heard that we have raised \$650,000 and have another \$50,000 in church pledges. Thank you to all who have already made such generous gifts to get us to where we are. These gifts reflect hours spent in planning, preparing, asking, walking, riding, puppet shows, pipe cleaner mosquitoes, and about 500 very handsome bobble heads!

So, our task is not complete. When we realized that we would not reach our goal by this Annual Conference, I asked the leaders that work most closely with me for suggestions of what we should do and why. Should we say “good enough” and go on to the next thing? Should we let the campaign coast along for a few more months to see what happens? The answer was we want to meet our goal. We don’t want to say good enough. We have great dreams for the future, and we need to be confident to say that we can accomplish great things as Wisconsin United Methodists. The lives and well-being of people are at stake and we want to see it through. I believe, before this time next year, we will be celebrating meeting or exceeding our goal for the Imagine No Malaria Campaign in Wisconsin. I challenge every church that has not yet participated to take up the cause. I will continue to meet with those who may be able to give a larger gift. If you are one of those persons, or know someone who is, please give me their name and contact information, and we will set up a time for me to visit to share my passion for this life-saving campaign. I know we can do it! I am thankful to God for using the United Methodist Church to save Africa from the killing disease of malaria, and excited that we are reaching our denominational commitment to raise \$75 million. It is God’s moving. It is a Wisconsin United Methodist faith movement.

One of the reasons it is so important for us to fulfill our promise is so we can prove to ourselves that our ministry together has vitality. When we complete our pledge, we are building the foundation for a big dream and vision for our future. I am working with our UM Foundation and Cabinet to create an Office of Financial Stewardship and Development. This office will help us lay the foundation for a successful capital fundraising effort to provide necessary funds to help our health and welfare ministries like Northcott Neighborhood House, UM Children’s Services, and Harbor House to be able to sustain and grow in their efforts to minister to the most needy

in some of our poorest communities, and to provide resources for establishing new faith communities throughout Wisconsin. It is a big dream, and wherever you see me or hear me in the coming year, you will experience me talking about it with you. I will sound like a broken record (I know many of you are too young to remember what a record is...but a broken record is like when you're streaming music and you hear the same song over and over!) My message over and over will be. We can do it! God is depending on us to include new people on the faith journey, and to care for those who are in need. We are not a dead or dying Church. We are committed to the worldwide work of the United Methodist Church through 100% apportionment giving! Our faith is alive and thriving!

It has been a good year since we met last. Yes, we have had struggles, and some struggles continue. But we have experienced hope, and hope is eternal. In the next year, we will move forward with five new districts and five district superintendents. We will continue life-saving efforts and complete our Imagine No Malaria Campaign, and begin to set the stage for the next great effort to share God's love and grace in our world. We don't know what the year will hold, but we know the One who holds us as a Church, Annual Conference, congregations, and individual believers. We know and we are known!

Thanks to God who goes before us preparing the way.

Jeremiah 30:18-19

"Thus says the Lord:

*Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob
and have compassion on his dwellings;
the city shall be rebuilt on its mound,
and the palace shall stand where it used to be.*

*Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving,
and the voices of those who celebrate.*

*I will multiply them, and they shall not be few;
I will make them honored, and they shall not be small.*

In this passage from Jeremiah chapter 30, seventy years or so of captivity are coming to an end. The future is not captivity to the past; instead it is an opportunity to rebuild and move into a new place and future. And before they moved ahead, the prophet Jeremiah delivered a word about restoration from God to the people. A message to and for a generation of people that no longer remembered the good old days, but only the bad present days and circumstances. To the people, Jeremiah brought from God a word of hope and encouragement. You will rebuild; you shall sing songs of thanksgiving; you shall celebrate!

I believe we also are moving forward in restoration and rebuilding. Come on Wisconsin Conference; let's live our future singing songs of thanksgiving and celebration. God will honor our faith... and we shall grow!