

EPISCOPAL ADDRESS

Dakotas Annual Conference The United Methodist Church

June 5, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Lord be with you! (And, also with you.)

It is a joy to greet you as we begin this 21st annual session of the Dakotas Conference, in the mighty name of Jesus, risen and ascended and present with us in this very room.

I invite you to pray with me.

Everlasting and everliving God,
your eternal Christ once dwelt on earth,
confined by time and space.

Now, on this very day of Jesus' Ascension,
the heaven its Lord has received.

Still Jesus calls the world his own.

He lives. He lives. Christ Jesus lives today.

Give us faith and open the eyes of our hearts
to discern in every time and place the Presence among us
of Him who is head over all things and fills all.

Through Jesus' resurrection power and promise,

unleash us from all limits, excuses and delays
to be fearless, Spirit-led churches.

We pray in the precious and holy name of Jesus,
our ascended Lord. Amen.

Once again this year, I look forward to this privileged opportunity to address the lay and clergy leadership of the Minnesota Conference as we continue our shared journey toward God's vision for us, a conference in which each of our 356 congregations is bearing kingdom fruit reflective of Jesus' missional imperatives to:

- love God and neighbor,
- reach new people, and
- heal a broken world.

Congregations that are giving full-blown expression to these three core missional imperatives are fulfilling our Wesleyan movement's mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." They experience the "signs and wonders" of God's Spirit breaking through and raising people to new life in Christ. They have holy imagination; dreaming God-sized dreams. They bear much kingdom fruit:

- new disciples;
- bold spirit leaders;
- people sent into the mission field as purveyors of God's love, grace and justice; and
- generous givers.

In a phrase, congregations that fully embrace Jesus' core missional imperatives are "fearless, Spirit-led churches."

The conference and district leadership has a laser focus on this vision. It is written on our hearts. It frames our agendas. It guides our teaching and witness. It informs our prayers. It directs the building of the conference budget and the allocation of our human and financial resources. Together, with each of you, we are on a Journey Toward Vitality along four strategic pathways we believe will help congregations and the conference increase our missional capacity. They are:

- Developing Missional Leaders,
- Equipping Missional Congregations,
- Extending Missional Impact, and
- Generating Missional Resources.

Developing Missional Leaders builds capacity by creating a culture of call to raise up the next generation of clergy and lay leaders; and by preparing, equipping and deploying lay and clergy leaders who are gifted, passionate, skilled and fruitful in leading congregations to fulfill Jesus' core missional imperatives.

Equipping Missional Congregations builds capacity by creating new places in strategic missional settings, for more people, younger people and more diverse people; and by providing resources and training for existing congregations that demonstrate a readiness to re-invent themselves or launch a new life cycle of missional fruitfulness.

Extending Missional Impact builds capacity by providing avenues for congregations to more effectively utilize our “connection” to have a greater impact on transforming their communities and the world.

Generating Missional Resources builds capacity by creating generous givers and generating the financial resources necessary to create and sustain our leadership development, congregational vitality and missional impact initiatives.

Significant progress is being made along each of these strategic pathways. Our Lay Servants Leaders recruitment and training program is being re-designed and re-energized. As a part of a comprehensive assessment of our very successful conference camping ministry, we are reviewing how camping can better align with our commitment to identify and enlist the next generation of bold, spiritual leaders.

We have successfully launched the Missional Church Initiative with eight congregations in the initial cohort group. This intense and comprehensive local church consultation process assists congregations to re-invent themselves and to enter into a new, more fruitful life cycle. I am pleased to announce that we have just completed a contract with Rev. Sue Nilson Kibbey (you will recall she was our conference teacher last year) to expand and guide our Missional Church Initiative.

We also continue to create new places for new people through our congregational development efforts. In the last couple of years we have launched four new congregations – Fusion in Mitchell, the Gathering in Fargo, Encounter –

a second site of Cornerstone in Watertown, and as of April 6, a satellite of Embrace UMC in Tea, South Dakota. I'd like to show you a brief video of life-changing impact the new Encounter congregation is having on people's lives.

SHOW VIDEO

In order to give more intentional and focused attention to our congregational development and revitalization efforts, the Extended Cabinet and Common Table have recommended the creation of an Equipping Missional Congregations Link. You will see this proposal in the proposed changes to the conference rules.

Dakotas United Methodists save people's lives. Our missional impact is truly God-sized, truly miraculous. Our Haiti Solar Oven ministry continues to grow and assist an ever-expanding number of Haitian families. We continue to celebrate last annual conference session's \$275,000 Bakken Oil Rush Miracle Offering which launched several ministries in western North Dakota. Tomorrow morning we will receive another Miracle Offering to strengthen our Mobile Thrift Store in Watford City and launch a new congregation in the Kenmare region on the northeastern edge of the Bakken formation. Did you bring your offer? **(Yes!)** Are you ready to witness another miraculous outpouring of God's grace? **(Yes!)** Are you ready to party? **(Yes!)**

And, we are continuing our life-saving efforts as we consider during this annual conference session authorizing a feasibility study to assess our readiness and capacity to generate much needed missional resources for starting new churches

and renewing existing congregations. If the feasibility study suggests moving forward, we will launch an initiative to expand our efforts to create and unleash fearless, Spirit-led churches.

Are there other signs of kingdom fruit in the Dakotas Conference? Are there other signs that we are growing in our capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world? Absolutely! God is good and gracious!

- According to the standard metrics the denomination is using to monitor congregational vitality, we have moved from 20% of our churches being highly vital in 2011, to 25% in 2012.

- In 2013, the Dakotas Conference made 1,248 gifts totaling \$388,011 to the Advance, an increase of more than \$100,000 from 2012.

- For the third straight year, we have shown a growth in average worship attendance. In 2013 we grew by another 2% over 2012. More significantly, nearly 40% of our churches are now showing sustainable growth in average worship attendance. This is the seventh highest percentage of growing congregations of the 57 conferences in the United States.

- Nearly 15,000 Dakotas United Methodists are involved in small discipleship groups.

UNLEASHED: FEARLESS, SPIRIT-LED CHURCHES

The theme of each of our annual conference sessions throughout this quadrennium is focused on the four strategic pathways designed to build congregational capacity around Jesus' core missional imperatives.

You will recall, last year our theme was *Unleashing Bold, Spirit-Leaders* as we focused on developing missional leaders.

This year we turn our attention to equipping missional congregations under the theme: *Unleashed: Fearless, Spirit-led Churches*.

The United States has more than 180 million unchurched people, making it the third-largest mission field in the English-speaking world and the fifth globally. Nearly 1 million of these unchurched people are our neighbors right here in the Dakotas. And the number is growing. Williston, North Dakota is the fastest-growing town in North America; Fargo, Sioux Falls and Rapid City are three of the fastest growing micro-metropolitan areas in the country. North Dakota now has the largest proportion of 20-24 year-olds among the 50 states – nearly 9.3%. Nearly one-third of the young adults in this country have absolutely no faith experience. None! It is estimated that by the time my grandchildren reach adulthood, only 10% of their generation will be a part of a faith community. I am confronted by this reality and my heart breaks because, like you, I know the abundant life, the fullness of life, available in Christ.

I am challenged by Pope Francis who has reminded me and the Church Universal that “the most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you...” and that the first reform needed in the Church is attitude. “The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them...”

I am convicted that God is calling us to re-evangelize the Dakotas Conference. I am convinced that the keys to unleashing fearless, Spirit-Led churches are (1) hearts that break for the poor, the lost, the forgotten, the excluded and (2) a passion for turning the church inside out to embrace the needs of those outside the church.

AM I TOO LATE TO GET TO KNOW JESUS?

Many of you are acquainted with Rev. Jorge Acevedo and his work as senior pastor of Grace UMC in Cape Coral, Florida. A couple of years ago, he told me about one of the best evangelists in his congregation. She teaches GED classes as part of the congregation’s outreach ministry to the poor, broken and recovering addicts of their community. She always finds a way to work something about Jesus into every class. In one of her classes she noticed a young man who seemed particularly curious about what she said about Jesus. She began to pray for the young man’s well-being and salvation. At the last session of the class she invited him to come to church. He was pleased and assured his teacher he would attend the very next Sunday.

On Sunday, the woman watched for him, but he didn't show by the time worship began. Throughout the service, she kept looking back at the door but he didn't come. She responded to the altar call at the end of the service and was kneeling down in the front of the church praying for the young man when suddenly he came running into the church at the very last minute. His shirt was soaked in sweat because the bus schedule changes on the weekends and he had to run the last 2 ½ miles to the church. He spotted his teacher at the altar and suddenly stopped in the center aisle, sweat running down his face, and blurted out, "Am I too late to get to know Jesus?"

Have you ever asked this question? Or a similar question? Do you know anyone who is asking this question? Every one of our communities (village, town or city) has individuals – tens, hundreds, thousands of individuals – who are asking this question, "Am I too late to get to know Jesus?" Every place we live, there are tens, hundreds, thousands of individuals who are curious about Jesus and what Jesus can offer their lives. Everywhere we have United Methodist churches, there are tens, hundreds, thousands of individuals hungering for something or someone who will bring meaning and purpose to their lives. Every setting we are in – at work or play, with family or friends – has individuals who are calling out to be unleashed from sin and guilt, doubt and despair, addictions and hang-ups.

- Am I too late to find hope?
- Am I too late to be healed?
- Is it too late to receive forgiveness and new life?
- Did I miss Jesus?

· Did I miss my opportunity to start over?

Recently I heard Gil Rendle, church leadership consultant and author of *Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches*, make the following statement: “I was not trained to change people’s lives, but to change their membership affiliations.” That was true for me, as well. I was trained to invite and welcome people into membership in the church. I was never told that evangelism was a bad word; but, it became obvious to me that membership assimilation was a more polite and acceptable term. Unfortunately, we are shaped by the words we use. And I, and perhaps two or three generations of pastors and laity, learned to avoid the “E” word, and the vibrant, unabashed sharing of one’s faith in Christ Jesus. Only after my own spiritual crisis early in my ministry did I come to understand that as an evangel of Jesus’ Gospel, my core mission is to pay attention to the mystery of God in the life of persons, and to partner with God in transforming unbelievers to fully devoted disciples of Jesus to the glory of God and for the transformation of the world.

I look at fearless Spirit-led churches in the Dakotas and I see congregations that are focused on awakening the souls of the people in their communities. They are focused on helping people sense God’s tender, mysterious call, repent of their sins and receive God’s saving grace. Like the GED teacher at Grace UMC in Florida, they are enabling people to hear the voice of God speaking directly to their hunger, hurt or habit. Fearless, Spirit-led churches in the Dakotas and throughout the connection have learned that ministry is about a way of life – helping people become fully devoted disciples of Jesus – not merely a membership pledge. The

goal of invitation, welcome and assimilation is not merely to swell the membership rolls by people changing their affiliation, but to grow the church by reaching and changing the lives of new people, more people, younger people, diverse people. Swelling is a sign of disease, of something wrong. Growth is a sign of health and new life. Fearless, Spirit-led congregations aren't wasting their time trying to talk people into wanting to come to church to fill in the gaps in pews, finances or volunteers for the annual church dinner. Fearless, Spirit-led congregations are missional. Fearless, Spirit-led churches are doing life-transforming ministry and faith-transforming service; and, people who want to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others are showing up.

THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST

Zacchaeus wanted a transformed life. You remember the story from Luke's gospel. (Luke 19:1-10) Jesus entered and was walking through Jericho. Zacchaeus, the despised head tax collector for Rome and a very rich man, desperately wanted to see Jesus. But, as you recall from your Sunday school song, Zacchaeus was a wee little man – short in stature and he couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass by.

Now what I want you to see is a sweat-drenched man running into the middle of the Sunday morning crowd and blurting out, "Am I too late to get to know Jesus?" Zacchaeus had the same urgency, the same overwhelming curiosity, the same

deep hunger to know Jesus. And, he desperately did not want to miss this opportunity.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.” Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him and be in his presence.

Do you remember what happened next? The crowd grew indignant and began to grumble, “What business does Jesus have getting cozy with this crook? We can’t believe he has gone to be the guest of a sinner!” Have you noticed how people always start to grumble and complain and sometimes even threaten to leave whenever someone they perceive to be a sinner gets too cozy with Jesus, or gets too excited and emotional because they have found Jesus? Friends, I’m tired of the grumblers and excluders! There are just too many people out there who desperately want to see and know the Jesus who forgives and saves and transforms to worry about the grumblers and the whiners and the excluders!

We don’t know exactly what happened in Zacchaeus’ home, but we do know that his encounter with Jesus transformed him and his way of living. Zacchaeus bears witness to this transformation: “Master, I give away half my possessions to the poor and if I cheated anyone, I repay them four times the damages.” Jesus receives Zacchaeus’ confession and repentance and celebrates his faith story by announcing that, “Today is salvation day in this home. Here he is: Zacchaeus, a restored son of Abraham.” And then, to be sure no one missed what just

happened, Jesus uses this teachable moment to tell the crowd, “The Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.”

Jesus is the first and best among evangelists.

- When I want to learn about developing leaders, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about the process for making a disciple, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about being a lover of justice and peace, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about growing generous givers, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about being in mission to all nations, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about bringing persons to saving faith, I turn to Jesus.
- When I want to learn about fearless, Spirit-led churches, I turn to Jesus.

> The first thing Jesus does is focus on Zacchaeus. He is attentive to his need, his curiosity, his urgency. He addresses his heart’s desire. He does not judge him. He makes him the center of his attention. He begins an integrous, caring relationship.

> Second, Jesus invites Zacchaeus to a new level of vulnerability and intimacy. We all know that in the privacy of our own homes, we let our hair and defenses down; we become who we really are. Jesus desires to become intimate with us; to invite us to become vulnerable and name our deepest hurts, hungers and hopes. The relationship moves from caring to loving.

> Third, Jesus is not distracted or dissuaded by the crowds, whether they be religious insiders or secular outsiders. Jesus is tuned to Zacchaeus' heart song.

> I wish Luke had recorded the entire story. I wish we knew all the details of the interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus. But we don't. What we know is that Jesus invited Zacchaeus to repent and embrace the freedom and joy of kingdom living. We know that Jesus introduced Zacchaeus to a new reality, a reality different than the cultural reality and identity that had defined him.

> Finally, Jesus, the first and greatest evangelist, blesses Zacchaeus with an announcement of his salvation.

And the angels in heaven sang, "Alleluia!" And those of us on earth shouted, "Alleluia!" Let the party begin! Let the celebration commence! "For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

HOW LOVELY ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS

In my Church Center office hangs a gorgeous banner with the following quote from the prophet Isaiah: "How lovely are the feet of those who bring Good News." (Isaiah 52:7) The banner is a gift from the Methodist Church in Cambodia, given to me following a training event I conducted for their newly formed cabinet.

Paul quotes Isaiah in his letter to the Romans when he was calling forth persons to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Jews. "But how can the people

call for help if they don't know who to have faith in? And how can they have faith in someone they haven't heard of? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it? As it is written, 'How lovely are the feet of those who bring good news.'" (Romans 10:14-15)

The Dakotas Conference is blessed with hundreds of pastors, laity and scores of unleashed congregations who are faithful and fruitful and fearless evangelists of Jesus' Gospel. They are lovely feet bringing Good News to the last, the lost, the least, the lonely, the left out. They are a grand procession of witnesses telling all the good things of God!" (Romans 10:15, *The Message*) And, they possess some common characteristics I'd like to share with you:

- They believe that their future is not found in preserving themselves behind locked doors.
- They believe that people and relationships are more important than counting nickels and noses.
- They believe that faith in Jesus is about aprons to serve, not bibs to be fed.
- They believe that evangelism does not start with a despairing concern about institutional decline, but with a burning concern for the need and opportunity to reach those who do not know Christ.

- They believe, like John Wesley, that they should “do everything (from greeting, to worship, to teaching, to service) as if in the immediate presence of God.”

- They know how Jesus makes a difference in their lives and how to share their faith with others.

- They believe their work and witness make an eternal difference.

- They are engaged in life-changing mission.

- They develop servant leaders and cultivate generous givers.

- They believe the church’s real history is made when a person gives him/herself to Christ and not when the buildings are built or remodeled or the pastor moves.

- They are focused on seeking, inviting and saving those outside the church and not just keeping house among the folks remaining in the congregation through the work of previous generations of pastors and lay leaders.

- They are committed to being Jesus for the world.

- They know that on Judgment Day they will not be asked, “What did you think?” but “Who did you love?”

- They know that we cannot or should not depend on biological growth among those already in church but on radical outreach to God's children who have lost their way and cannot get home alone.

- They embrace that great Charles Wesley hymn, "Come sinners to the gospel feast, let every soul be Jesus' guest." (Hymn 339 and 616, *The United Methodist Hymnal*)

- They are thoroughly Wesley Christians and understand that salvation does not begin with our sin. Our salvation is rooted in God's character and that character is unrelenting, incarnational love.

- They know that the continuous first step of evangelism is to practice the same radical hospitality Jesus demonstrated when he led Zacchaeus into a saving relationship with the Living God.

- They know it is never too late to get to know Jesus!

I want you to meet four individuals who exemplify and represent the lovely feet of Dakotas United Methodists and congregations who are announcing the Good News. These are our 2014 Denman Award for Evangelism recipients. Each year, in partnership with the Foundation for Evangelism, the Dakotas Conference recognizes individuals who are passionate evangelists and have been notably fruitful in making and equipping new disciples for Jesus Christ.

Rev. Kermit Culver —Clergy

Offering People Christ

Throughout his ministry one of Kermit Culver's main goals has been that of “offering people Christ.” Whether it is through his preaching, his personal counsel, his teaching in Bible studies, his leadership in the church, or through his actions Kermit has sought to make Jesus Christ the central focus of his life. Kermit will quickly tell anyone that he is not a perfect follower of Jesus, but he will say that his life has been transformed by Christ. He clearly understands that his life is a reflection of what is within him and he wants people to see the light of Christ. So far over the course of Kermit’s ministry in the churches in which he has served there have been well over 350 professions of faith and over 200 baptisms. Kermit is one who would say that it’s not about the numbers, but it is about lives touched by the love of God. But he would also say that the numbers matter, because the numbers represent lives.

Kermit Culver and the entire Legacy congregation have also demonstrated extraordinary imagination by pioneering a partnership with the Moffit UMC that enables them to extend their leadership and passion for reaching people through a video feed to the Moffit congregation on Sunday mornings. I want to show you a video about this partnership. I know some of you saw this yesterday in a workshop session. But, it is another model of two fearless, Spirit-led churches in the Dakotas Conference. **(Show video.)**

Suzanne Thorenson — Laity

Helping Children Grow in Faith

Born and raised in Bismarck, North Dakota, Suzanne has been part of Legacy UMC since 1996. After volunteering in various capacities over the years, she found her place in kid's ministry. In 2007, Suzanne was hired as Kid's Ministry Director at Legacy. Suzanne feels blessed to work with great kids, an amazing team of volunteers, and the dedicated staff at Legacy. Her favorite part of ministry is leading kids in worship on Sunday morning and during Vacation Bible School each year. She also loves watching kids grow in their faith, meeting new families, and exercising child-like faith. Suzanne and her husband Sean have two boys, Mason, 14, and Chase, 11.

Jason Balster—Young Adult

Growing Christ on Campus

Jason grew up in South St. Paul, Minnesota, and is currently a sophomore studying biology at North Dakota State University in Fargo. While growing up in South St. Paul, Jason rarely attended church. It wasn't until starting NDSU that he made his commitment to follow Christ. Since then he has become an active member of Faith UMC and is the president-elect for Christ on Campus, Faith UMC's Campus Ministry. He led his sister to Christ and has been instrumental in growing Christ on Campus. Jason's plans to finish his undergraduate degree and then attend seminary pursuing his calling to be an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

Anne Reinhiller — Youth

A Heart For Mission

Anne Reinhiller has a heart for missions especially those who are experiencing the difficulties of poverty and disaster. Anne is currently serving in her second year as the director of the Sioux Falls Canteen. The Canteen is a feeding ministry shared by several United Methodist Churches in Sioux Falls. Every Sunday night, a volunteer group stops at two Sioux Falls locations and serves a mobile meal to over 100 people in need. Anne, as director of this ministry, is responsible for scheduling volunteer groups, stocking supplies in the Salvation Army trailer the ministry uses, managing the bank account, providing communication and raising funds. She also is the assistant director of Kid's Comfort Kits, a non-profit ministry started by her older sister Jayne. Kids Comfort Kits provides assistance to children who are recovering from a natural disaster. The kits include things like: a stuffed toy, crayons, coloring books, other age appropriate toys and a letter about recovering from disaster. Kid's Comfort Kits have been sent all over the country following natural disasters. Anne is currently a junior at Sioux Falls Christian High School and involved at Southern Hills United Methodist Church in worship leadership and in the Sunnycrest United Methodist Church senior high youth group.

I have a question for you, Kermit, Suzanne, Jason and Anne: What word of encouragement do you have for this conference as we seek to become fearless, Spirit-led churches?

Friends I invite you to join me in praying for Kermit, Suzanne, Jason, Anne and all of us. Please take the hand of a person near you and let us pray.

PRAYER

YOU SAID MY NAME. WHY DID YOU SAY MY NAME?

Show the “Grace” video produced by the Skit Guys.

You said my name. Jesus, why did you say my name?

I grew up in the church – actually, two Methodist churches, a Lutheran church and a Presbyterian church in northwest North Dakota. Through loving parents, a doting grandmother and several nurturing Sunday school teachers, I knew God loved me. And, I learned, like Peter in the video you just saw, to profess my love of Jesus. But I didn’t really hear Jesus say my name until I was sixteen. I didn’t really have that moment when it hit me that Jesus desired to forgive me of my sins and set me free until I was sixteen. God had been using my Uncle Ed to prepare me for the moment. My uncle could spot the difference between a cultural Christian and a Spirit-born Christian. He knew I was the former. So, nearly every summer weekend, when we had completed our work on the family farm, Uncle Ed would haul me off to a good, old-fashioned, sawdust-aisle, tent revival. He was determined to get me saved. What he didn’t know is that the story of his own conversion, which he shared with me like a fragile, treasured gift one summer evening, is what caused my spirit to stir. Although I never spoke the

words, they were well-formed in my heart and mind, “Am I too late to get to know Jesus?”

And then the moment came. Uncle Ed and I were watching a Billy Graham crusade on television. It was youth night. Mr. Graham had just issued the invitation. He invited those watching at home to kneel or touch the television. I knelt right there in the living room. And in that moment, Jesus finally had my full attention and I heard him speak my name. “Jesus, you said my name. Why did you say my name?” From that moment on, I could not get enough of Jesus. I wanted to spend every free minute reading the *Bible*. I would spontaneously break into songs of loud, sometimes nonsensical praise. My soul was full, but light and joyful. I had been unleashed, unburdened, set free.

Evangelism is faith sharing. Evangelism is showing and telling others of the new life and new hope we have found in our personal relationship with God in Christ. Evangelism is telling others what a difference being a Christian makes in our lives. Evangelism is telling people that God loves the world, not simply those who show interest in God, but the world. Evangelism is sharing our God stories with others.

My earnest desire and the focus of my prayers over the past several months is for each of you to leave this annual conference session as motivated, equipped and confident evangelists “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (I Peter 2:9b)

I want to give you an opportunity to practice telling your God Story. Take a moment in silence and reflect on a time when you heard Jesus say your name. Remember a moment when Jesus' love for you overwhelmed your resistance, your busyness, your emptiness, your unworthiness. Recall a moment when it hit you that Jesus was speaking directly to you and you found yourself saying, "You said my name. Jesus, why did you say my name?"

In a couple of minutes I will ask you to turn to a neighbor and share your God story.

Go ahead and turn to a neighbor and share. You will each have a couple of minutes.

YOU HAVE STAYED LONG ENOUGH AT THIS MOUNTAIN

The Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. God had prevented them from entering the promised land because of their fear and unfaithfulness. Many, you will recall, had cried out for the fleshpots of Egypt, ready to give up their freedom for the security and predictability of slavery. But the time had arrived.

"In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the Lord had commanded him to speak to them... The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Resume your journey...go in and take

possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob...” (Deuteronomy 1:3-8)

Dear lay and clergy members of the Dakotas Conference, we are in our 160th year as an annual conference; it is the 28th day of the fifth month and God’s word to the Israelites is God’s word to us today: we have stayed long enough at this mountain; it is time to **breakthrough** to the promised land. It is time to embrace a future with hope!

- We have languished too long at the mountain of decline, despair and division.
- We have too long been speechless.
- We have allowed the fires of the first proclamation to grow cold.
- We have permitted broken systems and dysfunctional processes to dictate our actions.
- We no longer hear the cries and whispers of the hundreds of thousands of lost and alienated people in the Dakotas.
- We have resigned ourselves to the fact that 57% of our churches had no professions of faith. Not one new disciple.

- We no longer expect the Holy Spirit to breakthrough and transform us or the world.
- We have substituted ministry activities for cultivating a vibrant relationship with God and for offering Christ.
- We are afraid we may offend someone with our God stories.
- We have forgotten that our Wesleyan movement's energy, identity and purpose are anchored in unleashing new life for the last, the least, the lost, the excluded.
- We long for the former, predictable, secure days of the "old Methodist Church" or "old Evangelical Brethren Church" and forget that does not mean the 1950s and 1960s, but the passionate evangelism and radical social reform of the Wesleys, Asbury, Otterbein, Bethune and many others who never envisioned or allowed a "settled" religion.
- We no longer believe – truly believe – our witness or lack of witness has eternal consequences for God's people or for us.

Friends, we have been around this mountain long enough! Amen!

- It is time to resume our journey toward a vital witness.

- It is time to take courageous steps to overcome our inertia.

- It is time to confess our sin of wanting to stay where we are rather than following Christ to the cross.

- It is time to fully embrace that we “have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” (I Peter 1:30)

- It is time to fall to our knees and pray for the Holy Spirit to break through to renew and revive our congregations.

- It is time to ask God to break open our hearts and open our eyes to those scrambling up trees to see Jesus or crying out, “Am I too late to know Jesus?”

- It is time to ask the Holy Spirit to revive our faith and transform us into fearless evangelists of Jesus’ saving grace.

- It is time to leave the mountain and set forth to unleash new life.

> Are you ready to go?

- > Are you ready to leave this mountain where we have camped too long?

- > Are you ready to become Fearless, Spirit-led churches?

- > Are you ready to tell your God stories?

- > Are you ready to pray each day for God's Spirit to break through?

If so, I invite you – all of you, each person here today – to begin this very moment. I invite you to respond. I invite you to get on your feet (if you are able) and come here to the front of the assembly hall to pray.

Perhaps you came running into this room today, sweating, saying to yourself, “Am I too late to get to know Jesus?” Perhaps the Holy Spirit has touched your heart this afternoon and you are hearing Jesus calling you to come down from your tree and give your life to Jesus. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is calling you to recommit your life to Jesus. If so, I invite you to make your way to the front of this room. The members of the Cabinet are here to receive you and pray with you. Come, come; it is not too late. It is never too late! Jesus is waiting to receive you.

Each of you has in your hands a Prayer for Unleashing New Life card. If you will commit to joining me and the conference leadership in praying this Breakthrough Prayer every day, I invite you to also come forward and stand

or kneel at the front of this auditorium. Bring your cards. Come, come, let us leave this mountain and break through!

Let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit,

- Break through and renew our churches, unleashing fearless, Spirit-led congregations.
- Empower our clergy and lay leadership with the contagious, miraculous, saving message of Jesus.
- Boldly use me, without limits, to reach new people and heal a broken world.
- Create in me a joyful heart for all that God is doing in and through us to change lives and transform the world.

I pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough

Dakotas-Minnesota Area