

**ACTS 2 CONGRGATIONS: LIVE EXPECTANTLY  
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS**

**Dakotas Annual Conference  
June 9, 2017  
Bismarck, North Dakota**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Church! I remind you this morning that God “chose you through the Spirit’s work of making you holy and because of the faithful obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. May God’s grace and peace be multiplied to you.” (I Peter 1:2)

Let me also remind you this morning why we are gathered here in this 24<sup>th</sup> Session of the Dakotas Annual Conference. We are on a shared journey—a journey toward God’s vision of each congregation growing in its capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world – all to the glory of God and the fulfillment of our mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Let us pray.

Gracious and faithful God, you sent the Holy Spirit to rekindle the zeal of Christ’s followers waiting in Jerusalem for his promised gift. Pour the same inspiration on your people assembled here this morning and on the Church of Christ throughout the world. Revive the power and passion of the gospel in our hearts that we may be living praise and witness to your love in every community in the Dakotas and beyond. Send the light and strength of your Holy Spirit to equip us to become Acts 2 congregations so that Jesus, being lifted up, may draw all people unto him, and the kingdom in heaven may become the kingdom on earth. We offer our prayers in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

**OUR JOURNEY TOWARD VITALITY**

We are on a shared journey. It is a Journey Toward Vitality. For the past four years we have been aligning all the Dakota Conference resources – leadership, staff, financial, programs, structures – toward our ultimate goal to increase the vitality and missional impact of each existing and newly formed congregation in the Dakotas Conference.

We believe God’s preferred future – God’s vision – for every congregation in the Dakotas is to be giving all-out, fully-mature expression to Jesus’ core missional imperatives:

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

Congregations that are continuously building capacity in these imperatives invariably fulfill our mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Throughout this current 2017-2020 quadrennium, each of our annual conference themes will address an element of our vision.

- We begin this year (2017) with the theme of *Encounter the Spirit: Live Expectantly!* We are exploring the nature of the primitive church recorded for us in Acts, chapter 2. The dynamics of these Pentecost-born and Spirit-led churches embody our vision and lay the foundation for exploring Jesus' gospel imperatives throughout the remainder of this quadrennium.
- In 2018, our theme will be *Discover Joy: Live Deeply!* as we take a deeper dive into Jesus' imperative to grow in love of God and neighbor.
- In 2019, our theme, *Dare to Disciple: Live Boldly!* will focus on the Great Commission and Jesus' imperative to reach new people.
- In 2020, we will utilize the theme *Be the Light: Live Hope!* to explore Jesus' imperative to heal a broken world.

Our Journey Toward vitality is producing much kingdom fruit. There are many signs our congregations are growing in our capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world. This fruitfulness is reflected in the Missional Report you received yesterday as we convened this conference session. Everywhere I travel, in nearly every church I visit, wonderful bountiful kingdom fruit is being brought forth. Congregations are encountering the Spirit and beginning to live and witness expectantly. The Holy Spirit is forming our churches in the image and pattern of Jesus for the redemption of the world. New life, new hope, new love, new creation is breaking forth.

## ACTS 2 CONGREGATIONS

Eugene Peterson, in his contemporary rendering of the Bible called *The Message*, writes these thoughts in his introduction to the Book of Acts:

“The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God – they were in on the action of God, God acting in them, living in them. Which also means, of course in us.”

Over the past several months, I have been re-reading the Book of Acts to better understand the characteristics and dynamics that contributed to the vitality, growth and missional passion of the first-generation church. The apostles and earliest disciples of Jesus replicated the pattern of how Jesus brought persons to saving, maturing faith. As a result, they bore much kingdom fruit. They were able to do so because God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, was living in them, and they were responsive and obedient to the Spirit's leading.

And, who were these first Christians? They were ordinary people like you and me. Following Pentecost, the Holy Spirit could have formed congregations out of an elite group of talented men and women. But,

that is not how the Holy Spirit works. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the church at Corinth that the first-generation church was totally devoid of the glamorous, the celebrity, the influential. Here is how Eugen Peterson paraphrases Paul's account:

"Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the 'brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies.'" (I Corinthians 1:26-18)

This is good news for us who are not the best and brightest. Right? Thank God that God has not changed strategies in bringing the church -- the congregation, the salvation community -- into our lives. The same Holy Spirit that was poured out upon the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost is the same Holy Spirit that anoints you and me for forming and leading the church today.

The Book of Acts is a lively record of both the means (or methods) and the ends (or fruit) of God's Spirit activity in and through the first-generation church. Likewise, the record of the early church in the Book of Acts is a contemporary blueprint for the means (or methods) and the ends (or fruit) of the Holy Spirit's activity in and through each of us.

Let me begin with the fruits. They are clearly identified in the second chapter of Acts, verses 41-47.

- Persons were demonstrating wonders and signs of God's kingdom-inverting and kingdom-multiplying power. (Acts 2:43) Imagine that! The early church shared their awe-inspiring God stories. They encountered the Spirit and lived expectantly. They expected the Holy Spirit to change lives. Can you see it? Do you want it?
- Persons were receiving the Good News and being saved. (Acts 2:47b) Imagine that! The early church was enthusiastic and intentional about reaching new people. Can you see it? Do you want it?
- Persons of all nations, races, tongues, and life circumstances were added to and included in the faith community (Acts 2:41) Imagine that! The early church was diverse and inclusive of all their neighbors. Can you see it? Do you want it?
- Persons were cared for as they had need. (Acts 2:44-45) Imagine that! The early church extravagantly shared all their resources to heal a broken world. Can you see it? Do you want it?

But, the method, or discipline, or process that gives rise to fruitfulness is also identified in the second chapter of Acts. This should sound familiar to you. It is the same method or core process Jesus employed as he led persons into a saving, transforming relationship with the living God. It is the same discipline or method that was distinctive of the early "Methodist" revival movement in England and North America and continues to characterize the "Methodist" movement today in every place, close at home and around the world, where we are growing in spirit, numbers and missional impact.

You guessed it. You are already running ahead of me. You know the elements of the disciple-making and disciple-maturing process. They are:

- Radical Hospitality,
- Passionate Worship,
- Faith-Forming Relationships and Disciplines,
- Risk-taking Mission, Service and Justice, and
- Extravagant Generosity.

Bishop Schnase describes these elements of the disciple-making process in his book, *Five Practices of Faithful Congregations*. We teach this Acts 2 model to all new clergy in our Provisional Years training.

### **Radical Hospitality**

Acts 2 Congregations practice radical hospitality that focuses on the least, last and lost coming to faith in Jesus Christ. They embrace the evangelistic task just like the first-generation church. “The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, CEB). Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, Acts 2 Congregations take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, baptize, teach and support newcomers as they grow in faith and become part of the Body of Christ. Acts 2 Congregations focus on those outside their congregation with as much energy as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already belong to the family of faith. They understand that hospitality is more than coffee and cookies; it is placing the stranger, the outsider at the center of all they do. Like the early church described throughout the Book of Acts, their hospitality is radical precisely because it is Spirit-inspired and Spirit-driven to welcome persons of all nations, races, languages, life circumstances or status.

One of the vital signs of congregations practicing radical hospitality is the number of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. In 2016, the Dakotas Conference had a 5.7% increase over 2015 in the number of preparatory members and a whopping 28.6% increase in the number of professions of faith. We also saw an increase of 2.5% in the number of children and adult baptisms.

ReNew United Methodist Church, our new re-started congregation in Kenmare is an Acts 2 Congregation that practices radical hospitality. Here is their story. (Show video)

### **Passionate Worship**

Acts 2 Congregations practice the same passionate worship of the first-generation church – worship that praises and magnifies God’s presence and builds up the Body of Christ. “Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone” (Acts 2:46-47a, CEB). Out of a deep desire for people to be fed, forgiven, healed and transformed, they conduct worship that creates expectancy, that moves people figuratively and often literally to their tiptoes, eager to drink in the Spirit. They understand that people are searching for worship that is authentic, alive, creative, enthusiastic; worship where they can touch Jesus’ garment and be changed. Like the early church described throughout the Book of Acts, their worship is passionate precisely because it is filled with the awe, the wonder, the signs of God’s Spirit presence.

One of the vital signs of congregations practicing passionate worship is worship attendance. In 2016, our conference average worship attendance grew by 1.1%, the sixth consecutive year of worship attendance growth. A remarkable 63.3% of our total professing members participate in weekly worship.

### **Intentional Faith Formation**

Acts 2 Congregations practice the same intentional faith-forming disciplines and relationships as the first-generation church. “The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers (Acts 2:42, CEB). Out of an abiding concern that people grow in their love of God and neighbor and be formed into the image of Christ for the sake of the world, Acts 2 Congregations insure that all followers of Jesus, from the great grandmother or great grandfather to the toddler, mature in faith and grow in discipleship through learning, nurture and accountability in small, intimate groups. This is the way of the early church. This is the United Methodist Way. This is our DNA, our heritage and our future. Like the early church described throughout the Book of Acts, their faith formation is intentional precisely because they know the Holy Spirit always shows up when two or three or more gather in holy conferencing to pray and study together.

One of the vital signs of congregations practicing intentional faith formation is the number of people participating in small discipleship groups. Although we experienced a small decline in both the number of small groups and the total number of persons participating in all Christian formation groups from 2015 to 2016, our average weekly attendance for all ages in Sunday Church School increased by 3%, and we had just under 7,000 participants in our 2016 Vacation Bible Schools.

### **Risk-Taking Mission and Service**

Acts 2 Congregations practice the same risk-taking mission, mercy and justice ministries of the first-generation church – ministries that served the needs of the community and demonstrated God’s transformative power and purpose. “God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles... They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them” (Acts 2:43b & 45, CEB). Out of an unwavering commitment to make the Kingdom of God visible on earth as it is in heaven, Acts 2 Congregations help persons identify and claim their unique mission and service. They challenge unjust systems that impoverish and dehumanize persons. They understand the failure to engage in risk-taking mission and service diminishes a congregation’s vitality, relevance and ability to form disciples. Like the early church described throughout the book of Acts, they take risks to engage the hurts and hopes of the world precisely because the Holy Spirit compels them to incarnate Christ’s unconditional, self-denying, life-giving love.

One of the vital signs of congregations practicing risk-taking mission and service is the number of congregational members and constituents sent to serve others. In 2016, the number of Dakotas United Methodists engaged in mission increased by 36% over 2015. Collectively, our congregations served 174,194 persons through community outreach, justice and mercy ministries, community daycare or other community education ministries. Friends, this is an incredible increase over 2015 of 60.7%.

Watertown First United Methodist Church is one of many Dakotas Conference congregations that is practicing risk-taking mission and service through outreach to needy, hungry children in their community. Let’s watch their story. (Show Watertown First video.)

## Extravagant Generosity

Acts 2 Congregations practice the same extravagant generosity of the first-generation church. “All the believers were united and shared everything... They shared food with gladness and simplicity” (Acts 2:44 & 46B, CEB). Out of a profound gratitude for God’s gift of life and Christ’s offering of himself, Acts 2 Congregations invite persons to align their hearts and resources with God’s purposes. They have discovered a truth as sure as gravity – generosity enlarges the soul, realigns priorities, connects people to the Body of Christ, and expands Christ’s mission. They model that generosity and giving is at the heart of discipleship. Like the early church described throughout the Book of Acts, their generosity is a gift of the Spirit that reflects the very nature of God’s extravagant love.

One of the vital signs of congregations practicing extravagant generosity is the total financial support of missions and other benevolences. In 2016, the 260 congregations of the Dakotas Conference gave \$6,114,680, including conference apportionments, to serve others. This compares to \$5,829,148 in 2015, or a 5% increase. We now stand at \$\_\_\_\_\_ given or pledged to our Thrive: Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow Initiative. To date, our Miracle Offerings have generated over \$600,000 to fund our Bakken Oil Rush Ministries, Imagine No Malaria and our Elisha Internship Project.

In just a few minutes we will receive our 2017 Kids Count Miracle Offering. You did bring your Miracle Offering, didn’t you? This is an opportunity for us to build partnerships with schools and communities and help “our” children realize their dreams. I can’t wait to see what miracle God will accomplish through your extravagant generosity.

## FILLED WITH THE FULLNESS OF GOD

Throughout his epistles, but especially in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul lifts up a post-resurrection image of us as a spiritual people knitted together in Christ to be a spiritual dwelling place for God. The message: we are incorporated into God’s mission – we become a part of God’s reconciling, transformative mission – through the Holy Spirit living within us. The first-generation church – the church we read about throughout the Book of Acts – understood themselves to be the spiritual dwelling place for God.

This is the very mystery of which Paul spoke when he prayed for the Ephesian Christians.

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:18-19, NSRV)

One of my favorite images is contained in the French philosopher Pascal’s treatise on religious faith. (I have shared this in many other settings.) He wrote his treatise when he was 16 years old. In this thick book, he wrote: “Within each of us is a God-shaped emptiness that only God can fill.” Call it your soul, your heart, your center, your inner being (as Paul does) – it doesn’t change the reality that God created every human being in such a manner that we are not whole, integrated, reconciled, saved or fully available to bear kingdom fruit until the God-shaped emptiness within us is filled with the Spirit of God! Can I get a witness?

But wait, there is more! Paul concludes his prayer with these words:

“Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21, CEB)

Jesus first made this promise when in his farewell discourse to his disciples that when the Holy Spirit lives within us – when, as Brother John Wesley said, there is the union of God’s Holy Spirit and our human spirit – we will not only do the works Jesus did, but we will, in fact, do great works than his (John 14:12). Do you believe this? Seriously, do you really believe this? Pretty incredible! Remarkable! Mind-blowing!

Filled with the fullness; filled with the fullness; filled with the fullness of God. Now that’s power! Now that is a real encounter with the Holy Spirit. It is Spirit-power within us that enables God to work through us to accomplish far more than we can possibly imagine or ask. It is this Spirit-power within us that enables us to do even greater works than Jesus. (I can see you are not yet ready to fully believe this.)

I so desperately want to be filled with the fullness of God. Don’t you? Often my prayer, my breath prayer, my unceasing prayer is simply, “Come, Holy Spirit. Come; fill me.”

But, I have a confession to make. My prayer is too often blunted or foiled because I come into Jesus’ presence with my God-shaped emptiness filled with impossible distractions, wicked dead ends and desperate behaviors. I too often come to Jesus with my God-shaped emptiness filled with fear, or filled with all the right answers, or filled with neat little boxes of shrink-wrapped faith, or filled with pretensions and presumptions and preferences, or filled with deceit or doubt. Am I alone here?

Let me be absolutely candid. If your “God-shaped emptiness that only God can fill” is filled with fear or doubt that God can revive your congregation and its missional impact, then there will be little or no room for the Holy Spirit to flood you with God’s imagination. If your inner being is filled with deceit and resistance to change and you have already determined your church is dead in the water, there will be no room for the Holy Spirit to use you to accomplish God’s purposes. If your heart is filled with an exclusionary and prejudicial spirit in the name of purity, truth or security, then there will be no room for the Holy Spirit to work through you to express the breadth and length and height and depth of Jesus’ love. If your soul is filled with an attitude of scarcity, or even an attitude of “it’s good enough” rather than the expansive, unlimited power of the Holy Spirit, then your prayers for God’s blessings will not measure up to God’s greatness or faithfulness and you will never live expectantly, eagerly, hopefully, joyfully, faithfully.

I learned a wonderful lesson, early in my ministry, about the power of the Spirit at work within us from one of my favorite theologians – my five-year old son, Matthew. (Tell story of Matthew asking me, “If God can fill my heart, how come my heart doesn’t burst?”)

Here is the gospel truth. When our hearts are filled with the fullness of God, they burst open with love; they overflow with love. The love must go somewhere; it cannot be contained. This is what happened at Pentecost. This is what gave rise to the Acts 2 church. This is what fueled the Christ movement.

When the God-shaped emptiness that only God can fill is filled with the fullness of God, everything is turned upside down.

- You die to live.
- You repent to gain new life.
- You become a servant to become important.
- You become least, to become first.
- You become poor to be rich.
- You become a peacemaker to be a child of God.
- You become meek to inherit the earth.
- Your heart bursts open with love to give life to a broken world.

### **CONCLUSION**

So, as we continue to Encounter the Spirit and Live Expectantly, I ask you these questions:

- Are you ready for Pentecost to come in your congregation?
- Are you praying for this?
- Do you want to become an Acts 2 Congregation?
- Do you want to be filled with the fullness of God?
- Do you want the power of the Risen Christ at work within you?

Great! Good! Wonderful! Then please stand if you are able and let us pray for this Pentecost miracle – for this breakthrough. (The prayer cards are on your tables and the prayer is projected on the screen.) Please join me.

### **Prayer for Living Expectantly**

Gracious and Life-Giving God,

- Pour out your Holy Spirit, like a mighty wind and tongues of fire, to unleash our churches to see kingdom visions, dream your dreams, and to prophesy to your saving grace and justice.
- Revive the power of the gospel in the hearts of our clergy and lay leadership and prosper their words and works, so that all nations may hear the good news in their own tongues.
- Boldly use me, without limits, delays or excuses to be a living praise and witness to your love throughout all the earth and a blessing to all creation.



- Create in me an expectant heart, eager to receive your Spirit gifts and guidance to the glory of Jesus Christ and his mission, in whose precious and powerful name I pray. Amen.

Please remain standing, if you are able.

Dear friends and leaders of the Acts 2 Church in the Dakotas Conference: if the space that only God can fill is filled with the Spirit of God, we will be changed; we will be transformed.

- We will be constantly surprised by the Holy Spirit.
- We will be born from above again and again and again.
- We will be empowered by the imagination of God.
- We will be driven to the margins of society.
- We will be compelled to bind up the wounds and bring resurrection hope.
- We will herald the new creation.
- We will bring down the walls that separate us from God and one another.
- We will become the light to rise in the darkness of injustice, hopelessness, cynicism and sin.
- We will have new hearts, hearts not of stone, but of flesh.
- We will know the love of Christ that is beyond comprehension; beyond human knowledge.
- We will have eyes to see the Spirit of Truth.
- We will proclaim release to the captives and the year of the Lord's favor.
- We will live expectantly.

In a word, we will be an Acts 2 Church, bringing glory to Christ Jesus in the church and in the world to all generations forever and ever!

### **Blessing**

Come, Holy Spirit. Come and fill your servants, your chosen, baptized, called leaders of The United Methodist Church in the Dakotas. Come, Holy Spirit. Fill your beloved people with your very presence. Work through them to accomplish your purposes – your miraculous, mysterious, magnificent purposes – for the sake of Christ and the sake of the world. May it be so! Amen!

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough**  
**Dakotas-Minnesota Area**  
**The United Methodist Church**

5/30/17