

State of the Conference Address
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June 11, 2010

For me, this is a Deuteronomy 32 moment. In the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy, God says to Moses, “For you shall see the land before you; but you shall not go there, into the land which I give to the people of Israel.” For all of us who are authorized by the Church to preach and teach the Gospel, whether as local church pastors, chaplains, or conference or national staff, there comes that moment when we are called to pass on the responsibilities of our position to another. And like Moses, all of us in leadership get a glimpse of the promised-land, but none of us actually ever get to go there. No matter how well or how poorly we have stewarded our congregations or our conferences or our ministries, it is always God’s prerogative to lead the people we have served into the promised-land. As leaders, our task is to hand off our staff to the one that will follow us. We do not yet know who that person will be for the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, but trust that God will provide. And so today, like countless others who have gone before me, I find myself still in Moab, with great anticipation of the promised-land poised right before us.

I trust that like the Christian leaders who have gone before me, I find myself making the inevitable assessment about the outcome of my leadership. Very few of us ever come to the end of the journey with a full glass. For most of us, the question is: am I leaving the congregation or institution or conference I have been privileged to lead over these years with the glass half full, or with the glass half empty?

Is the glass half full or is the glass half empty? The optimist in me wants to proclaim that the glass is more than half-full. After all, consider all of the blessings experienced by the Indiana-Kentucky Conference in the past year:

- The Conference just recently received a bequest of \$225,000 from the estate of Dan Crown, a long-time summer camp counselor who was devoted to the Merom Conference Center.
- The value of the reserve funds of the Conference, which at the end of 2008 had dropped from \$1.5 million dollars to a little over \$700,000, rebounded during 2009 and 2010. While still short of their former value, the reserve funds nevertheless recovered 80% of their value!
- The response of our churches to help those who survived the earthquake in the country of Haiti was overwhelmingly generous with over \$70,000 in contributions! Once again, you proved just how generous the members of our Indiana-Kentucky churches are!
- During the past year, the Conference has been blessed with the calling of two new employees. Rev. John Krueger, a former conference minister himself, is providing wonderful service as our part-time Interim Associate Conference Minister. Ms. Nikki Richards brings with her great skills as she serves in the new position of Communications Coordinator.
- Speaking of communications, implementation of that part of our Vision Plan is being carefully and thoughtfully conducted by the Communication and Technology Task Force. During the coming year, they will be responsible for a new and larger web-site for the Conference with increased services for local churches.
- The Conference has initiated a new church start in Warsaw, Indiana. Rev. Timothy Price is the new church planter of Abundance United Church of Christ, which is slowly trying to take root in this northern Indiana community.
- As you saw from the participation of their young people in our opening worship service, St. Peter United Church of Christ in Louisville, is a revitalizing congregation, and has been blessed by a generous grant from the national setting of our denomination.
- In February of this year, the Conference initiated a new partnership with Global Missions Missionary, Elena Huegel and the Pentecostal Church of Chile. The exuberance of those participating in the delegation will speak for itself.
- Finally, those of you who know me, know that I am not one who is big on spending money on facilities and infrastructure. However, one of our long time lay volunteers had noticed the need and provided a very generous gift of \$5,000 which the Conference Women’s Board is seeking to match. The funds have been used to re-carpet, repaint and re-furnish our Indianapolis office which we think had not been updated for at least 20 years! If you are in the area, come up to the office and look. The results look terrific!

However, as encouraging as so many of these developments have been, I could equally contend, looking back over my 12 years with you, that our conference glass is not really half full, but rather that it is “half-empty.” The amount of evidence for this conclusion is just as numerous. Just consider the following facts:

- When I began as your Conference Minister, the number of churches in this Conference was 187. The number of churches composing the Conference today is 151. What happened to these 36 congregations? About one third of these congregations closed their doors for a variety of reasons – diminished attendance, aging of participants, an inability to attract younger people and the increasing loss of population in their communities. But nearly two-thirds of these congregations withdrew from their association because of differences in faith and practice with the General Synod or with the larger United Church of Christ. Unlike other denominations, it is not our practice to “dis-fellowship” churches. If they leave us, they do it on their own accord. While all other UCC conferences experienced a loss of congregations for similar reasons, the proportion of loss we experienced was greater than most other conferences.
- Accompanying this downsizing of the number of Conference churches were all of the other corresponding statistics about membership and participation. As an aggregate, we have witnessed decreases in the number of members, average Sunday worship and Church School attendance, confirmands and new members. In the past ten years, the number of members in the Conference has actually decreased by over 36% - from 47,144 to 30,063 members and, despite a decrease in churches, the average attendance in each of our churches has gone down from 89 to 78!
- With fewer people, it should not surprise us that there was less money to support the Conference and national UCC. From a high of \$1,400,000 in 1991, the contribution by our congregations to Our Church’s Wider Mission Basic Support decreased to \$776,000 last year! This is an alarming decrease! But what is even more alarming is that it not only mirrors an equivalent decrease in the other 37 conferences and the national setting of the United Church of Christ, but it mirrors a similar decrease for all denominations and religious institutions in the United States! Since the mid-1990s, the landscape of religious giving has experienced a seismic shift. As a share of overall charitable giving, giving to religion has fallen from over half of the charitable dollars given to less than one third today. Between 1987 and 2004, religious giving as a share of income fell between twenty-five percent and fifty percent with most faith groups experiencing a 30% decline. Since 1989, the giving of every religious group has declined between 15% to as high as 45.7%!
- While he and his family are not presently attending a United Church of Christ congregation, the President of the United States had attended a UCC congregation for over 20 years and professes that his most important theologian is Reinhold Neibuhr. Neibuhr was a saint of the Evangelical side of our church and one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. But in spite of this affiliation, you will notice that the person chosen to deliver the prayer at the president’s inauguration was not a UCC, or other mainline pastor, but Rev. Rick Warren representing the more conservative wing of the prevailing face of Protestant Christianity today.
- In spite of the growth and prevalence in our culture of mega-churches reflecting a more conservative theology, we have witnessed a gradual increase in the number of un-churched people in our culture. Many of us profess to be stunned by the research from the Barna Group that reports that 70% of all young adults under the age of 30 have never set foot in a church sanctuary of any denominational affiliation! Truth be told, many of us Baby Boomers of every religious persuasion continue to be mystified at our own children who, in spite of all of our training and example to the contrary, do not have the slightest interest in the support of institutions of any kind, be they sacred or secular.

Now if we were to weigh all the evidence, it would well appear that our conference and our denominational glass is half empty! After all, using all of the world’s standards of size, number of adherents, amount of money, and acknowledgement by the culture, we and the other of what have been known as “main-line” denominations appear to be noticeably on the side line as far as our culture is concerned.

But all of the “glass half empty” conclusions to the contrary, I remain convinced that within the Church Universal, the United Church of Christ and the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, flawed vessels that they may be, have been offering and will continue to offer their own unique contribution to the understanding of the Christian Gospel. In our relatively short history as a Christian Church, even including the history of each of our predecessor denominations, we have always had a greater impact on religious and cultural values than our size should have warranted. And I expect and hope, our Gospel DNA being what it is, that the United Church of Christ will continue to provide in the future a similar kind of leadership for the Church Universal.

In spite of the forces that are currently impeding our denomination and all religious communities in this country today, I want us to take the balance of this afternoon to appreciate some of the faith affirmations and corresponding ethical values that are part of who we are as the United Church of Christ here in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, and which I hope will continue to mark us as a Christian Church in the years to come. While there could be many choices, for me there are three faith affirmations in our heritage which I think define us and which I especially prize in our private and public witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. While our churches may be fewer, and our members may be less, there remain three gifts that we continue to be in the position to share with the Church Universal.

Stillspeaking God. Some seven plus years ago, the national setting of the United Church of Christ initiated, for the first time, an advertising campaign which continues today to be known as the Stillspeaking Campaign. What made the Stillspeaking Campaign resonate with so many of our churches, members, and pastors was that it articulated in a new and novel way an understanding of the Christian faith that has so long been a part of the heritage of the four predecessor denominations forming the United Church of Christ.

When Pilgrim John Robinson stated that “God still has more truth and light to break forth from God’s Holy Word,” he was articulating our belief that the power and providence of God cannot be restricted by church creeds or church traditions or church leaders or by previous interpretations of the Biblical text. While we encourage our members to be informed by the past, that does not mean that we are necessarily bound by it. Our members are encouraged to ask questions, to raise doubts, and to think for themselves about what it is that they truly believe. The late William Sloan Coffin put it this way when he said, “There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. . . . Certainly Peter and Andrew and James and John, in deciding to follow Jesus, received more to think about than had they stayed home. And so it is with all of us: if we give our lives to Christ, if we leave familiar territory and take the leap of faith, what we receive in return fills our minds altogether as much as it fills our hearts.” (*Credo*, p 8)

In the Stillspeaking Campaign, we heard this understanding re-cast from the unlikely source of actress Gracie Allen in the words, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” God is not a dead presence whose truths have been captured in the tomes of ancient Christendom, but the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a living reality who speaks to us still and challenges our assumptions in no less a way than Jesus did in the culture in which he lived. In response to all of those religious voices who claim to know God’s punctuation with absolute certitude, we declare ourselves to be the people of the comma, who proclaim a God who always reserves the right to, and often does, speak a new and challenging word to us.

Extravagant Hospitality. A second gift that the churches of our conference have to share is not only the vision of a Stillspeaking God, but an inclusive and non-judgmental understanding of who it is that we welcome to our pews and to our pulpits. Once again, it was the Stillspeaking Campaign that coined a phrase that describes an attitude shared by most all of our churches. It is now a familiar phrase to most of us. You all know it. Let’s say it together: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

It is a proclamation of our belief as a Church in extravagant hospitality. I trust that none of you here this afternoon would think twice when you hear the communion liturgy used in some of our churches: “In this meal, we invite you to participate in God’s presence. At this table, all are welcome. For this is not our table. It is not a United Church of Christ table. It is God’s table. All people confessing faith in Christ Jesus are welcome here.”

Reflecting this same kind of extravagant hospitality, the United Church of Christ was one of the first denominations to call attention to how inhospitable our churches, our public buildings and our streets and sidewalks were to people with disabilities. As a result of an action initiated at one of our General Synods, building codes across the country were eventually changed so that today public buildings and streets and sidewalks are largely accessible to people with disabilities. I don’t know of a church in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference that has not invested in a ramp or elevator to make its facilities accessible to all.

But as much as we might take inclusivity for granted, this is not a value that is shared by other Christian or public communities. In fact, it was deemed to be so controversial that the Stillspeaking television commercials were not given access by the ABC, CBS and NBC television networks. For some, extravagant welcome is deemed to be a dangerous thing. But for the United Church of Christ, it is who we are and what we understand Christ’s Church to be.

God So Loved the World. The third gift that I prize about the United Church of Christ, but once again which most of our churches here in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference take for granted is our theological understanding that in Jesus Christ, God offers us salvation not just for the life to come, but for this life as well. God gave his only son

because God so loved the world. The very history of the health and welfare institutions of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, from Brooklawn and Crossroads to the more recent United Caring Shelters in Evansville are a sign that the God whom we worship calls us to care just as much for the welfare of all God's creation alive today as we are called to care for the souls of those who may die tomorrow.

That means that for those of us in the United Church of Christ the work of our churches is not only to help our people have a relationship with the God of all salvation, but also to minister to those suffering on the margins of society, whose lives have failed to achieve the kind of abundance for which God created them. It is this passion for the quality of life today and for the just sharing of God's abundant resources that is a part of our theological heritage that we have to share with the world.

It is out of this conviction of God's love for this world and for each one of God's children that has led this Church to champion the liberation and justice for so many people whose humanity and talents our culture wants to deny. I trust that in 1954, three years before the formation of the United Church of Christ, many of you never would have dreamed that in just 54 years this country would move from the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in civil rights to an African American being inaugurated as President.

That happened, of course, because of a shared religious conviction across the country, but at the forefront of that movement were leaders in the United Church of Christ. It was because the UCC congregation I pastored in Nashville, Tennessee, understood the civil rights movement to be an expression of God's love for all God's children that they encouraged me to be one of the leaders of what was estimated as a 10,000 person civil rights march in Nashville in 1978.

In a time when some Protestant denominations like the Southern Baptist Church are rolling back the opportunities for ordained leadership that they had offered to women for many years, it is instructive to be reminded of a resolution that was passed here in Indiana by the Eel River Christian Convention, one of the predecessor denominations to the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, in the year 1885. It read "Women's Rights. Whereas, because of the large amount of ignorance and superstition extant in the world, woman had been kept largely in the background, both in church and state; and Whereas, because of mistaken ideas as to biblical teaching the church has been deprived of her brightest and best workers; there Be It Resolved that we hereby proclaim to the world that it is the sense of this conference that woman were created mentally and morally the equal of man, and that it is the duty of woman to move out in the departments of life for women to advance to her true sphere in the world."

It was out of religious conviction that God loves all equally that three of our former Associate Conference Ministers along with leaders across the United Church of Christ worked tirelessly that women might have equal access to all settings of authorized ministry in our conference and denomination. And it is for that reason that over one half of the students preparing for ministry within the United Church of Christ today are women and are providing excellent leadership in all settings of our Church.

For God so loves the world.... The latest manifestation of this movement is today the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in all settings of our Church's life and leadership. Like the civil rights and women's liberation movements before it, it is controversial in our churches as well as in our culture. We are not of one mind about it, just as we were not at one time of one mind about the equality before God of African Americans and of women. But it is one more example of our deep seated conviction that God is still speaking and that "there is yet more truth and light to break forth from God's Holy Word."

As I prepare to conclude the stewardship of my role as the fourth Conference Minister of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, I pray that the implementation of the Vision Plan may begin to address some of the forces that over the past 12 years have caused our glass to be half full. But whatever God has in mind for the Indiana-Kentucky Conference and our 151 churches, let us continue to do what we do best and which has been a beacon of light for so many people. May we continue to help others to encounter the Stillspeaking God; may we continue to be a church of extravagant welcome; and may we continue to be an extension of God's love and inclusion for all of creation.

Wishing you grace, mercy and peace this day. Amen.