

## **Address to the 2009 Western PA Annual Conference Thomas J. Bickerton, Resident Bishop**

**To open my remarks to this Annual Conference I would like to quote from II Corinthians 8. Paul writes,**

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us. (II Corinthians 8:1-5)*

That test summarizes, in part, the feelings that well up within me when I think of the privilege I have of serving here in Western Pennsylvania. I truly believe that we, out of severe trial and unfortunate circumstances, continue to demonstrate our faithfulness to the Body of Christ called the church. What wells up within me is a rich generosity that continues to bless my heart. I, like Paul can testify that, in many ways, you are giving as much as you are able and even, at times, beyond your ability. This is demonstrated in the fact that after the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2009, we were one of only a handful of Annual Conferences that were reporting an increase in our giving to Mission Share. Earlier in the year we initiated an offer to reduce each church's Mission Share asking if they chose to do so. Our Treasurer reported each week the moving letters she received either from churches who declined the offer and decided to continue to demonstrate their faithfulness by 100% giving or from churches who accepted the offer and pledged to work as hard as they could to remain faithful to their obligation to be connectional church. Add to that the continued evidence of faithfulness you have demonstrated in disaster response, missions, and extra mile giving, and you have testimony of a tremendous outpouring of generosity for the ministry that is our here in Western Pennsylvania. Before Bill Jacka created needed storage space at the Conference Center, flood buckets were stacked just outside my office. The smell of Clorox would filter into my office on a daily basis. While I didn't like the smell I loved the reminder that Western Pennsylvanians are a kind and loving people who demonstrate their loyalty in many ways. Like the Corinthian Church, I believe we have more generosity and more ability to give than we realize. I commend you, than you for the inspiration you are to me, and urge you to continue to allow God to be your guide.

A person in the Obama administration said several months ago, "You should never let a good crisis pass you by." The economic crisis of our country has provided an opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ to demonstrate where our loyalty lies. If we continue to depend and lean upon the grace of God through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, we will continue to demonstrate more generosity than we could imagine. It follows directly with the old principle of tithing – give what God calls you to give and the blessings you receive in return outweigh any gift you gave or sacrifice you made.

### **State of the Church in Western PA**

As a cabinet and as a staff, we have begun to look more closely at what the statistics have to say to us about the State of the Church here in our Annual Conference. The cabinet has committed to itself to identifying congregations that are demonstrating

evidence of growth and vitality. In turn we are attempting to place our best leaders in those situations. Our staff has begun to monitor more closely the impact & interest that certain program initiatives generate. Our financial wing is producing reliable reports on our giving each month. Each of these initiatives help us to not only identify the places where we can celebrate faithful, effective and fruitful ministry but also target the places that need our concentration and assistance.

So what DO the statistics reveal to us? Statistics are numbers. But numbers represent people and people are the repositories of souls that need cared for, loved, and forgiven. They are souls that need the call to repentance and genuine acceptance into the Body of Christ.

In 2008, the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference had 2,353 baptisms and 2,512 Professions of Faith. This is clear evidence that disciples are indeed being formed and made. That's the good news. The bad news is that those numbers continue to decline each year. We had 74 fewer baptisms than the year before and 412 fewer professions of faith.

Even more grim are these statistics: Of our 866 local churches in the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, 329 of them had no baptisms. That is 38% of our congregations. Of our 866 local churches, 427 of them had no Professions of Faith. That is 49% of our congregations.

When it comes to Attendance and Membership, we continue to decline in both categories. Our membership dropped in 2008 by 1,850 and our attendance dropped by exactly 900.

But there is good news. Of our 866 churches, 266 of them showed a gain in membership. That is to say that 31% of the churches in Western Pennsylvania are growing. 275, or 32%, of our churches showed a gain in worship attendance.

The real celebration that I want to highlight in these categories is that for the first time in several years there is not an across-the-board decline taking place. In certain regions of our Annual Conference, there is evidence of hard work and faithfulness taking place.

Last year, three of our Districts experienced a gain in the number of baptisms. The Greensburg District had 16 more baptisms or a 5% growth, the Butler District had 24 more baptisms or a 9% growth, and the Pittsburgh District has 88 more baptisms or a growth over 28%.

In Professions of Faith the Indiana District showed a gain of 59 Professions of Faith in 2008. That is a 40% growth over last year.

And, for the first time in at least five years, we are showing positive trends in our attendance. Two of our Districts are showing a growth in attendance. Greensburg is up 121 or a growth of 1.5% and the Pittsburgh District is up 215 or a growth of 2.9%. These are good blocks upon which to build. If four of our Districts can show positive growth in the areas of Baptisms, Professions of Faith and Attendance, we should be able to add at least two more to those ranks this time next year.

## Celebrations

What do these statistics say to us? While we have some celebrations to highlight and some signs of faithfulness that we can use as building blocks for transformation, these statistics reveal that we have much work to do in order to turnaround our decline and being to re-build a vital denomination in this region for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe that we have laid a positive foundation for that transformation in the past five years in several ways:

- ❖ We have worked to create a new climate and attitude within our Annual Conference. I believe we are working out of a positive posture of possibility rather than a position of negativity and despair. We have worked hard to create a sense of *respect* for one another and increased the acknowledgement of our need on the presence of the Holy Spirit to be our guide.
  - We have established a very clear Mission, Vision and Core Values that are the foundation upon which to build every program, initiative and ministry.
  - Our Strategic Plan is being actively implemented and sprouts or needed ministries are beginning to break through the crust of our conference.
  - We have clearly defined what a Faithful, Effective, and Fruitful pastor is and fulfilled our disciplinary mandate to provide annual evaluations by the SPRC and the District Superintendent. (*highlight some of them*)
- ❖ We have begun to address the stark absence of continuing education opportunities within the boundaries of our Annual Conference and are once more providing places where we can learn and grow together. Later this week you will see the fruits of those who are laboring in this effort.
- ❖ Our Leadership Incubator process continues to grow and build a sense of community, respect, and mutual ministry among pastors and laity in each of our ten districts.
- ❖ We have provided the skills necessary for vital and relevant ministry to unfold in each of our local churches. NCD, healthy church workshops, Racism training, and poverty simulations have had a positive impact on how we approach church health, vitality, inclusiveness and awareness of the wider world.
- ❖ The cabinet has committed itself to doing better in appointing pastors to congregations which match their giftedness and need. We are using the same Faithful, Effective, and Fruitful criteria in the manner in which we make appointments in a disciplined and strategic approach. There is, no doubt, that the recent economic struggles have created challenges in appointment-making but we thank God for the opportunity to have each of our available pastors a place in which to serve.
- ❖ We have increased communication within our system and created a stronger sense of accountability to one another and to the Mission, Vision and Core Values of the Annual Conference.
- ❖ And we are attempting to let the structure help us to fulfill our mission rather than having the structure AS our mission.

## Prayer, Attention Needed

There are, however, some clear learnings from these statistics as well. There are some areas which desperately need our prayers and attention:

- ❖ Our staff and cabinet must continue to look at intentional ways that we focus our work on the ministry of the local church and continue to provide the resources and opportunities for growth that they need.
- ❖ It is clear from these statistics that the depth of the problem goes deeper though than cabinet and staff. It is evident that some of our congregations have decided to grow. They have made a conscious decision to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and feed the hungry. They have decided to avail themselves of the valuable resources we provide. They have decided to transform the world by making disciples and they have clearly decided to ignite and sustain a passionate spiritual connection with Christ among all people in their region. God is graciously granting pastors and congregations fruit who desire and work for fruit. I would say to congregations who don't fit this category: don't decide to decline and die. There are great resources at your fingertips and a hungry world around you. God is not through with us yet. Feed off of our Mission, Vision & Core Values and develop a strategic plan for ministry that will share the special gifts God has given you with the world.

### **Areas of Focus**

Many of you are aware of the fact that our denomination has embraced four distinct areas of ministry where we are focusing our attention and emphasis. Providentially, we had already embraced these four areas as a part of our "Believe Again" strategic plan before the General Conference affirmed them. In this report I must acknowledge with gratitude the amazing work that has been done in our "Believe Again" Implementation Team. This strategy has begun to be imbedded into who we are as an Annual Conference. Several have inquired when our next strategic plan might unfold. I truly believe that we need to work our current plan for another year to make sure that the Mission, Vision & Core Values of our Annual Conference become a firm part of our DNA and that the goals of the Areas of Focus from "Believe Again" and the General Church are well implemented. Once we evaluate the progress made in these areas over the next year it may be that at Annual Conference next year we will begin the process of identifying the next steps of our strategy for ministry here in Western Pennsylvania.

The four areas of focus provide for us a forum upon which to identify some of the additional areas of ministry we need to provide in order to create a more solidly positioned Annual Conference for growth. Let me illustrate.

1. **The First Area of Focus is DEVELOPING PRINCIPLED CHRISTIAN LEADERS FOR THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.** As I stated earlier, we have made great progress in developing and implementing the "Faithful, Effective, and Fruitful" model for clergy leadership. This, along with evaluations and continuing education development, provides a good model for accountability and covenant in the ministry we share together as clergy. There is, however, a serious need for us to target laity as a focal point for leadership development in the next year. While a Faithful, Effective and Fruitful standard has been established for our laity, there is a tremendous need to increase training, commitment, relationship, and calling among the laity of Western Pennsylvania. For that reason I am announcing that in the next several months I will be establishing a Bishop's Study Team on Lay Ministry to discuss and implement strategies for how we build the base of effective, confident, and committed laity in our Annual Conference. I also intend to pick up on an idea from one of my colleague bishops and for this

year a Laity Cabinet, based loosely on the model of the current cabinet, with the Conference Lay Leader and District Lay Leaders meeting with me once a quarter for conversation and strategic development of lay ministry opportunities in our Annual Conference. While we can celebrate good work in the development of a system of Faithful, Effective, and Fruitful clergy we must all acknowledge that our laity must be better trained, equipped, and challenged to come together in Christian love and go forth together to tell the story of God's redeeming grace and love.

- 2. The Second Area of Focus is CREATING NEW PLACES FOR NEW PEOPLE AND REVITALIZING EXISTING CONGREGATIONS.** Our new committee on Parish and Community Development has been working throughout the year to establish themselves in these two critical areas of our Annual Conference life and work. It is not easy doing simultaneous development of definitions and standards for revitalizing existing congregations AND thinking about creating new faith communities. Add to that the clear reality that while we have had some successes in New Church Starts over the last twenty years, the number of those successes have not been sufficient to meet the need which exists in our region. The disappointments and setbacks that previous committees have experienced continue to cloud our vision of a new day when we aggressively and creatively begin to systematically and consistently establish new churches. The statistics across the country are confirming of the reality that most Annual Conferences which are growing numerically are Annual Conferences which have successfully adopted and implemented New Church Starts strategic plans which are funded by those Annual Conferences and supported by local congregations who, in many situations, parent those new churches. For that reason I am calling the Cabinet and the Parish and Community Development Committee to commit themselves to a series of a joint meetings throughout this next year to firmly develop a comprehensive strategic plan for New Church Starts with clearly identified places where those starts need to be engaged. Likewise, I would ask this joint group to develop a strategic listing of places where we can approach congregations and to talk with other congregations about specific redevelopment possibilities. I would ask that this joint group work with CFA to develop more intentional ways that our budget can embrace this ministry and report their findings and plans to the 2010 Annual Conference. We will not turn around this Annual Conference until we get serious about starting new churches and providing opportunities for revitalizing existing churches that are not afraid to change here within Western Pennsylvania.
- 3. The Third Area of Focus is ENGAGING IN MINISTRY WITH THE POOR.** There is enormous potential which exists in every congregation to identify and actively engage our congregations in ministries with the poor. Our "Believe Again" Poverty Team has done good work in providing Poverty Simulation events which have done great work among the participants in creating a sensitivity for the plight and victimization of the poor. Yet, we need to expand our focus in this area. More people need to become aware of the poor who live in each of our communities and more of our churches need to explore active ways of engaging in ministry with the poor throughout this region, especially in light of the economic conditions we are facing. There is a

piece of legislation we will be considering this week that identifies the need to identify six existing mission projects located in regions of our Annual Conference that can be marketed and promoted so that needed resources can be generated to support the ministries they provide to the poor. Likewise, today I am asking each congregation to develop a plan for engaging in ministry with the poor in your own community with a full report and action plan being given at this year's Charge Conference. Commit yourself to doing something good for the poor between now and Charge Conference so that your report and plan has teeth in it. The poor are all around us and with the advent of casinos and other arenas of gambling emerging all around us, we can be guaranteed that the poor will only grow in numbers. Each of our local churches are mission outposts which can become gathering points for all of God's children, especially those who need a helping hand of grace and love.

- 4. The Fourth Area of Focus is COMBATTING THE KILLER DISEASE OF POVERTY BY IMPROVING HEALTH GLOBALLY.** Most of you are, no doubt, aware that I have been engaged as the leader of this area of focus for the denomination. The special emphasis in this area of focus is our ongoing work to prevent and eventually eradicate malaria. Building upon the success of the "Nothing but Nets" campaign, we are now seeking to cast a wider net. Our goal is to continue our quest to blanket all of sub-Saharan Africa with insecticide treated mosquito nets. But the Global Health Initiative goes much deeper. We are actively working to strengthen our existing infrastructure of hospitals and clinics throughout Africa and provide training and resources for traditional birth attendants and others who work directly in the remote areas where people live. This work involves an active engagement with people on the continent of Africa on all levels of government, secular agency and ecumenical efforts with denominations. It's a bed net plus campaign that is looking not only at nets and infrastructure but also the critical issues of safe water, sanitation, and medical follow-up.

### **Zimbabwe Partnership**

As many of you know, at this session of Annual Conference we will be considering a new partner-to partner relationship with the country of Zimbabwe. This would be a true partnership that would involve not only Western Pennsylvanians on the continent of Africa through work teams, training sessions, and net distributions, it would also involve Zimbabwe becoming engaged in our lives through training in church growth, leadership development, and new church starts. This partnership would make Western Pennsylvania a key player in the development of this area of focus and would potentially give a new level of life and involvement for many of people across this conference. In order to make this a reality, we will need to work consistently with a team of staff and volunteers to market the partnership across the conference, tell the story of this ministry opportunity, solicit and raise funds for the campaign, and be a bridge between the actual ministry that is unfolding on the continent and the story that is told among our people.

In addition to Zimbabwe, we have an immediate need to raise 1.5 million dollars to blanket the country of Sierra Leone by year's end. Special offerings and immediate appeals are being made across the denomination this month in order to quickly raise money and meet the goal so that this distribution can happen by year's end. That

offering will be taken Saturday night here at Annual Conference. It gives us yet another opportunity to show our true spirit of commitment and generosity to the whole church.

Finally, I need to personally ask for the active involvement of this Annual Conference, my Annual Conference, as we unfold the Global Health Initiative Campaign across the denomination in an effort to raise \$75 million dollars to make the world a healthier place for all God's children. Nearly \$9 million has already been raised. Frankly, I cannot do my work across the denomination effectively if I cannot count on the support and engagement of my own Annual Conference in this effort. I need you and, more than that, the denomination needs you to step up and show forth our great potential to become a difference-maker on the world scene through the Global Health Initiative. I am privileged to do this work and will be blessed even more as we together lead our church in this initiative.

5. When the "Believe Again" plan for ministry was approved two years ago, we embraced a fifth area of focus for this Annual Conference. This was a commitment to work tirelessly to combat and lessen the damaging effects of racism on a significant segment of God's creation. Our Racism team has done tremendous work so far in providing opportunities for sensitivity and training. This work and exposure needs to continue as we attempt to filter this work into every pew of every church in our Annual Conference and then from the pew into all the places where we work, play, and interact with the wider world. This work will not end any time soon as the need continues to be felt. I urge us to not grow weary in this area but remain committed to combating racism with the gospel of Jesus Christ that will settle for nothing less than a posture of doing good, doing no harm and staying in love with God as we reach out to love all of God's children consistently and effectively.

The foundation continues to be laid for a solid ministry here in Western Pennsylvania based on our commitment to make disciples, ignite and sustain a passionate spiritual connection, and love one another. Understand me clearly, it is only a foundation. There is much more to do in order to turnaround a declining denomination and position itself for growth and vitality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To grow once again we need a solid foundation, one that will not easily or quickly crumble. That foundation must be fortified with the constant prayers of our people and the hard work of our leaders. That is my hope. But it is not a false hope for we have demonstrated repeatedly that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

I started with that passage of scripture and highlighted the reality that out of the handicaps that beset us, great generosity and potential for ministry emerges. That is the hallmark of being a Western Pennsylvanian – a people who, when the odds stack up against us, rise to their highest level of productivity and potential. This is where we are as a denomination. Our backs are up against the wall. The reality of our decline is staring us in the face. The economic conditions are not conducive to providing the resources necessary to get the job done. Yet, with this undeniable sense of determination, we move forward to bring *"bring to completion this act of grace."* I count it the joy of my life and ministry to have the chance to be in ministry with and for you as your bishop. I love you. I'm proud of you. And I pledge to work with you to transform this place so that we can indeed "ignite and sustain a passionate spiritual connection with Christ among all people in Western Pennsylvania." To paraphrase the Apostle Paul:

*I want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of (Western Pennsylvania); for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us. (II Corinthians 8: 1-5)*

May it be so as we work to be the Body of Christ in all that we do! May it be so. Amen.