

State of the Church Address

Western PA Annual Conference 2010

Thomas J. Bickerton, Resident Bishop

- I. As I stand in front of you this afternoon it is hard for me to believe that Sally, the boys and I are completing our sixth year with you. The time has passed so quickly, forging many wonderful memories within us. Standing before you today I am as nervous as I was the first time and as much in awe as I was in 2004. The experience of serving in a place that I love is as wonderful a blessing as I have ever experienced in my life. And so, as I begin my remarks this year, I wish to first and foremost say thank you to God for the wonderful blessing of this place and thank you to each one of you and to all the people of our churches for allowing the spirit of Christ to work in and through you to be such a wonderful blessing and inspiration to me.

- II. I didn't say it wasn't a challenge for we have had to navigate our way through some very treacherous waters and we continue to do so as we work to bring vitality to our churches, vision to our people, and Christ to the world.

- III. Last year during this address I announced to you that I would be forming two laity groups for conversation about the future of the church. The first group was a Laity Cabinet – representatives

from each district who sit in a configuration similar to the cabinet for conversation and direction. During our time together we engaged a “reverse mentor” system whereby we asked every participant to find a mentor who represented the younger generation who could mentor them, and us, in understanding the emerging church and the challenge of an established denomination meeting the spiritual needs of an emerging generation. We have named those “reverse mentors” our experts for they know something that many of us are struggling to embrace. Like many of us joked years ago about our parents not being able to program their VCRs we have had to come to the realization that many of us in leadership many not be able to program the church for 21st century ministry. We need help and we have been seeking it from those who are most engaged in and aware of the changing dynamics and needs in the culture around us. I would encourage each of you to follow suit with the Laity Cabinet and find a “reverse mentor” to teach and shepherd you into an expanded awareness of the need for Deep Change in the church that we love.

- IV. The other group formed in the last year was a Laity Study Team to seriously examine the need for the development of lay leadership in our Annual Conference and among our churches. I must confess that I entered those meetings with a preconceived notion that we would try to solve the church’s problems with yet another program. Yet,

not once did the conversation turn toward a program or an event. This group of laity clearly identified that there are no canned programs that will save us or no event that will all of a sudden develop emerging leaders. This group clearly identified that the clear need for leadership development and a deepened spiritual walk with God must be stimulated through a deepened relationship with one another than is based on a renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. That group emerged with a clear call for a revival of the spirit within us.

We can easily acknowledge that time are tough and challenging for us here in Western Pennsylvania. It doesn't take long for a conversation to turn in the direction of identifying all that is wrong and all that is hard about our life here. But acknowledgement of the problem and the struggle is only a small part of the answer. A call for a deepened walk with Christ and an uncompromising witness for Christ in the midst of the struggle is absolutely essential.

Earlier in the day I shared in the quad a sermon entitled "You've Got to Be One to Make One." This sermon was a recognition that a prerequisite to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is that we establish, renew, re-visit and revive our own relationship with Christ. This is a call for a deeper faith within each one of us – one that calls upon the name of the Lord

regularly through the “means of grace” – one that never shys away from “doing good, doing no harm, and staying constantly in love with God” – one that believes that God is with us and will indeed see us through.

Are their mistakes made along the way? Yes. But do we believe that God will use all of us – mistakes and marvels – to bless us and bless the world in God’s name? This revival of faith is a key to unlock the door of our future together.

V. There is no doubt that our actions over the past year have born witness to our need but also to our blessing.

a. Earlier this year the world was shaken by the earthquake in Haiti. Friends we have worked with died and lives were forever changed due to the devastation in that place. Yet, here in WPA, you responded. Over \$500,000 in cash and another \$500,000 in health kits were given to this relief effort. We rank 3rd in the nation in giving to our United Methodist Committee on Relief and continue to demonstrate that when a need is felt, we will rally and respond.

b. For the fifth year in a row, our giving in this Annual Conference has increased. Our mission share contributions have reached an all-time high with some amazing stories of faithfulness being told by many of our local churches. Small churches struggling to find their way have

responded with faithfulness to the connection. Large churches bearing an increased weight of responsibility have stepped up and been faithful. Even today, six months into 2010, we can say to you that our giving is higher now than it was this time last year. While we are still not at the payout level that I would desire, progress IS being made.

- c. And, we continue to make disciples in this place. I could spend much time talking to you about where this is not happening – churches that are more concerned about their own well-being than the community around them or places where there hasn't been a baptism or a profession of faith in years. But let's today look at the work that IS being done.
 - i. In 2009, there were 2,573 professions of faith made in our 863 local churches.
 - ii. There were 1, 291 persons who also joined our churches on transfer.
 - iii. In our 863 local churches in 2009 there were 2, 156 persons who were baptized.
 - iv. In 2009, 255 of our churches saw a gain in weekly attendance and 226 saw a gain in membership.

Disciples ARE being made and I celebrate today the hard work and faithfulness of so many of our people. I especially applaud the leaders, both lay and clergy, who are committed to our confirmation classes. Once again this year I sat

on the floor of my office with nearly 1,000 confirmands who came to be a part of the Bishop's Confirmation Tours. This continues to be one of the most meaningful events in my ministry as I field every conceivable question from the inquiring minds of these teenagers. They give me life, keep me fresh, and remind me that the church is doing vital work to introduce young people to the heart of God and the love of Jesus Christ.

VI. As I stated earlier, while the blessings are abundant, we must recognize that the challenges we face are formidable. Throughout the year we have heard two distinct cries from you:

First, you have said that it's getting harder and harder to meet your obligations. While this is more difficult for some churches than others, we have come to understand the depth of the concern very clearly. For that reason you will notice that we are bringing before you this week a budget that is lower than the year before. While it may not represent as deep a cut as some would want it does begin an incremental process of examination and possible reduction in subsequent years as well. I am committed to doing the analysis necessary to determine how we can, in effect, do more with less. That is not without its struggles. Every budget consists of a series of hopes and dreams for particular areas of our ministry. A smaller budget means that that some of those dreams have to be re-

evaluated. I hope that you agree that we should not have a budget that is only maintenance in its orientation. We need to be visionary and bold but realistic as well.

The second thing we have heard very clearly is that it is becoming more difficult to make, form, and nurture disciples. It is critical, in response to this concern that we continue to creatively focus on our Five Areas of Focus. I truly believe that focusing on Leadership Development, New Places for New People, Poverty, Global Health, and Racism will stimulate the kinds of conversations and creativity that will open the door to a deeper level of commitment and discipleship. The implementation of these areas continues to be found in the goals that have been established in our “Believe Again” plan for ministry.

In addition, I believe that we in leadership need to make a commitment to you to do a better job of providing leadership, connection and resources as you work on the front lines of making, sustaining, and nurturing disciples on the journey.

VII. As we search for answers in the midst of challenging times, there is something required of each of us. Ultimately the issues we face today are spiritual issues. Our call in the midst of the struggle is to search for and earnestly desire a revival of our spirits that will cause us to humbly fall in love with

Jesus once more and earnestly desire the inspiration from God alone that will cause us to fall in love with our neighbors – all of them.

VIII. When I was in the Democratic Republic of Congo earlier this spring I witnessed poverty on a scale that I had never seen before. Our party traveled across that country under some of the most grueling conditions I had ever witnessed. In Kamina, we distributed 15,000 mosquito nets to a town of 450,000 people. In a public address to thousands of Congolese people, I witnessed a man standing three rows deep in the crowd. It was as if he were the only way talking. I could hear him say repeatedly, “I’ll buy one. I’ll buy one.” We didn’t have any more to give.

Yet, I watched too as people shared their faith as they distributed nets and invited people to church with each net hung. It wasn’t “Nothing but Nets, everything but Jesus” as I have heard some cynically describe, but the gospel being actively integrated into social outreach.

That Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching in a church that seated 300 but housed that day 700. What I witnessed, I had seen before – in the midst of stark poverty, killer diseases, and little hope, there was a joy in worship that was undeniable. It was clear that the people were falling in love with Jesus that day as 55 professions of faith took place

that day, many of whom had just gotten a net a few days before. Joy in the midst of nothingness truly humbles me and opens the door to a hope that I continue to maintain here at home.

I believe that we can sing the song of Joy right here in Western Pennsylvania. Compared to a person from Congo, we live in great abundance. We can and should strive earnestly to sing a song of joy every time we recognize the awesome grace of God that has given this opportunity to live and serve.

I have sincere hopes that our Zimbabwe partnership will open the doorway for us to continually be visited with this pure joy and thanksgiving. I pray for it every day the doors of the church are open – that we can see the possibility that every time we worship and every time we reach out we have an opportunity to not only fall in love with God once more but bear such joy that others will do the same.

Zamuranza – it's all about you God. It's all about you. Thank you.

You know, it IS all about God. Our ministry, whether in the local church or throughout the Annual Conference, is called to be an outgrowth of our deep love for God and a response to our call to love one another.

I love what I do because it gives me that chance – to love God in my service and to love you as we work together toward Christ-like holiness.