

Episcopal Address
June 20, 2014

May the grace and blessings from our Lord be with you.

Before I came to Hampton, I had the following conversation with the staff in my office: Would it be an impossible dream to have our Annual Conference so filled with excitement and blessings that everyone will want to come to Annual Conference? Would it be impossible to have a day when there will be serious competition in the election of lay members of Annual Conference because everyone who attends Annual Conference experiences God's presence and blessings? Would this be an impossible hope and dream?

I think this can be possible by the grace of God. I know I cannot provide this precious experience, but our Lord can. So my prayer has been, "Lord, you do it!" "Lord, you do it!" This has been my prayer for our Annual Conference this year. I am very excited about what our Lord will do within and among us during our gathering, beginning today.

Bishop Ray Chamberlain, Conference Lay Leader Warren Harper and members of the Virginia Annual Conference, this afternoon I am standing here with deep gratitude to our God and to all of you. It has truly been an honor and privilege to serve this great conference another year. By the grace of God and your prayers and support, Kiok and I had truly a blessed year.

In my episcopal address last year, I shared with you the four areas of focus in my ministry as your Bishop: leading All Things New-Equipping Vital Congregations; strengthening the spiritual foundation of our mission and ministries; developing new faith communities; and nurturing the culture of cooperation and coordination.

It is my great joy to report to you that we are making progresses in all four of these areas. I thank our Lord that the Virginia Annual Conference is moving forward.

I

(1) First, All Things New- Equipping Vital Congregation (ATN-EVC) continued to be a strategic plan to change the culture of the Virginia Annual Conference from maintenance to fruitfulness and to increase the number of vital congregations. When I began my ministry as Bishop, the Steering Team was already organized for the systemic implementation of this initiative. I discerned that we did not need another new initiative and decided to utilize this steering team. We met throughout the conference year and responded to the challenges, monitored progress and provided directions for other sub teams.

- The Prayer Team continued to meet monthly and prayed for the renewal and revival of our churches.

- The Data Automation Team accomplished their task, and the conference website has been updated.

- The Discipleship Circle Design Team developed the model that consists of clergy and laity and passed the baton to the Implementation Team. Two beta groups were formed and have begun their journey.

- To transform our clergy leadership, the Virginia Clergy Leadership Program was created and 20 clergy in the first cohort began their 18 month journey last February and finished two 3 day sessions. I am very pleased with this new clergy leadership program and have a great expectation about the future ministries of these clergy.

- Last October thirty-nine clergy joined the Pilgrimage for Spiritual Renewal to Korea, and another trip is scheduled in October this year.

- The cabinet continued to work to improve our appointment making process. We tried hard to discern the guidance of the Lord in this process and to match the missional needs of the church with the gifts and graces of the pastor. During our cabinet retreat in July, we will evaluate this process one more time and work to find a better way, if there is any.

(2) The second focus area has been strengthening the spiritual foundation of our mission and ministries. I truly want and pray that ATN-EVC will be more than a reactive plan to save our denomination. I want to upgrade or transform this initiative to be a movement to restore a biblical, authentic and vital church. That is the reason I have said wherever I go, “No Spiritual Vitality, No Vital Congregation.” We worked hard to spread the culture of prayer this conference year and have made significant progress in this area:

- After our last Annual Conference with its theme of “Lord, Teach us to Pray,” the Prayer Convocation Team and cabinet developed the Covenant for Spiritual Discipline and invited the churches to join and become a prayer covenant congregation. In my last episcopal address, I shared with you my hope that at least 10 % of our clergy and local churches would commit to the practice of one hour daily for spiritual disciplines. Today I report to you that more than 200 congregations responded to this invitation to spiritual discipline and signed to become a Prayer Covenant Congregation. Thanks be to God and to all of you.
- We had the 2nd Bishop’s Convocation on Prayer on March 29 this year. About 400 people attended and prayed together at this gathering.
- As a follow up to the Prayer Convocation, the Board of Discipleship designed 3 regional gatherings and will provide training on prayer.
- This year I set May 25th as a conference-wide Day of Prayer for the renewal and revival of the churches.
- In every meeting of our boards and agencies, we are encouraging members to spend more time for devotion and to seek the will of the Lord in making decisions.

(3) The third focus area of my ministry has been developing new faith communities:

- During this conference year two new faith communities started: Ashburn Korean on the Arlington District and Aldersgate at Fort Belvoir on the Alexandria District. Since we adopted “All Things New” in 2008, 26 new faith communities have started and their average worship attendance this year is 1,829, which has increased by 98 persons this year (up from 1,731). The number of baptisms in these faith communities in 2014 is 88.

- One of the key needs in developing new faith communities is securing effective clergy leadership. To develop the leadership for new faith communities, last fall we hosted a New Church Leadership Institute again and provided a training opportunity for clergy to inventory their gifts for ministry and to discern their calling. Thirty pastors enrolled and took part in this training event last year, and so far 120 pastors got this training.

(4) The fourth area has been nurturing a culture of cooperation and coordination among our conference boards and agencies.

- Since we adopted a new mission statement for our annual conference at the last Annual Conference, the Common Table has been restructured, and we are working hard to coordinate our ministries.

- One of the most significant accomplishments in this area is the work of the Bishop's Long-Term Financial Strategy Advisory Task Force. Under the leadership of Ms. Betty Forbes, representatives of the cabinet, Board of Ordained Ministry, the Board of Pensions, the Council on Finance and Administration and the Board of Laity have met regularly to review the financial situation of our conference and prepare the recommendations for the future. I am deeply grateful to the members of this task force for their dedication and wisdom.

II

Thinking of the progress we have made in these areas during this conference year, we cannot but give thanks to our God and to all of you. However, this is just a beginning. We still have a long way to go. Here I would like speak about four important things we are going to start during this coming conference year.

(1) First, for a systemic implementation of ATN-EVC, we will work to expand the number of Discipleship Circles this year. According to EVC system, more than 450 churches are putting their vital signs regularly (worship attendance, number of profession of faith, number of small groups, number of people engaged in mission and the amount of giving for mission). How can we utilize this statistical data for revitalizing our churches?

We discerned that Discipleship Circles would be the answer to this question. In Discipleship Circle clergy and laity will get together and grow in Christ first and then tackle the vital signs of our churches. This effort is rooted in the proud legacy of our Methodist movement. You will learn more about Discipleship Circles in the brochure and from the Steering Team's report. We started two beta Discipleship Circles this year. After an evaluation of these two groups' journeys, we will expand to the districts. Please pray for this plan and respond to the invitation to join a Discipleship Circle.

The cabinet will also study and learn more about congregational intervention during our retreat next month. I think we need more intentional efforts based upon prayerful discernment to help the churches fully develop their potential and to increase the number of vital congregations.

(2) Secondly, tomorrow morning Common Table will present the recommendation on "Imagine no Malaria." This quadrennium the United Methodist Church has been working to raise 75 million dollars to fight malaria. Because of our previous capital campaign for "All Things New," I told the leaders of this campaign that the Virginia Conference needed a break from participating in this campaign.

Now, I have discerned that the time had come for us to take part in this initiative. Our approach for this initiative will have some unique perspectives:

1) I proposed this initiative to the Common Table as a way of spiritual discipline. One of characteristics of our Methodist movement is a vital balance. We are proud of the balance between God's grace and human responsibility, individual holiness and social holiness, a warm heart and a cool head and knowledge and vital piety. In our spiritual disciplines we also need a balance between acts of piety and acts of mercy. I have emphasized the act of piety for two years. Now, the time has come for us to emphasize the acts of mercy. I challenge you to take this initiative as a spiritual discipline, an act of mercy. Please pray first before you respond to this episcopal initiative.

2) In this effort, we will not set a monetary goal. But we want to set these two goals: first, we envision that every church in our conference will join this initiative; second, we hope to touch more than 100, 000 lives through our effort. We will hear more about this initiative tomorrow morning when Common Table presents its recommendations.

3) We will also ask young adults, youth and children to lead this initiative. They are not only our future, but our present as well. We want them to be energized by this initiative and learn the importance of mission of saving human lives and having an impact on transforming the world.

(3) The third important plan for this coming conference year will be to support starting three new faith communities: Floris UMC at Reston on the Arlington District, Ignite UMC on the Old Dominion Campus and Community on the Elizabeth River District and People United in Christ UMC on the Staunton District. These new faith communities will be on the frontline in reaching out to new people for the Kingdom of God.

In addition to starting three new faith communities, the Church Development Team will continue to work with Dr. Lovett Weems to identify the geographic areas where we should concentrate our efforts over the next 5 years in light of the anticipated growth of the population. This study will help the conference to develop more intentional plans in starting new faith communities.

(4) Fourthly, as the 2016 General Conference approaches, the entire United Methodist Church will face many challenges and difficult situations over human sexuality issues. Because of my limited tenure, this issue was not on my plate at first. I wanted to spend more time on our mission and revitalizing the churches. But after listening to the suggestion from the members of the Committee on Episcopacy, I have changed my mind. I have requested Common Table to develop a plan for a conference-wide conversation on this issue coming conference year.

As most of you are aware, a group of pastors have proposed an amicable separation in the United Methodist Church because some of the differences among us are too serious and too difficult to reconcile and live together. Another group of pastors and theologians have proposed a way for us to stay together by giving the authority to decide such issues to local churches or to annual conferences.

It is clear that we will face a storm soon. If we do not prepare ourselves for this storm, the future our churches face will be a difficult and troubled one. This is a time when we truly need to pray and to seek the guidance of our Lord. If our spiritual life is not deep enough to discern and obey the will of our Lord on this issue, we will easily fall into a political battle.

I want the Virginia Conference to pray for the future of our United Methodist Church very seriously. One of the best preparations we can make in discerning God's will is to empty ourselves before God. Even though I may not like a particular way, I will follow that way if we discern together that this may be what our Lord wants. This is the attitude and prayer that will help us to discern God's will on this issue. I hope our conference-wide conversation will help us to be more open to God and to God's truth and guidance for us.

III

This year we have gathered here praying for a renewal of our churches by the Spirit. The renewal of the church is not a human creation. It is more than implementing another program. It is God's grace and gift for the church. It is a movement led by the Holy Spirit to restore a biblical, authentic and vital church. In church history, renewal movements always begin with the renewal of an individual or a group of people.

In 1903 when Dr. R. A. Hardie was touched by the Holy Spirit during the missionary's retreat in Korea, he repented of his pride and of his ineffective ministry and experienced God's transforming grace. This became the beginning

of the Great Awakening in Korea. The revival movement spread to the churches in Korea like a wild fire.

Today we desperately need a renewal and revival of the UMC. Our Lord is the same yesterday and today and forever. So, I am very excited about what God will do among us during this conference. Let us pray to God, "Lord, renew me first." In closing, I would like to invite you to join me in singing this hymn prayerfully three times. When we sing it the third time, let us change the word "me" to "us."

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.