

ment, and leadership that is self-enforcing and not hierarchically driven. We need to work creating a culture where marginal ministerial functioning is not good enough. It is strange, isn't it, that accountability among clergy is often a dirty word despite the fact that it is one of the founding principles of Methodism.

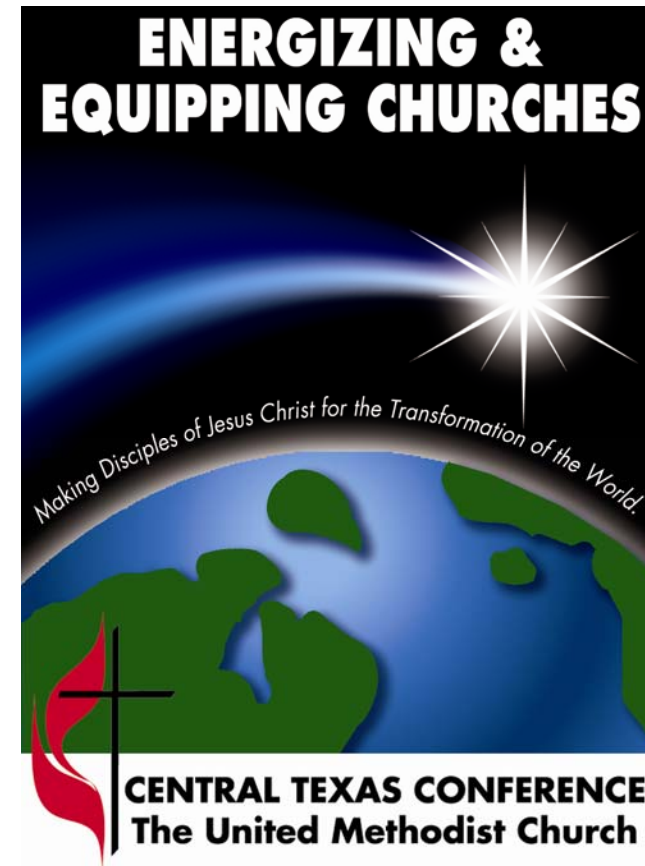
Laity, the same can be said to you. The days of passively waiting around for the clergy to do ministry are over. We need to stop measuring churches by their seating capacity and start holding them (you the laity, and clergy) accountable for your sending capacity. I think we need to take a hard look at scrapping the yearly preference form. Instead we need to work together on how we help pastors be faithful and fruitful where there are. Moves will still happen. There will still be places where moves take place that people don't want. But instead of failing to give honest feedback and shuffling problems, we need churches and lay leadership that are committed to the mission and committed to helping their pastor have a fruitful ministry. The mission has to take center stage over power struggles and being taken care of. If you look at growing churches (in both mission and membership) this is already happening.

Together we need to examine how the church can be more faithful and fruitful. Take the evangelism side of the equation: 41% of our churches had no professions of faith. That includes one with over 1,200 members. That is not acceptable. Take the missional side: love, justice and mercy. The question for all of us should be not are you involved in mission outreach and service to the last, least and lost but where are you involved in mission outreach and service to the last, least and lost. We are the "called-out" ones. That is what church, *ecclesia*, means. It is not acceptable to just take care of our own.

When I went on my first retreat with the Cabinet, I felt the Holy Spirit in the room. They, the Cabinet, came up with what I call the big three: 1) Be Holy Spirit led, 2) Witness to the resurrection of Christ and 3) Stay on message. That is a pretty good Big Three. Bishop Bruce Ough says that we need to "allow the Holy Spirit to determine both our course and our cadence." (Bishop Bruce Ough, March, 2007, Bishop's Convocation, Mt. Wesley, Kerrville, Texas) I think the Holy Spirit is leading us and I am proud, pleased and honored to share with you in this ministry.

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)

The Episcopal Address *Bishop J. Michael Lowry* © *June 8, 2009*



Oh my friends, it is so good to be here! Jolynn and I want to thank you for your gracious reception of us. I want to express my appreciation to Bishop and Mrs. Chamness for their exemplary kindness and help in our transition. I wish also to express my deep gratitude to Bliss Dodd and the entire Committee on the Episcopacy for the numerous ways in which they have cared for us. Conference lay leadership, the Cabinet and so many of you have been tremendous in your embrace of us and sharing the Way of Christ with us. And most of all, I thank the churches of the Central Texas Conference for the joy of visiting and sharing with you in ministry. You are great! And a great blessing to us and many!



I have now been in all of our churches (except for 3, for which I showed up but others didn't). It has been tremendously insightful, exciting and often inspiring. Allow me one example which I have already shared in the Temple and Brownwood Districts.

Judy didn't get it. She really didn't. She was supposed to go out and provide hospice care until the church could be closed. When Rankin Koch, the Temple District Superintendent, asked her to go over and take care of Granger United Methodist Church, his aspirations were justifiably limited. He hoped simply to keep the church open long enough to bury the two matriarchs left. That was their request. In fact, the community of Granger thought the church had closed after splitting from the Bartlett-Granger Charge in March, 2007. The only reason given to keep it open with its average attendance of 2 - 3 was so that the funeral of the matriarchs could be held there. The problem was that Judy Gotcher, the Lay Supply Pastor sent there by Rankin, didn't follow the script.

She cooked up a community ecumenical worship service which demonstrated the continued witness of the church. Then the Lord "laid a mission upon our hearts of starting a Community Food Bank for residents of Granger and Granger I.S.D. Having a mustard seed of faith with 13 members now, the Granger I.S.D., every organization in the community, all the churches, businesses, and everyone we knew were contacted. God continued to open each door with amazing results. Even our dilapidated sidewalks, an accident waiting to happen, were torn up, hauled away, and dirt and loam brought in by volunteers from the City. The Food Bank doors opened in November 2008 with a full pantry and money in the bank to keep it going. It has served 25 families and currently is open the third Thursday of every month for 4 hours. With our church the founder and distributor, held in our fellowship hall, the Food Bank is supported by the community. A Candlelight Service was held in December 2008. Our church was filled by representatives of all six churches in Granger and 2 churches from Holland. Granger UMC is alive. God's light continues to shine and our work has only begun." (Judy Gotcher, Pastor, Granger UMC, email February 17, 2009) They have new converts and adult baptisms. On my Episcopal shepherd visit, I was greeted by people new to the Lord and excited to tell me about what God was doing through their church, Christ's church.

I am fascinated with the witness of Granger UMC for a number of reasons. First, simply put, the story of Granger UMC is a work of the Holy Spirit. It should bring all of us to our knees. We don't know how it will come out. What we do know is that God is at work. Second, it is a story of the faith triumphant beyond any of our nascent planning, best growth techniques or clever concoctions. It is a tale of faithfulness on the part of half a handful of people. Third, it is epic of recombining - of rediscovering - the heart of Christianity and especially the heart of the Wesleyan branch of the Church Universal. What we have here is the absolute reintegration of genuine evangelism and true mission involvement in love, justice and mercy. People are converted, lives are transformed, and disciples are in the making. In the process of all this, the community and (at least that little corner of) the world is being transformed.

This is being repeated in many congregations across our conference. In every district there are vibrant communities of faith of all sizes, types and stripes. This Conference has an enviable record of membership growth. I discovered great things happening. I also encountered some

It is a tale of faithfulness on the part of half a handful of people.

We need to restructure with an eye to less institutionalism and more mission-driven ministry around the four focus areas. The goal is to do so without adding to the ministry apportionment dollar. (Please don't misunderstand me. Pension payments alone – overhead dollars, if you will – will increase our apportionments next year. We need to radically re-examine how we use our financial resources to energize and equip. By way of example, just follow the four focus areas: 1) Developing leaders: How do we reinforce youth and campus ministry to develop the next generation of principle-centered Christian leaders? How do we develop our existing leadership both lay and clergy? 2) Creating places for new people involves shifting resources (spiritual, intellectual and financial) into new church development and transforming existing congregations. It means not spending money trying to hang on to the past. 3) Eliminating poverty with the poor will engage us on multiple levels. We are already doing superb work in this area. How do we take what is clearly excellent and raise it to the next level? 4) Improving health globally has engaged us in *Nothing But Nets* in a big way. How do we structure in a way that continues the marvelous work this Conference has been doing long before I got here?

I don't know the answer to all these questions, but I believe we need to take a fresh look at how we structure for the mission to make disciples for the transformation of the world. Structures don't save us. Christ Jesus does that. Structures are vehicles, tools that can energize and equip local churches. That is our business as a Conference. Things like the number of Districts, the configuration of the conference staff, the use and deployment of District Superintendents, the focus and functions of Wesley Foundations and United Campus Fellowships, all this and more needs to be on the table with an eye toward, passion for, and ardent commitment to energizing and equipping local churches to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world.

Clergy, if we are going to transition into the church of tomorrow, together we have to look at how we step up to the next level of faithfulness and fruitfulness. The clergy union has got to change at least as much as the UAW (United Auto Workers) are. (A close friend and treasured advisor urged me not to say this but the analogy is too apt to ignore.) Please do hear this with the grace I intend it. I am a part of that union; a beneficiary. We have struggled hard for human dignity, adequate pay, and fair treatment. These are good things, but they are not the end mission. A part of the danger in our structure, with no blame on anyone, is that health insurance and pensions are threatening to become our missional priorities. I know that is not your intent, nor is it mine. (Just like the UAW, we need to relate differently to each other and our shared mission. It is worth noting that the UAW is now leading the effort to save and reconfigure General Motors.)

We need to be a group that returns chastened to prayer and spiritual formation for ourselves as well as our flocks. Bishop Bruce Ough says, "The leaders of the God movement are those who are ready to abandon their preferences and embrace God's purposes." (Bishop Bruce Ough, March, 2007, Bishop's Convocation, Mt. Wesley, Kerrville, Texas) We need to rediscover real peer accountability. What might this look like? It might entail a natural doubling of peer prayer groups, study groups and learning communities that hold each other naturally accountable without any legislation by the Board of Ordained Ministry or Cabinet action. Peer accountability means we establish a culture among us of improvement and growth spiritually, in skill develop-

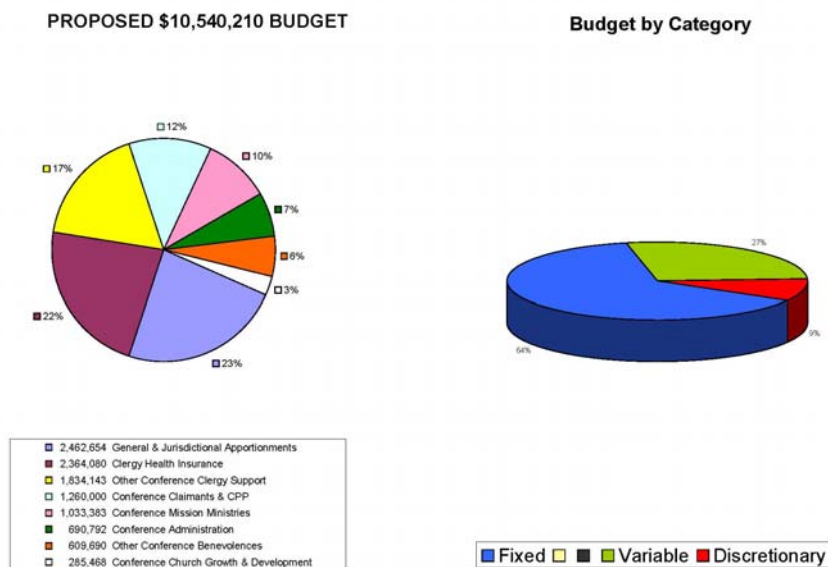
was made to serve the church not the church the structure.

In a real sense I think this is the direction we have been moving in the last few years as a Conference. I have deep appreciation for the leadership Bishop Chamness offered and the work of Dr. Doyle Allen in mission leadership along with Dr. Allen Goss in church development. With others, they have been leading us in this direction. We'll miss their insight and effort. Recent conference actions such as the clergy effectiveness legislation and the congregational effectiveness legislation are concrete testimony of this intention. Now it is time to accelerate that movement.

Accordingly, with the able assistance of both the Committee on the Episcopacy and the Conference Personnel Committee, the Executive Ministry Team of the Conference will be bringing a proposal to establish a Task Force on Conference restructuring in which everything is on the table. Structure should reflect the vision and mission. We need to take the next step in structuring to energize and equip local churches (not just maintain the institution).

If you follow change gurus like John Kotter (co-author of [Our Iceberg is Melting](#)), they say never waste a good crisis. Well, we are in an economic crisis. Let's not waste it. Economically we are going to be hit even harder by increased pension costs that are coming on line next year. We've already reduced spending for mission and ministry. It is time to take a hard fresh look at how we are spending our apportionment dollars in mission and ministry.

A little bit of education first; increasingly pensions and health insurance are driving the economics of local churches and the Conference. The following graphs note our budget breakdown. 64% of our budget is in fixed expenses. Health insurance is about 1/5 of conference budget. The Conference pays half of the health insurance for clergy, which means large churches are really supplementing the employment of all clergy. We have to change the way we do business in order to adequately resource local churches – to energize and equip. (Parenthetically, at their spring meeting, the Council of Bishops voted to take a pay cut – amounting to about 3.5% – as a sign of solidarity with those affected by the economy.)



challenging changes that are impacting our communities and our churches. Allow me to hold up a mirror on some, but not all, of my learnings from the Shepherd Visits.

Learnings from Shepherd Visits:

- 1. We are strong, very strong, in missional engagement.***
- 2. We don't know how to do evangelism & must relearn and engage ourselves evangelistically if we are going to survive!***
- 3. Preservation of buildings has often taken precedence over mission.***
- 4. In many places we have more memories than dreams!***
- 5. Young adults are often a missing generation (especially in smaller churches).***
- 6. We know we have to change but are slow and timid about doing so. (I was amazed at the number of people who made comments to me on this subject. We are late adapters who have allowed a few people to exercise veto over new ideas and outreach. Our love of comfort negates our need to deal with conflict between mission and preservation.)***
- 7. Courageous clergy and lay leadership are essential.***

National trends can be seen in the Central Texas Conference. Large churches are growing larger. Smaller churches without a real sense of mission and purpose face problematic futures. Smaller churches that have embraced a real sense of mission and purpose beyond self-preservation are thriving. Risk-taking leadership, both lay and clergy, makes an enormous difference. The most significant decision an Administrative Council or Board makes is to decide whether they are going to operate as if next year is 2010 or 1960.

Of our approximately 320 churches, by my conservative count 116 are a generation away from either becoming a less-than-full-time appointment or closing their doors. Please don't misunderstand me. This will be a slow process, but gradually large clusters of congregations are disappearing from being viable entities. Some of this is internal to a church's understanding of its mission and purpose. One lay person in Valera commented to me, "Bishop, for a while every time someone new moved into the community they were Baptist and every time someone died in the community they were Methodist. Some of this has to do with the changing demographics of communities. Some has to do with our failure to witness and do evangelism. Now, more often than not, new people are none of the above.

Trenchantly the insightful Southern Baptist executive Reggie McNeal notes, "The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80% of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both." (Reggie McNeal, [The Present Future](#), p. 1) He carefully adds (and I wholeheartedly agree!): "The death of the church culture as we know it will not be the death of the church. The church Jesus founded is good; it is right. The church established by Jesus will survive until He returns." (McNeal, [IBID](#), p. 1) It is the current institutional expression of the universal church that will not survive. The church as Christ's church, a mission post of the advancing kingdom of God, has a great future and will be the church triumphant!

Powerfully Thomas Friedman writes in [The World is Flat](#): "Analysts have always tended to

measure a society by classical economic and social statistics: its deficit-to-GDP ratio, or its unemployment rate, or the rate of literacy among its adult women. Such statistics are important and revealing. But there is another statistic - much harder to measure - that I think is even more important and revealing: Does your society have more memories than dreams or more dreams than memories?

“By dreams I mean the positive, life-affirming variety. The business organization consultant Michael Hammer once remarked, ‘One thing that tells me a company is in trouble is when they tell me how good they were in the past. Same with countries. You don’t want to forget your identity. I am glad you were great in the fourteenth century, but that was then, and this is now.’ When memories exceed dreams, the end is near. The hallmark of a truly successful organization is the willingness to abandon what made it successful and start fresh.

“In societies that have more memories than dreams, too many people are spending too many days looking backward. They see dignity, affirmation, and self-worth not by mining the present but by chewing on the past. Indeed, such societies focus all their imagination on making that imagined past even more beautiful than it ever was, and then they cling to it like a rosary or a strand of worry beads, rather than imagining a better future and acting on it.” (Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat*, pp. 450-451) You can almost apply that passage as a whole to the church, both local and in its wider Conference structures. The past is critical. It anchors us in faithfulness. It tells our story which is God’s story. But we must have more dreams than memories. Look at Pentecost and take the lesson Peter offers when he quotes the prophet Joel. “God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” (Acts 2:17-18)

By my own estimation we have a closing window of opportunity (a decade, two at most) to transition into the church of tomorrow, the church God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is leading us to be. It will be different. We are all learners in this new way of living and being church, the body of Christ in the world. A good friend of mine who pastors a large church in another conference says, “no one knows how to do church any more. We are all learning and experimenting. I like Robert Quinn’s phrase: we are building the bridge while we walk on it.

The church of tomorrow will have some common characteristics. Its twin engines will be missional engagement, transforming the world through the deeds of love, justice and mercy in the name of Christ; and evangelism, offering Christ to all as Lord and Savior.

When I first came to the Central Texas Conference, I met with a number of leaders. I can remember so clearly sitting down with Dr. Doyle Allen at the beginning. I asked him what the Conference saw as its mission. He quickly replied, “Oh, we don’t have a separate mission from the denomination. Our mission is to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world. As I visited with another 10 or 12 lay and clergy leaders, people repeated essentially the same comment. Everyone had their own nuance but there was and is a clear sense of what we are to be and be about. Our Mission is to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world.

In one of my first retreats we established, reconfirmed really, a clarity that was already pre-

... we must have more dreams than memories.

sent about core values. They are: Evangelism, Wesleyan Tradition, Spiritual Growth, Mission, and Inclusiveness. By now many of you can see where this is going. The big three that should drive any faithful institution are mission, vision and values. We have the mission. We know the values. So what is the vision? More specifically what is my vision for this conference as your Bishop?

It is simple and straight forward. I see churches vibrant and alive all across the landscape of Central Texas that are mission posts of the advancing kingdom of God; growing in missional outreach of love, justice, and mercy; producing new converts to the Christian faith. I see churches faithful and fruitful making disciples of Christ and transforming the world in the name of the gospel. Our vision is faithful and fruitful communities of faith where people are loved, lives transformed and disciples made. ***Our vision is growing faithful and fruitful local churches all across the conference that are transforming the world.***

I keep remembering that old faded children’s sermon where the pastor calls the kids to the front and excitedly proclaims that he has something new to share with them. Smiling, cheery faces greet the pastor. “What” he exclaims “is small and furry; has a big tail that often goes straight up and runs around the yard gathering nuts? One attentive little boy timidly raises his hand. “Yes Jimmy,” says the Pastor. “Well,” Jimmy hesitantly begins, “I know the answer is Jesus but it sure sounds a lot like a squirrel.”

The kid is right. The answer is Jesus. But we have made it sound a lot like a squirrel. No one joins a church to keep the institution going. People come to church to meet God. They want to walk with Christ. They hunger to experience life in the Spirit. They want to transform this battered and broken world. Unfortunately we are often running around the yard picking up nuts. The goal here is not to build the institution but to advance the Kingdom of God. In doing so, the church as the body of Christ, a colony of heaven, will thrive. This is God’s promise; “the gates of Hell” will not prevail against it.

I love the way Bill Hybels puts it. “There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.” (Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, p. 23)

If our vision is growing faithful and fruitful local churches all across the conference that are transforming the world, then the primary function of the Conference is energizing and equipping local churches. Local churches are the primary place disciples are made. The Conference – including Cabinet, staff, committees and commissions – are to be about the business of energizing and equipping local churches. The top of the pyramid is the local church. The bottom is the bishop, Cabinet, Conference staff and structure. The structure

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