

PASTOR JANET DURRWACHTER (FIRST UMC, WILLIAMSPORT)

Good morning. I want to begin by thanking you for being here. I know you were here late last evening and it's now early in the morning, so thank you so much for your time. I also want to thank the people seated on the stage with me. We very much did this as a team. And I am so grateful that this is not my presentation, but is our presentation.

Each one of us is kind of surprised to be here. We are not people accustomed to being on the stage at Annual Conference, and we are not experts in church growth. We also didn't even know each other before this adventure began. When we first got together we had to introduce ourselves, and even this morning we were introducing ourselves to one another.

When we got together we discovered we are really, really different. Some of us are extreme introverts. We are not enjoying being on this stage; you scare us. Others of us are bubbly extroverts, and we just want to jump right off and hug every single one of you. Some of us are laid back, and some of us could be a poster child for type A. Some of us are clergy and some of us are laity. But all of us are committed to leading congregations to be more vital. And we were selected as a team because we are proof that God can use anyone to do that who is willing.

I want to begin by reminding you of the words that Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many of you were noble by birth, but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of the world, and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us the wisdom of God. That is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

It has been our prayer for the last few months that what you hear from us is not boasting about what we have been a part of, but boasting in the Lord. We do not have it all together. Our churches are not perfect. We are just leaders who are working to help people take the next step.

Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church, talks about getting from here to there. From here, in the desert, where people are broken and living lives that are not full and abundant, to there, where the kingdom of God is flourishing, and people are becoming all that God desires for them to be.

We don't fully understand how that movement happens. There is a sense in which God does something beyond us, sometimes even in spite of us. And in some ways, we certainly know that we have not arrived from here to there. So we don't have a magic bullet. In fact, one of the things that I've been worried about is that you'll come to this morning, and you'll leave, and you'll say, I didn't hear anything that I don't already know. But if you leave this morning with renewed confidence that your congregation can become more vital, we will give thanks to God. If you walk away with just one concrete step that you can take to move from here to there, we will boast in the Lord.

This morning we are like the little boys who offered his lunch to Jesus. We know that we don't have anything extraordinary to share. I'll tell you what we have. We have four main points and some stories. Some of which we're going to tell you using homemade videos. And we pray that God will take our meager loaves and fishes and all that we have to offer and will multiply it so that everyone will receive something of significance, and we will be satisfied with that.

Will you join me in prayer?

Lord, we pray that you would be our teacher this morning. That you would open our eyes and ears so that we might catch a glimpse of what is possible in our church. For those who are weary, we pray for inspiration and renewed strength. For those who are at a loss for what to do next, we pray for direction and for willing servants to come along side them. For those who have battle scars because they have tried to change things, God, we pray for your healing. And God, for those who are satisfied with the status quo, for those who just want things to go back to being the way they used to be, God, we pray for compassion for the many who are not being reached because we are not able to change. Help us to see ourselves as leaders of your church. Help us to believe that the best years are not behind us. We offer to you, God, all that we are and all that we have. And I pray that you will be pleased with what is shared in this hour. God, I pray that you will speak through Randy, through Rich, through Jamie, and myself. Amen.

REV. RICH MORRIS (HICKS MEMORIAL UMC, DUNCANSVILLE)

Good morning. I know this isn't ground-breaking news but it's still all about Jesus. It was all about Jesus yesterday, and it's still all about Jesus today, because he is the lord of life. And the transforming power of God is only accessed by faithful disciples who follow Jesus in the kingdom life. He is the Lord of life, he is declaring that the school of life is in session, and he invites us to enter into life with him today. He is Savior, and he is one who calls us to step into the kingdom today; not to wait until after we die, but today. And his kingdom preaching was, now is the day of salvation. Today is the day that we enter into life with him.

I am also convicted that nominal faith produces nominal life. Early in my pastoral ministry, I observed good church people behaving badly. I don't know if you have ever observed that. In fact, I remember the very first administrative board meeting I attended as a new pastor. The treasurer threw her books across a table in anger at someone else, and I sat there agape, thinking what have I signed up for? What is going on here?

I continue to wrestle with the question of why my church that I pastor fails to produce authentic disciples. I ask the questions, what about our life together is good, and what is not really helpful? And I realized that the usual way of doing things is not producing the disciples that we need.

For example, I discovered not all of our Sunday school classes are actually spending their time engaging the Scripture. They are talking about other stuff. I thought, well, what needs to change here. I realize that it starts with me, and the rest of our leadership as a church. So, as the leadership of the church, we try to make our expectations clear about what a disciple looks like and what a disciple does. We spell out – a disciple worships weekly with the church, and daily in his or her life. A disciple is in a small group to study Scripture. A disciple grows in spiritual

practices. A disciple tithes or grows toward a tithe. A disciple serves in the larger community. A disciple witnesses for Christ all the time. There is no separation between the sacred and the secular. We are on-call all the time, giving a witness for Christ.

And so we expect our leadership in the church to model this, so that we have a right to ask this of our folks.

I've been asked by people in my church – long-time church members, church members that I'm friends with – in private say to me, Rich, do you really get up in the morning and open your Bible? And I say, yeah, that really happens. And that can happen for you. People want to know if it's possible to live like Jesus today. They want to see if anyone is living it.

As for reaching new people with the gospel, I feel like for the past thirty years we have been crying out to the culture, hey, come join us, we are just like you, we are just like you, we are just like you. And they finally believed us. They said, you're right, you are just like us, so why should we come to church? I don't mean that we shouldn't be culturally relevant. I think my church seeks to be that. But in critical ways, the church is called to be counter-cultural. For example, Tim Keller says that Christians today will be different from the culture in several key areas: in how we use power, in how we use money, and how we express our sexuality.

Have you ever wondered if celebrities on TV actually eat the products they endorse? Have you ever wondered that? In the church we endorse a product, but perhaps we are not eating what we are selling either. Perhaps the way we do church has no relevance and power for daily living. What people really need to see are Christians actually living and becoming like Jesus Christ.

Now anytime you talk about high standards of discipleship, you open yourself up to charges of hypocrisy and self-righteousness and criticism, but is not the grace of Jesus Christ not only the power to forgive us but the power to change us? Can I have an amen, church?

To focus on Jesus and the church is to do the things he did; to do what he is doing; to emulate him in discipline and practice. Things like prayer, solitude, service, study, fasting, worship, and celebration. So at my church we are trying to introduce new people to these age-old disciplines. We do this through small group ministry. And as Janet so aptly said, we haven't arrived. We do some things poorly, and we're trying and struggling and growing.

We have done a church-wide read the Bible in a year program. And that was simply such a blessing for so many people to this for the very first time in their lives, to read through the word of God from beginning to end together. And there is some that couldn't do it in a year. I have a group that's reading the Bible in like four or five years, or going on that. But they are sticking with it.

We focus on inter-generational ministries so that we are teaching and mentoring each other across age groups.

An example of this is the first Sunday of each month at two of our three Sunday morning worship services; we have something that we call family worship. And that just means that we

are all there together. We don't send the kids to Sunday school. We don't send them to children's church like we do other Sundays. But we are all together worshipping, and so we try to create our worship experiences so that the generations are interacting together and worshipping together.

It can be challenging, because we have a lot of kids. We challenge our whole church to memorize Scripture each Sunday by giving memory verses in the bulletins that correspond to the message.

Since children's ministry is a strength for our church, we take it outside the building into the neighborhood through something we call Backyard Club. It is a weekly, kind of mini-VBS that we do at a local housing project. We're there to teach them about Jesus. We're there to model this is how people of Christ treat each other, because their default is fighting and anger anytime anything goes wrong. Just the other day, a boy threw a piece of pizza at a girl. It wasn't a big deal, but then parents got involved, and it escalated, and I'm like, people are always throwing things around me. What is going on?

But the kids of the project are used to having churches send vans and busses in to ship them out to their building for a time, and then return them. We're not going to do that. We come to them, because we know Jesus is already there where they live. And we want to be there with them.

Methodists give lip-service sometimes to John Wesley, and we have our favorite Wesley quotes, but are we doing the things that he did? Are we rising to pray, to study God's word. Are we giving sacrificially, are we serving. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We live in a time where this ancient wisdom is fresh every morning for those who would enter in to following the Master of the school of life. And this takes time and effort to lead Bible studies, to train new leaders, to model what a follower of Jesus actually does. But this is the world's great need: To see Christian's live authentically like Jesus is what the world needs today. This is what the Holy Spirit blesses. This is where power and transformation is found. This is the church that is vital.

You are going to see a couple of testimonies from folks from my church, and just different aspects of their path of discipleship.

VIDEO

REV. DR. RANDY WILLIS (CENTRE GROVE UMC, CLEARFIELD)

The first time Janet and I spoke on the phone, and we met each other by way of that phone conversation. And she referred to us as a vital congregation. And I just kind of really reacted against that and said, I'm not really comfortable saying that we are a vital congregation. I think I'd be OK in saying that we're becoming a vital congregation, or we're trying to become a vital congregation, but we're not there yet.

The vitality that we've experienced in the last few years way too early, those very fragile. And we're kind of at a point where we really could go either way.

But looking at the last thirteen to fourteen years, I've been there seven, so the church went to this ten-year slide, where its average worship attendance went from 136 to 86. That's a thirty-seven percent decline. And I was there for the last three years of that. So we did that. And then the three years after those ten years, we've bounced back twenty-two percent. And a lot of that was in 2013.

So we definitely thank God. God is at work. As Rich said, there are a whole lot of other areas where we still need to grow and do well.

But one of the areas that we really have excelled in is reaching out. And this is a congregation, I think for those ten years, I think I would say we were there, but we weren't really there. And now, just some of the outreach that we do: Free monthly dinners for the community that's been pretty effective for us. In the summer, which is kind of our peak season for outreach, we'll do some free car care clinics. During the summer we'll do a lot of other outreach. We're going to do a block party this year. Worship attendance is one number, but the number that we're really excited about is the number of people who are getting involved in hands-on ministry that went from a very, very small number of core leaders to a lot of people.

I think the church is at its best when it is reaching out. The church is at its best when it's actively reaching out. So that's kind of the part where Janet said we wouldn't tell you anything new. We all know we need to be reaching out. We need to be doing outreach. We need to be engaging our community with the good news of Jesus Christ.

I want to share just three quick elements that I think, you know, how do we get from here to there? How do we get from here to there? Three elements from Acts Chapter 6, which was a very different situation. They were a vibrant church, experiencing a lot of vitality. And they were responding to that. But I think those three things also work in a turn-around situation, a church that needs to be turned around the same elements. I'm not going to cover them in the same order that are maybe in the Book of Acts or in really no particular order of importance.

The disciples, they mobilized people for ministry. They said we will devote ourselves to prayer and proclaiming the word. Proclaiming the word. Proclaiming the word. I think that's about casting vision. It's about preaching the gospel, not so that people will be just informed by the word, but the people will be shaped by the word. I don't think first century preachers were information dispensers. I think they were culture shapers and movement makers.

Preaching professor Michael Quick says that missionally defective preaching leads to missionally defective people. I think the flip side of that is true. I hope it is. Missionally effective preaching leads to missionally effective people. So preaching and proclaiming the word, casting the vision, calling people to action, turning consumers into contributors is huge. Then, of course, mobilizing people for ministry.

At Genre Grove that happened primarily through Matthew 28. In fact, our consultation was at the end of that ten-year slide. In the next year, just a slight bump, and then we continued on. But that was huge for us. In fact, Rich was our coach. But that was huge for us in getting people mobilized for ministry.

And then the last thing is prayer. We could say a lot about prayer, but I just want to say one thing, I think prayer is key for us. It's the way that we are empowered for ministry. We receive God's power through prayer. The word power, extremely important in the New Testament. Jesus said you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.

As important as words are to us, they're our primary means of communication. The Apostle Paul said God's kingdom isn't about words, but about power. He said my message and my preaching weren't presented with convincing wise words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. I did this so that you're faith might not depend on the wisdom of people, but on the power of God.

So we proclaim the word. We mobilize people for ministry, and we pray, so that lives will be transformed. So that lives' will be transformed. So I am excited about sharing this, Brian's story, through this video.

VIDEO

PASTOR JANET DURRWACHTER (FIRST UMC, WILLIAMSPORT)

I got goose bumps when I watched that video. Maybe you've done cardboard testimonies at your church. We have. It's not a brand new idea, but it is meaningful, because it's a way for people to effectively communicate the difference Jesus makes. Saved, forgiven, free, thank you, Jesus.

Rich isn't the only one who knows that it's all about Jesus. The video wasn't high-caliber, it wasn't professionally shot using HD cameras and edited using Final Cut Pro. But it was high-impact. It changed the trajectory of a man's life.

Brian went from exploring atheism to exploring a call to ministry. All because someone from Centre Grove Church chose to reach out by posting that video on Facebook.

A story like Brian's provides inspiration when leading becomes challenging. And we need to collect and celebrate those stories, because they remind us why we keep doing what we do. Equipping vital congregations involves repeating what is important. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Repeat the vision, repeat that it's all about Jesus, repeat the church's call to reach out to the community, repeat the need to develop passionate connections.

We have all reached the point that we were tired of the repeats, haven't we? Haven't we reached the point where we were just tired? If you care about equipping vital congregations, if you are trying to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, you know what I am talking about. Because sometimes we're tired and sometimes we're more than tired.

Sometimes, isn't it true, we're worried, is this going to work? Will the old guard give up power so that we can move forward? Will there be enough money to do what we're planning? Will the leaders step up?

So sometimes we can't sleep at night. Sometimes we have a knot in the pit of our stomach. Sometimes we're afraid that we're going to fail. If you care about equipping vital congregations, if you are trying to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, you know what I am talking about. Everytime we set out to accomplish a great vision, we will encounter circumstances at some point that will lead us to believe that we are headed toward failure. When we move from here to there, we will almost always want to turn around half way. And I stand here to tell you just one thing – stay the course.

That's my message this morning, because I have seen the difference that it makes when leaders stay the course. It comes with a cost. It requires great faith. But it is what we must do to partner with God to change the culture of our churches. And until our churches have a culture that will nurture vitality, making disciples is going to continue to be very, very difficult.

I have been a part of my congregating for over twenty years. And I have seen an amazing transformation in which the culture of a church changed dramatically. I have watched a congregation wake up to its potential, and has resulted in not only nearly quadrupling in size, but in becoming a significant, positive influence in our community. And I don't take credit for this. We all know that none of this happens apart from a movement of God's Spirit. But even more than that, I am not the primary leader. I have not, never have been, am not the lead pastor at First Church, Williamsport. But I have been there, and I know what can happen when we stay the course.

And I just want to share with you a few of my observations of how I think that happened.

First of all, it's all about Jesus. It started with discipleship. That's why we started with Rich this morning. It started with raising people up who study Scripture, pray daily, are committed to tithe, support one another in small groups, and understand servant leadership. And that starts with the pastor. But it can't be just one person. One person cannot change the culture.

Our leadership team is critical, and we never settle when choosing our key leaders. No warm bodies. You cannot do this alone; you have to build a team.

We also have found that it is just so important to remember what is at stake. Anyone who is leading a vital congregation has wanted to quit. Bill Hybels, of Willow Creek Church, wanted to quit. Perry Noble, New Spring Church, wanted to quit. Be honest. Hasn't there been a time when you were just tired out and beaten up? When you feel that way, remember what is at stake, because if you stay the course, something wonderful can happen. The culture of your church can change. The church can become a place where disciples are made for the transformation of the world.

We make it a habit to share good stories. Stories of transformed lives; stories that make it real for us. We share these stories because they are our oxygen. When we're getting worn out these stories give us energy. They keep us going. They help us remember why we are willing to risk failure; why we get down on our knees at 3 a.m. when we cannot sleep. Why we stay the course.

And one of the stories that we love to share in our congregation is Edwin's Story. Edwin lives a different life because of the United Methodist Church. And I invite you to listen to what he has to say about how the church introduced him to life in Christ, and changed his life.

VIDEO

JAIME CARPENTER (LAITY, CHRIST UMC, SELINGROVE)

My name is Jamie Carpenter, and I am the director of lay ministries at Christ United Methodist Church in Selinsgrove. I've been a part of the church for thirty years, but I've been employed there for eleven. I am also the chairperson for the lay servant ministries of the Lewisburg District. God has exactly called me to lead high-level leadership ministries as a lay person in these roles and for this time.

Organizing and teaching, equipping God's people modules 1 and 2, organizing the lay speaking courses, and helping people understand the major shift in all of that, has been solid work. I hear a few snickers out there. It's true.

I know that good local church leaders need education. And so our districts have implemented the two modules, and are creating other courses to follow. Many of you are familiar with this. The feedback has been positive, and awareness is growing.

Today I bring along with me Grace Dunagan, a sixteen-year-old youth who has fulfilled her high school requirements, and will begin college in the fall. I have personally mentored her for the past year and a half in church leadership, and truth be told, she has taught me a thing or two. She has been beside me as we organize courses and correspond with lay speakers in the district and lead trainings in other local churches. As a member of our administrative council, she is a bright spot in our church's leadership.

And today Grace and I are here because we want to share a characteristic of Christ United Methodist, which has been identified as a vital congregation. And I feel the same way as some of the others up here about that. But the characteristic that we've chosen to talk about today is called passionate connection.

Eight years ago, the pastor of our church encouraged a few of us to read a book, entitled, "Fusion: Turning First-time Visitors into Fully-engaged Members of Your Church," by Nelson Searcy. Are you all familiar with that book?

We took that book to our hears, and we removed the pew pads, and our staff added connection cards to the bulletins. And we received lots of good information from our worship attendees. Not only updates to their contact information, which of course is important for our attendance, but also specific ways that worship attendees planned to respond to the message that they heard on Sunday morning.

We included a prayer, joys, and concerns line, and cannot believe what people write on those lines on Monday morning. They move us to tears. People will write things on those cards that

they will never say with words. Some Monday mornings, yeah, get pretty emotional for us. But if there is something that the church staff or care teams need to follow up with, we follow up no later than Wednesday of that week.

First and second time visitors receive hand-written cards or emails; then a letter from the pastor; then a visit from one of our ministry staff members. In addition, thanks to the church's awesome hospitality leader who is with us today at Annual Conference – and her name is Jinny Harnum – our ushers and greeters are well-trained.

Ushers stand by, available for assistance. And they walk worship attendees to their seats. They actually do that. I know that's what they are supposed to do and it feels like I shouldn't even have to say that, but sometimes we get involved in our side conversations, and we kind of miss a golden opportunity. The greeters try to remember the first names of the people on the first introduction. Their stations are located just inside the door and out on the street, helping drivers park their cars.

From that excellent training, our culture began to shift. The leadership and worship attendees began to care for one another, not simply just for the sake of caring. Not simply for the sake of saying we care, but actually honestly caring. And I know how that sounds. And if I would be sitting right there, I would be wondering, really, it's really that good? But you know, we all have things in our churches, and we have issues in other areas. But in this area of passionate connections, the church is really nailing it.

Taking it up a level, the church is connecting with community agencies, schools, and businesses. We are helping in classrooms, encouraging teachers, feeding hungry schools students on the weekends, and donating our gently-used shoes and so much more. All along we have earned the right to be heard, and we built solid relationships through the community on all levels. And I say this boldly and with confidence.

Again, you may be sitting there wondering how do you know that. How do you measure the trust earned in the community, school, and agencies? And again, I'd be asking the same thing if I were sitting there.

But here is how we know. On Monday night, May 4, at 9:45 p.m., a report came to the 911 center that Christ United Methodist Church was on fire. Nine companies responded to the scene. The whole community gathered beside us as we watched our beloved church building burn until nearly 2 a.m. Neighbors brought out tables with bottled water. Community leaders came out, even while the church was still burning, to offer classroom and worship space for our preschool and church. The days and weeks after the fire were going to be critical to our recovery. Even those of us who have felt the heaviness of the loss and were beginning a full-out grieving process, had a solid understanding of the following things: The last thing is never the worst thing. The church is the people. God gives us beauty for ashes and a future with hope.

So we are publicly grieving. We are accepting the help of others. And we are facing our struggles with transparency. We are inviting others to walk with us through one of the most

difficult times of our leadership ministry. And we continue intentional connection and care for people of the church.

Today has been forty days since the fire, Pastor Ryan. It's only been five Sundays. It's only been five Sundays, pastors. That's how you measure time, right? The Sunday after the fire we included blank pieces of paper which served as connection cards. Actually, it came from a desk drawer of some scrap tables that were in one of our member's homes. They served as connection cards, and we included those in a bulletin that was graciously printed for us by another church in Selinsgrove. And we connected with the new people, our guests.

We had a copy of our directory and a database of contacts saved on the Cloud and a thumb drive with our servant keeper records saved to it. Are you guys backing your stuff up? You should.

While the pastor, trustees, and finance committees did work with insurance, investigating, and inventory, the ministry team leaders gathered to make plans for ministry. An emergency care team meeting was called, and I had photos printed and copied, so that we could take them to our homebound members and show them the pictures while saying the words, "The church burned." The fire was accidental and electrical. It was nobody's fault. But it did happen."

We immediately rebuilt the website to show pictures to tell the story, and designed a blog that gave daily updates from our pastor and staff. The entire community is invited to this story. And today, you are invited to this story.

But here's the shift I really don't want you to miss. The community contacted the church to see how we could do ministry together. Susquehanna University, the Selinsgrove Borough, the school district, the county offices, all the local churches reached out. Hundreds of offers came from small businesses, civic organizations, our friends. And the people of the church are being cared for by the people of our community. And this is a true connection.

So, it's been asked of us, if your church would disappear would the community notice? I know that the church has built systems, followed through with excellent practices, but we could never really measure the influence, the difference that the church was making in the community. Through the experience of this fire, we found out.

And as it turns out, all of it mattered and none of our resources were wasted. Passionate connection is active. It is well within your budget. It requires true care, which may require deep change, which is hard work.

The fire, although devastating and heartbreaking, provided an opportunity for heightened emotion, and a re-entry point for momentum. Does this sound familiar to anybody who took Equipping God's People Module 1, Session 3, when we studied Bob Farr's book, "Renovate or Die"? That's what we talk about there.

The fire, like any other tragedy, and you can fill in the blank, the tragedies that have happened in your community or in your churches. It can open the door to conversation with people who otherwise would not care to connect with you or the church. It opens doors to reconciliation from

previously broken relationships. It allows for deposits to strengthen relationships. Tragedies also peak people's curiosity. That's OK, too. We are all part of the story.

The feeling of the longing is the fruit of passionate connections. Transparency of our vulnerability is a connecting force. Once connected, we share the stories of our faith and point others toward God. It is all about Jesus.

My prayer is, that our church leadership, our clergy and laity, continue to be teachable, vulnerable, transparent, and hungry to passionately connect. My prayer is that you are earning trust and the right to be heard in your communities. Stay the course.

Sometimes the church's influence cannot be measured. God is with us. He calls us in big ways to point each other toward Christ. And together we agreed, and all God's people said, "Amen."