

## **“Equip, Empower, and Engage”**

Scripture Readings:

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13

Acts 1:6-11

Matthew 28:18-20

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the Redeemer, the Prince of Peace, Healer of our brokenness, and Hope of the world!

As I stand before you here for the third time, my heart is rejoicing with thanksgiving for the blessing of serving our awesome God with the faithful people of Central and Northeastern Pennsylvania. Praise be to God for the journey we've been taking together. We've come this far by faith and we've come this far by grace.

I love Pennsylvania! There are many reasons I say that so emphatically. Recently I experienced another exciting reason. Lisa and I visited Germany for the first time about a month ago to attend the Council of Bishops meeting in Berlin. We fell in love with Germany. It's an awesome place to visit. I had an opportunity to speak briefly at one church and to preach at another church during Sunday worship. I told the congregations that I serve an area, where a large part of the population's ancestry originated from Germany. So I introduced myself that I was 1/3 Korean, 1/3 American and 1/3 German! I would like you to know that my name is now Jeremiah Park-Muller.

I realize that this is the last annual conference before General Conference next year. Our prayers intensify as our church approaches a critical moment of decision making on some significant matters, including the issue of human sexuality. We recognize that the decisions to be made regarding the same-gender issue may redefine and reset the future path of the United Methodist Church. The Unity of the church could be in serious jeopardy.

No one has a clear picture of what is waiting for us the day after. However, this much I know, no matter what happens, God is in charge. God is not finished with our church yet. I put my trust and hope in a God who called us to be a church for such a time as this.

As we seek the unity of the church Paul's words to God's people of the church in Ephesus are revealing. He urged them to live up to the life of their calling in unity. Apparently, they had some disagreements among themselves that threatened the unity of the church. He points out that unity is worth keeping at all costs and is a worthy goal to pursue: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit ..... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," he says. (Ephesians 4: 13) His point is: To people in Christ, disagreement is not a reason to break up the unity. Rather it is an opportunity to grow in maturity. Do not be overcome by disagreement, but overcome disagreement with the bond of love and peace. The God of all is larger than the disagreement we have. I would like you to know that I am committed to do whatever I can to keep the vision of unity of our church alive. I plead with you to do the same.

God's people of Susquehanna Conference, here we are gathered together once again under the banner of "Alive in Christ Together....Equipping Vital Congregations." You and I started our common journey with a fervent prayer and ardent aspiration to be God's people alive in Christ together for such a time as this.

Two persons were attending the viewing of their friend. One asked the other, "Jim, what would you want people to say about you when they attend your viewing?" Jim, who is a teacher, said, "I wish people would say, 'I am glad that he was my teacher. He was one of the best teachers I had. He was a dedicated public servant, something like that.'" "How about you?" Jim asked his friend. He said, "All I would want others say is this, 'Look! He is moving!'" I would like to have people say of each and every

congregation of the Susquehanna Conference, “Look at the church! It’s moving! It’s alive!”

Thanks be to God that I have witnessed that many of our churches are truly alive in transformative and life-giving ways. They demonstrate their vitality in and through their worship, stewardship, discipleship, witness, mission and ministry. They have a clear sense of who they are with vision, passion, commitment, joy and excitement. Indeed, they represent the presence of hope among us.

However, we know that the challenge we are facing as a church becomes larger and evermore formidable. While we stayed in Berlin for the Council of Bishops’ meeting, Lisa and I had an opportunity to ride a city tour bus and saw many historic sites like the remnants of the walls, Check Point Charlie, and other historically significant buildings and monuments. At one point, the tour guide directed our attention to a gorgeous church and said, “Look at the church. I can show you many other beautiful churches like that, but they are all empty.” And he said, “We are a secular society. We don’t need the church anymore. We don’t believe any more.” Many empty churches were there as tourists’ attractions, symbolizing the advanced and prevalent secularism in that part of the world. Is this a harbinger of what is to come to us here in America?

A recent Pew Research study showed that “Christians declined sharply as a share of the population,” while unaffiliated and other religions and faiths continue to grow. “Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%.” (That’s more than a 1% loss per year!) During the same 7 years period, “the unaffiliated grew from about 16% to almost 23%.” (That’s a growth roughly 1% a year!) It is more likely than not that this trend will continue and even accelerate.

One of the classic American movies, which remains a favorite for many is: “The Wizard of Oz.” In the movie, when the tornado stops, Dorothy realizes that she has woken up in an entirely different place. The people are different, her situation is

different, and yes, everything in the world is different. The cinematographer makes the point very real because the movie is no longer black and white, but is now in Technicolor. Then we hear Dorothy speak her now famous words: “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

A few months ago, District Superintendent, Rev. Dr. Dennis Keller, shared with us at the Cabinet devotion some intriguing insights from Stephen Mattson of the University of Northwestern in St. Paul, Minnesota. According to him, “our society reveals that everything — and everyone — is spiritual on some level.” He then identifies what he believes are the most popular (non) religions/ or religions of the world. Among them was “the Religion of Sport”. (I quote) “Few people pray more fervently, earnestly, and passionately than when their favorite sports teams — and athletes — are competing. With arms outstretched, they wildly clap, cheer, chant, cry, and scream at the top of their lungs..... followers of sport are driven by faith .... The stadiums are their churches, the crowds their parishioners, the coaches their preachers, the athletes their Saints, the opposition their Sinners, and the referees their Satan. They ..... are unified through a shared belief in their *savior* — the Dallas Cowboys, the New York Yankees, the Boston Celtics, (or let me add the Philadelphia Eagles or the Pittsburg Steelers) or any other sports entity that they piously follow..... It’s the reality of millions of people around the world. Just follow the money: church-goers generally give about 2 percent of their annual income to the church, while families involved in athletics give around 10 percent to things sport-related.” (End quote) Well, we aren’t in Kansas anymore. The church is no longer the only “game in town.” We aren’t living in the same Pennsylvanian culture that many of our people knew in their childhood. Things all around us will continue to change: the scope of change to expand, the speed to increase, and the substance to be more substantial.

The most recent report by the Economic Advisory Committee of our denomination shows that the trend of the United Methodist Church in the United States is indeed alarming. It can be described as a crisis. Nothing is really new about it. However,

one thing that the presenter of the study said struck me and it has stuck with me ever since. He said that the window of opportunity for our church to turn around is very small. He said that we have only 15 years. 15 years! Without a turn around by 2030, he predicts the United Methodist Church will no longer be able to support and sustain the connectional church as we know it today and a serious denominational process of demise would begin, like selling off the assets. 15 years!

Do we have a fighting chance for such a time as this? Rather, does God have a fighting chance in and through us, the United Methodist Church? God's redemptive presence and power will continue until the day of Christ. But will our church be a part of it?

In a rapidly changing and already changed environment, a rigid organization will not make it. Church is not an exception. A living church must be an organism that adapts to the new and emerging reality with a sense of urgency and clear vision and mission. The Council of Bishops has adopted the adaptive challenge for the United Methodist Church in these words: "To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." The Bishops are in agreement that increasing "congregational vitality" is the key to leading our church for such a time as this.

Congregational vitality may not be that simple to define. Some aspects of vitality can be measured and some cannot. However, I can tell you that vitality shows when it is present. People know it when you have it. We know which churches are vital congregations and where they are. Thanks be to God that we have many vital congregations of all sizes in all places. The intriguing thing about vitality is that the more you have it, the more you want it. As vitality grows, an appetite for making disciples and a desire to engage in transforming the communities and the world around you also grows.

At the same time, there are churches that have not reached vitality quite yet. They are currently staying in the neutral zone: not quite vital yet, but are not on hospice care either. According to the denominational statistics, the majority of our churches belong to this neutral zone. They are in crisis, meaning that danger and opportunity coexist in their midst. Danger in the sense that they can slip into a point of no return, opportunity in the sense that they can move up to vitality. We cannot afford to lose any one of them. Every single church has a sacred worth in the eyes of God. It was founded by Christ and was purchased by His blood. However, every church has its season. Some churches are to be a legacy church now rather than later so that a new life can be born.

The task before us is that we are to minimize the danger and maximize the opportunity in as many churches in the neutral zone as possible before it is too late. As we respond to the challenge of moving as many congregations to vitality and high vitality, I would like to lift up three E words: Equip, Empower, and Engage. I hope that these words will stimulate our conversation and imagination for the task and bless our future journey.

First, equip.

Many people know the mission statement of the church. The Book of Discipline (para. 120) says it clear: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." However, they may not know what follows right after it; "Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." As far as making disciples is concerned, the local church makes the most significant difference; not the conference and not the general church.

Please hear me, a local church does not exist to support the denominational hierarchal structure. No! Rather it is vice versa. This must be a foundational understanding for our connectional church: No strong local church, no strong annual conference. No healthy local church, no healthy denomination. No vital

congregation, no vital United Methodist Church. Our conference is here to serve you, our local churches. Equipping our local churches for ministry is the number one job of the annual conference.

This understanding is reflected in Paul's words to the Church of Ephesus. To make the point, he lists those who represent the most significant office or place of leadership of the church like, apostles, evangelists, prophets, pastors and teachers, to say that God gave them to the church to equip God's people for the works of ministry. The point is: No matter what one's role to fulfill in the church, equipping God's people for ministry is the number one job. Churches must be all in for this job. Paul knew that a vital congregation is a fruit of an intentional equipping process, not a random product of chance. It simply doesn't happen that way, not in a consistent manner at least.

I would like you to know that our conference is all in for equipping vital congregations! You will hear many exciting stories and uplifting witnesses about it while you are here. The future of our church does not depend on how many churches we have, but on how many vital congregations we have.

Two, "empower".

The Church of Jesus Christ started with the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was born of the Spirit 2,000 years ago. It is born of the Spirit today. It will be born of the Spirit until the day of Christ. The Church is of the Spirit.

Someone was looking for something on the ground under the street lamp in a most attentive and desperate manner. One passer-by wanted to help and joined in the search. After some time had passed in futility, the one who wanted to help asked, "Are you sure you lost it here?" "No!" the other replied. "I lost it over there," pointing to the other side of the street. "Then why, in the world, are you looking for it here?" The answer came back. "Because it is much brighter here." Are we looking for congregational vitality to start in the wrong places? Does it come from a

refurbished parking lot or state of the art projection and sound systems? It is needed, but that's not it. No, it comes from the Holy Spirit! No spiritual vitality, no congregational vitality; No spiritual renewal, no church renewal; No spiritual revival, no denominational revival.

God's people, clergy or laity, this is the time for us rebuild our connection with the Spirit. Poor stewardship? It's a spiritual issue. No new disciples made? It's a spiritual issue. No commitment? It's a spiritual issue. Discipleship stuck in one place? It's a spiritual issue. Existing in a self imposed island separated from its community? It's a spiritual issue. Country club mentality? It's a spiritual issue. Power struggle? It's a spiritual issue. No joy? It's a spiritual issue. Losing vitality? It's a spiritual issue. We can go on only so much without addressing the spiritual issue. Is our connection with the Spirit well and alive? There's no way for God's people to keep the connection with the Spirit vital without keeping their personal devotional life of prayer alive. That's why we have to pray as if everything depends on prayer.

This story is from Rev. Arun Adrews, pastor of Trinity Church, New Cumberland. He is a gift from the Methodist Church in India and will be the Bible study teacher this Saturday morning: In a church where people used prayer books to follow the services, a pastor came to the altar as the people had gathered for the service. As he examined the microphone the pastor mumbled, "There's something wrong with this microphone". The congregation promptly responded in tune, "And also with you!" This is no time for the blame game. Rather, this is the time to renew and rebuild the connection with the Spirit, starting with ourselves.

As we seek and work towards congregational vitality we must remember that everything depends on the Holy Spirit who alone can empower God's people for the ministry of Jesus Christ!

Third; "Engage"

We would like to have more people and more resources for ministry. That's for sure. But how? This may be an uncomfortable truth but, in many places, there's no shortage of people, no shortage of young people, even children, and no shortage of mission fields in our own communities. The shortage we have is of the spirit, willingness, and courage, to come out of the comfort zone, cross the boundaries, tear down the walls, and break the barriers of "we've never done it that way before or we've always done it this way". This is the time for God's people to be bold and take risks.

We know that fear is real and big. Fear immobilizes people and prevents them from moving outward and forward. Its grip on the life of a congregation is indeed debilitating. Look at the disciples. They were not the exception. At one point, out of fear, they locked themselves in a closed room. The chain of fear was finally broken with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. Now the disciples were ready to respond to the final words of their Master: "Go and make disciples of all nations. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

Take heart, God's people! Be bold and courageous! We are the ones called to be a going church in mission for such a time as this. I can say that with total and absolute confidence because of the One who called us: the Risen Christ. "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11) He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who lives and reigns now and forever. He is the One we worship.

A pastor took his family to a Chinese restaurant. After the meal, he cracked the fortune cookie to find out his fortune. His little daughter said, "Dad, we don't need fortunes because God is with us!" We serve the risen Lord who is in the world today. He is with us, within us, and among us through the Holy Spirit. He is the One who said, "All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me. Therefore, go!"

There is an apocryphal story told about Jesus' arrival in heaven following his ascension. He was asked by the angels what his succession plan was so that the story of the good news would continue to be told since he was now no longer on earth. He told the angels that he had equipped his disciples to do it and that he commanded them to go with the good news of God to make disciples of all nations throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. Jesus was then asked by the angels what his backup plan was if the disciples did not follow through on his commandments. He said that he didn't have any. God's people, we are it! We are Jesus' plan for such a time as this.

Our God is a missionary God. We are a missionary people. Born and raised in a foreign county, here I am serving you as a missionary Bishop. If God is using a limited vessel like me, everyone is qualified.