

2018 Susquehanna Annual Conference
Celebration of Ministry Service: Passing the Mantle
– Rev. Tom Willard and David Keyworth
June 1, 2018

Rev. Tom Willard: Each one of us has a story of grace. I am sharing mine tonight, representative of my thirty-seven other colleagues who are retiring with me. And hopefully you can see something of the way in which God had been at work through us.

My first full day of retirement will be my birthday, July 1. Sixty-five years ago, when my twin sister and I were born, my mother weighed ninety-four pounds before she became pregnant. After giving birth to my sister ten minutes before me, my mother went into a coma. I always tell folks she saw my sister and she was out for three days. When she awoke three days later, she had a curious story to tell. She remembered waking up part way through her coma and seeing herself and what she described as a “figure of light” that she identified as Jesus, walking together across the room. And as she watched herself and her Lord, Jesus turned and looked at her and whispered, “All will indeed be well.” In a couple of days, all was, indeed, well. It didn’t always stay that way.

When we were eighteen months old, I had a raging fever, and in those days, you didn’t rush to the hospital, you rushed to your doctor. And our doctor notified my mother and dad that it was unlikely that I would survive the night. And if they were people of prayer, he encouraged them to take me home and pray over me. So, my mom and dad took me home and knelt beside their bed and they prayed. And their prayer was simple: In return for his good health, O Lord, we surrender him to your service.

Thankfully, my parents chose not to share that story with me until I was eighteen years old and had already been called by Christ into ministry.

On August 30, 1970, I came to know Christ personally as my Lord and Savior as part of a youth revival that swept through Perry County where I lived. It was a part of a youth Sunday service in my home church, Liverpool Church. And the speaker that morning was seventeen years old and had just come back from a transformational experience at church camp.

At the end of his message, he gave an invitation. And I was one of twenty-five young people that responded and came to know Christ that day.

Suddenly the little youth fellowship group of about eight, swelled within about six or eight weeks to sixty-four. And instead of meeting just on Sunday evenings, we went to the church every night of the week at nine o’clock, laid our heads on the kneeling pads, joined hands on our backs, and devoted ourselves to prayer.

As the months went by, three of us, all young men, all age eighteen, were called by God to do a summer singing ministry when we graduated from high school. And so I graduated from high school one day, and the next day left with my two friends, hitting the road not knowing where we were going except that we were going to follow the call of God.

That first night we set up in a campground, pulled out our guitars, and began to sing. And we watched as people from all over the campground began drawing closer and closer. And when we were done singing that night, the questions, naturally, started to flow, wondering why seventeen- and eighteen-year-old young men were singing about Jesus. And we had opportunity to share our witness for Jesus Christ. And we watched that summer and the next as hundreds and hundreds of people committed their lives to Jesus Christ as a result of what we were learning to do and to call ministry.

When I returned after the first summer, I was starting at Messiah College as a freshman. The college administration knew what I had been doing for the summer, and so my roommate and I formed a music ministry team for Messiah. My wife auditioned for that group. She made not just the group, but also my heart, and the very best partner in ministry I've ever had. Throughout college and seminary, we continued to have hand-on opportunities to do ministry in the name of Jesus.

On the day that I turned twenty-five, I was appointed to the West Fairview United Methodist Church as their pastor, and went on to serve four churches over these forty years. All in Cumberland County, none more than eighteen miles from another. And I was blessed by God.

I learned and was taught by lay people what it meant to be a pastor. And I grew to love them, and they loved us. And together we served Jesus Christ side-by-side.

I've been blessed over these forty years with wonderful colleagues in ministry. Men and women of God who have challenged me, laughed with me, and cried with me.

On the day I turned fifty, I was appointed to the district that in those days was miles above the rest. I spent six wonderful years working with the pastors and lay people of the Wellsboro District, and loved every minute of it. It was a time of great blessing. And they are still "miles above the rest."

Over the past nine years I have been privileged to be in ministry with my congregation in a very small village eight hours out into the bush of Sierra Leone. I've been privileged to visit our sister church three times, and the first time I did, indeed, come back with malaria. And it took six months to get diagnosed. And I, today, have chronic kidney disease as a result of it. But I have to tell you that I wouldn't trade any of it, regardless of the consequences, because of the privilege of learning to be in ministry along side brothers and sisters in Christ in Sierra Leone.

Now after forty years of ministry, I am preparing to lay down the mantle, along with my colleagues, of active service and enter retirement. This great church that we have served for all of these many years is on the brink of some of its greatest challenges and opportunities in my lifetime. My petit, now eighty-six year old mother, is suffering from Alzheimer's Disease and battling severe dementia, so that I have become the keeper not just of my own memories, but of hers as well. And Christ is raising up a whole new generation of young women and men he is calling to serve him within the United Methodist Church. And I continue to hear that still, small voice whisper to me, as it did to my mother, "All will indeed be well."

David Keyworth: In this season of ministry, I am a member of the young clergy club. What this exactly means, I'm not really sure. But what I do know is that I am a member of it. I know that when I walk into the funeral home or I walk into the hospital or I walk really into any other parts of the community and I get "the look." You're a pastor? What I know is that Paul tells Timothy in I Timothy 4:12, "Don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth, but an example for believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity."

For me, this is what it means to be one with Christ. Is to set an example and to live a life in a way that everyone around you knows that you are indeed a child of God. To live a life worthy of the calling that you have received. We know this isn't easy. We need a little help along the way. And one thing you need is, indeed, to have the mind of Christ. To have the mind of Christ is to have Christ's vision, attitude, perspective. To have the same priorities and mind in all that you say and do.

Just as what it is like to buy a house and to have the three "Ls" of buying a house: Location, Location, Location. The same is true for the mind of Christ, is having the three "Ps" of the mind of Christ: Pray, Pray, Pray. Pray without ceasing. To pray with an intentionality. To pray what you mean, and to mean what you pray. As well as to pray with a humble and grateful heart.

This is why every single morning I pray this prayer: "God, I thank you for the day that you have given me. For family. For friends. For those who support me. Help me be the servant that you want me to be, and not that I want to be."

I accept this mantle. I am deeply grateful for those that have ministered faithfully before me, who have taught me, who have supported me, and on whose shoulders I stand. You have given us great examples of what it means to be ministers of the gospel, and what it means to serve in pastoral ministry. By your example, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, I will, indeed, strive to be one with Christ, to set an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity."