

**Episcopal Address**  
2023 Central Texas Annual Conference  
June 5, 2023

***Be Strong. Take Heart. Hope in the Lord!***

Greetings, lay and clergy members, distinguished guests, and all those joining us online. Welcome to the 2023 Central Texas Annual Conference.

The grace and peace of Jesus Christ be with you.

It is my joy to celebrate what God's spirit is doing through you and share what lies ahead.

Be Strong! Take Heart! And Hope in the Lord is our theme for this coming year.

In Scripture, "Strength" is often described as the ability God gives believers to persevere through difficult times.

To "Take Heart" means being courageous in the face of difficulty or adversity as we continue in life without losing faith and hope.

To "Hope in the Lord" means to place our trust and confidence in God's faithfulness and promises even in the face of trials, difficulties, and an unknown future, knowing that God is with us and will never leave or forsake us.

So, to be strong, encouraged, and hopeful is a deliberate choice, an act of faith to trust God even when things look bleak.

## **Reflections**

We have been through a challenging year.

Congregations have not all fully recovered from the COVID shutdown.

Our season of disaffiliation added to the challenges.

Relational bonds in Christ have been severed because of disaffiliations. People that worshipped together for years now don't. Households are divided. Church members face the dilemma of staying or going when votes come out on the short end, whatever side they're on. Many United Methodists have been displaced from their places of worship.

We mourn the 82 Central Texas churches that voted to separate last year. Another 37 churches will separate from us effective July 1 by the action of this annual conference.

The pain is real for all of us. I can relate to the pain because my childhood church, which shaped me in the faith, also voted to leave.

That said, I want to be clear that as bishop, I've been charged with maintaining the church's unity. This means that I will continue to work for a United Methodist Church that is fully inclusive, theologically, racially, and concerning gender identity because the mission field is diverse and needs diverse expressions of the church.

Let's be realistic. We will not resolve many personal, religious, or partisan issues in our lifetime. Everybody has an opinion about any given issue, and almost everyone can justify their position by appealing to Scripture and their values.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, believed that despite differences in theological opinions, Christians could still come together in love and unity. He recognized that people will always have different opinions and interpretations of scripture but that this should not divide the church. In his sermon "Catholic Spirit," Wesley stated,

"Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of opinion? Without a doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences."

Wesley believed Christians should focus on the essentials of the faith, such as belief in the Trinity, divinity of, and salvation through faith in Christ. He believed Christians should not let minor theological differences divide them but should come together in love and unity. He emphasized the importance of a "catholic spirit," which meant having a generous and inclusive attitude towards others, even those with whom we disagree. Wesley believed this spirit was essential for the church's health, growth, and witness.

## **Accomplishments**

Yet, we move forward in ministry, deliberately choosing to be strong, encouraged, and hopeful in the Lord as we persevere through this season, facing challenges and embracing new opportunities.

One thing is clear, we are a stronger, more courageous, and more hopeful community and connection, enjoying a more profound sense of belonging and unity. We are supporting one another, sharing our resources and expertise, and working together in new ways to achieve more than we could alone. We are Christians in the United Methodist tradition and proud to be so by choice.

Despite all we've been through, this is an exciting time to be a United Methodist in the Central Texas Conference.

We are strong, encouraged, and hopeful in the Lord, responding effectively to a changing social and religious landscape.

- Our Lay Ministries team added several training sessions to equip emerging leaders that bring fresh ideas, gifts, expertise, life experience, and energy to our work.
- Our ministries are helping people grow in their love for God, offering Christ, serving others, especially the poor, doing works of mercy, and seeking God's justice.

More specifically, our witness and impact in the world are stronger, encouraged, and hopeful because of innovative initiatives. For example,

- Pastor Rev. Sarah Boyette and the senior adults Pickleball Ministry at First Hurst UMC, strengthening minds, bodies, spirits, and relationships.
- The Bike Gangs of Fort Worth chapter at New Riverside UMC and their Bike in a Box program offers families in the surrounding community safe neighborhood bike rides, free bike repairs, and free bikes to get families rolling.
- A lay-led ministry, The Five and Two Food Truck, out of Arlington Heights UMC in Fort Worth, currently provides as many as 1000 free meals a week for those with food insecurities.
- In Nolanville, a community of 6000 residents, Rev. Patricia Warden, is spearheading an area-wide, ecumenical effort to launch a community health clinic this year. She wanted to open the clinic in 2019 but was delayed and delayed again due to the COVID shutdown and economic struggles. The community clinic is targeted to open this September and serves as an example of strong, courageous, and hope-filled perseverance.
- In Arlington, United Methodist Churches are partnering with the Arlington ISD to help meet the students' and families' educational and environmental needs.
- Revs. Beth Evers and Leslie Byrd, pastors at University UMC in Fort Worth and New World UMC in Arlington, swiftly responded to the real-life suffering caused by tragic shootings. Under their pastoral leadership, their churches mobilized to provide sanctuary and held interdenominational prayer vigils, offering support and comfort to those affected by the senseless violence.

Your devotion to Christ, your local congregation, and the United Methodist Church is inspiring. Your generosity knows no bounds; you've given freely without worrying about the cost. Despite adversity, you continued to press forward with unwavering

strength, courage, and hope. Your tireless efforts are recognized, even as you sought no personal gain or reward. Your devotion, service, and witness for Christ enable us to make disciples and pave the way for future generations of Christ followers.

We are strong, encouraged, and hopeful because of our district superintendents, annual conference directors, and support staff's selfless and servant leadership.

- This year, **District Superintendents** Revs. Philip Rhodes, Beverly Connally, and Danny Tenney, assisted by active and retired elders, presided at more than 140 church charge conferences for disaffiliations. These three superintendents have worked closely and tirelessly with SPRCs and me in appointing and assigning ordained and licensed clergy and trained laypersons to serve congregations and mission fields.
- **The Smith Center for Evangelism**, directed by Dr. Will Cotton and Rev. Meg Witmer-Faille, and their staff have resourced the creation of Oasis churches, the launch and chartering of Revive UMC in Azle, the reorganization of our conference youth ministry program, and supported our camping and campus ministries. They'll share more details of all their accomplishments in their report.
- **The Robert's Center for Clergy Leadership**, directed by Rev. Lara Franklin and Mrs. Kathy Ezell, resourced the clergy with multiple opportunities for fellowship, leadership development, coaching, continuing education, and peer support.
- **The administrative arm of the Roberts Center, directed by Dr. Tim Brewster**, includes the Conference Finance and Administration chaired by Mr. Gary Sult, Pensions and Benefits administered by Mrs. Shawn-Mari Riley, and the conference Trustees chaired by Rev. Fred Bates. These persons and members of respective boards and committees led our conference's administration and finances with invaluable expert oversight and transparency that fostered trust and ensured the best interests of our annual conference.
- **Our communications and IT teams**, under the direction of Vance Morton, provided timely information and technologies in times of confusion and uncertainty that built trust, provided clarity, facilitated coordination, reduced rumors and misinformation, and provided reassurance.

## **So where do we go from here?**

**Unification** - The impact of disaffiliation will reshape the denomination and initiate the redrawing of annual conference boundaries.

That is why, beginning later this month, we will start a consultation process to work toward unifying Central and North Texas and possibly the Northwest Texas Conferences.

This consultation will recommend reorganizing to better disciple existing members and reach new people for Christ using adaptive, effective, and innovative 21st-century best practices. The recommendations will also prepare us to move forward as a unified conference immediately after the South-Central Jurisdictional Conference adopts new boundaries in 2024.

Both annual conferences must first approve the unification next year.

Lisa Gafford of the Central Texas Conference and Tim Griffey from North Texas will co-manage the assessment phase. Brief bios for Lisa and Tim are on the conference website. Lisa and Tim will work with independent consultants John Wimberley and Caitlyn Cogden from GCFA. John will conduct the conference assessment and organizational design proposal, and Caitlyn will help with administrative and financial integration recommendations.

Their reports and recommendations will be ready by October 1.

In the meantime, both cabinet teams and selected conference clergy and lay leaders are discerning an aspirational vision for the emergent annual conference that will be compelling enough to **Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to the world.**

Four to five strategic priorities with action plans and key metrics will support the aspirational vision. It is too soon to present the key strategic priorities, but one key priority remains ... **Engaged Discipleship in the United Methodist tradition that helps people love God, proclaim new life in Christ, serve others (especially the poor), do mercy, and seek justice.**

We will communicate the vision, strategic priorities, action plans, and key metrics as soon as they become ready.

I trust you are as excited as I am about the new opportunities and possibilities unification will afford us.

## Looking Forward

Several of you have heard me speak in person or via video about the missional importance of shifting our focus from today's crisis and short-term thinking to laying the foundations for a church that future generations will receive and value - a church, future generations will give God thanks for us for being good, farsighted ancestors.

This is such a core conviction that our new conference podcast produced by our communications team and hosted by **Rev. Daniel Hawkins - POD Strangely Warmed** - dedicated the first nine episodes to discussing how to be good ancestors of faith to future generations. I invite you to listen to the podcasts if you haven't yet.

Here is the opportunity before us, as I see it.

Today, we can start laying the **foundations** of a church for future generations that is **growing and diverse** and will equip them to identify the needs of individuals and society and address those needs out of the resources of the Christian faith clearly, convincingly, and effectively.

We are farsighted, kingdom-oriented people with a grand overarching and eternal perspective that soars above the perils of short-term thinking. Ecclesiastes says that **God has put a sense of past and future into our minds** to figure out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

To be clear, we are very earthly-minded, concerned, and engaged with what is happening around us, seeking a peaceful and just world. We seek to live a life pleasing to God that loves and honors God and blesses and cares for our neighbor.

But we are not so consumed with the present that we see the future as if nobody were there or the coming realm of God as if it is something to disbelieve or ignore.

Our focus on eternal things makes us stronger, more encouraged, and more hopeful in the Lord. St. Ignatius says, **“The laborers in the Lord’s vineyard should have one foot on the ground and the other raised to proceed on their journey.”**

The truth is that tomorrow’s generation of disciples is not here to challenge our actions today. Our actions can contribute to tomorrow’s generation’s well-being or borrow from them, leaving them to start with a deficit they may never recover from.

An old Apache says, **“We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”**

So, we are responsible for including the young generations and those yet not born and their needs in thinking about how to start laying the foundations for a church that will equip them as faithful Christians living in a very different and even more complex and volatile world than ours.

Generational researchers signal that emerging generations already envision and strive for a diverse, equitable, inclusive, peaceful, and just future. They know how to use the **power of social media** to drive change and hold those in power accountable for working toward such a world.

As research shows, emerging generations don’t want to be lectured or preached to from a burning pulpit; they want to hear about the teachings and lessons of the faith to learn, reflect on, and live their Christian faith in a clear, convincing, and relevant way. They seek a church that cares about **society, the environment, and the well-being of all humanity.**

Our United Methodist method of doing theology that strives to clearly articulate our understanding of the divine-human encounter as revealed in **Scripture**, illumined by **Church tradition**, vivified in personal **experience**, and confirmed by **reason** based on wider fields of knowledge is a precious and timely gift to current and future generations of disciples.

The future is not a distant abstraction, it is an assurance of our faith and hope. Scripture list genealogies and a great cloud of witnesses that remind us repeatedly that we are both heirs and ancestors of faith now responsible for passing on the Christian faith to the next generation so they will place their hope in God.

Roman Krznaric, in *The Good Ancestor*, introduces the Māori concept of *whakapapa*, or intergenerational fluidity. The Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. They have a rich culture, language, and tradition that are still celebrated today. The Māori have a strong connection to the land and the natural world, and an emphasis on community, hospitality, and respect for ancestors and elders characterizes their culture. For these New Zealanders, **time is liquid, dissolving yesterday, today, and tomorrow into one another.** For them, everyone is in the room when they make decisions: the dead, the living, and the unborn.

We are all interlinked as humanity - past, present, and future - by the same basic needs and common struggles.

With strength, courage, and hope, we will do our small but important part to allow the Lord's grace to enter and bring peace, justice, and freedom into our broken world.

With strength, courage, and hope, we will be a church today that thinks beyond the knee-jerk, reckless confines of what Bob Johanson says is mindless categorizing that fosters contempt and makes it easy to write off others with tired labels like "immigrant," "black," "white," "millennial," "gay," "Jew," "Muslim," "old," and I would add, "progressive," "liberal," "conservative," "traditionalist." People are more, much more than the labels we project on them. We are human beings created in the image of God, sacred and worthy to God!

In Christ, we are One! We are one with each other. And we are one in ministry to the world until Christ returns, and we feast at his heavenly banquet!

With strength, courage, and hope, we will invite emerging generations to the decision-making tables, learn from them, stop talking about them and start talking with them, and come alongside them to co-construct a good future and a church they will receive and value - even if it is different.

I am excited about our keynote speakers, Reverend Trey Wince and Dr. Akekelah Ligonde from Ministry Incubators - an organization dedicated to transforming innovative and even some "way out there" ideas into actionable and sustainable

ministries. Their expertise will give us valuable insights and practical ideas to consider as we work to reach and minister to present and future generations, even those not yet born.

I'm also very eager to hear from a panel of Gen Z youth and young adults who will share their hopes and dreams for the church and the world.

Friends, we are at an inflection point in the life and future of our denomination, annual conference, and local churches. In business or economics, an inflection point refers to a turning point in a company's performance, where the rate of growth or decline changes significantly. Now is God's time window to make long-needed and necessary fundamental changes to enable us to grow again, stay relevant, flourish, and thrive in a changing world.

We want future generations to judge us as good ancestors of faith who thought about them and helped lay the foundations for a church they will receive and value and help them be faithful Christ followers.

So, courage, everyone! We're not going to give fears a platform!

We choose hope! We choose to hope against hope! Our hope is in what God is doing and will do through us.

Our hope cannot and will not be contained!

We choose life, not death. We choose new beginnings, not endings.

We will move forward, hoping dangerously in God's radical and inclusive love, who created, redeemed, and sustains us and who will make a way when there seems to be no way!

We will create new things, prepare the way for a better tomorrow and a relevant church for the next generation and call a piece of heaven down today.

Together, we are strong in the Lord! We take heart in the Lord! We choose to put our hope in the Lord! Our hope will not disappoint us!

The future of the United Methodist Church is now.