

**Arkansas Conference
The United Methodist Church
Episcopal Address
"Full Speed Ahead"
Bishop Gary E. Mueller
June 20, 2014**



This year sure is different from last year.

Last year I was a 'rookie' bishop and you extended amazing grace; this year I'm a grizzled old veteran. Last year I had Karon Mann, our outstanding conference lay leader, standing by me to make me look good; this year I'm up here by myself. Last year you were waiting to hear where you are heading; this year you're trying to figure out where this thing called the "Next Steps' Trajectory" is really taking us.

But one thing is exactly the same as last year. I'm still in love with you. I'm still in awe of your faith. I'm still amazed by your creativity. I'm still inspired by your commitment. I'm still challenged by how you're sharing Jesus' love. I'm still blessed to be your bishop. And I still believe that the local church is the most important place where disciples are made.

Which makes my task today really pretty simple: I want to get you ready to go back home.

I know. I know. Annual Conference has just begun and I'm already talking about what's going to happen when it's over. But that's the point. I want you to be ready to move full speed ahead in making your church such a faithful, passionate, excited, growing congregation that the only thing you can do is make disciples of Jesus Christ, who in turn make disciples, who are equipped to go out into the mission field right outside your sanctuary doors to transform lives, communities and the world.

So I'm going to share four important things that every one of you can do – every one of you – so that we can be a church moving full speed ahead. Now I want to tell you up front that you can do them. You really can. You are capable. You really are. And the Holy Spirit is going to be with you enabling you to do it. So get ready, there will

be a test after I'm done. And here is what will happen when you go home and when you do these four things: You will be amazed at how God enables you to move faster than you ever thought possible, to do greater things than you ever imagined and to be on fire for the Lord.

Get real

The first thing that you need to do when you get back home is **get real**.

That's right. You need to begin by getting real about how tough it is right now. And let's just be honest, it's plenty tough.

It's tough in our world. It seems that we're closer and closer to that proverbial tipping point when everything could just spin out of control. And, at the very time our crisis-riddled world needs the Good News of the Gospel more than ever, it seems that world is less receptive to faith than ever.

It's tough to be part of a mainline denomination. We don't hold a position of prestige the way we used to. We're declining, growing older and smaller. And, if that isn't tough enough, there's no mainline denomination that has successfully reversed its decline.

It's tough to be a United Methodist. We're struggling to be relevant. There's a new set of rules, but we're not sure what they are. And one issue – homosexuality – seems to keep overriding every other issue, putting stress and strain on our connection in unimaginable ways.

It's tough for some of you in this room right now. You've been hurt by 'the system.' By pastors. By laity. And perhaps even by me. And I am sorry. So sorry. Especially if I am responsible for that pain.

Now, none of this is new to you. It's not news because you experience how tough the world is, how tough it is to be in ministry every single day. And that's why we need to be very, very careful. Because while it's important to get real about how tough it is, if we're not careful, we're going to end up going down a road that takes us where we just don't want to go. Here's how it works: you go from expressing how you feel to whining, to gritching (that is a theological term), to feeling powerless, to acting like a victim, to experiencing chronic anxiety, to wanting to give up. And then, before you know it, you'll be just like those Israelites following Moses who formed a "Let's go back to Egypt" Committee. And, suddenly, you're not going to be ready to follow God into the future anymore, and the thing that is so frustrating about that is you'll feel self-righteous doing it.

That's why you have to get real about something that's a whole lot more real than just how tough, and discouraging, and difficult it is. You have to get real about our incredible Wesleyan heritage. You have to get real about a Holy Spirit inspired vision. You have to get real about a biblically grounded mission. You have to get real

about our transformative trajectory. You have to get real about the great lay leaders we have here in Arkansas. You have to get real about the outstanding pastors we have here in Arkansas. And you have to get real about the future that God has planned for us.

But, most of all, you have get real about the fact that we have Jesus. The one who is our Savior, Lord, brother and friend. The one who has come from God to give us what we absolutely need, but can never get on our own. The one who is ready to lead us where he wants us to go.

Now you know and I know that it's not going to be easy. Because Jesus is leading us away from the past into the future. And that always means hard choices. And change. And doing things you've never done before. And that's when we start talking about how tough it is, and whining and gritching and caucusing about forming that Back to Egypt committee.

But, remember, Jesus is leading us. And when Jesus is leading us, we don't need to know where he's taking us. We don't have to be comfortable. And we don't have to agree with everything he does. We just have to do it. So remember, let's get real. Let's get real about how tough it is. But more than anything else, let's get real about Jesus, and the real difference he makes in our lives.

Be different

When you get back home, you've got to **be different**.

Can I just talk with you honestly now? I get the feeling sometimes that we're kind of embarrassed to be Christian. It may be because there are lots of Christians who do embarrassing things. Not you, of course – Methodists in other Annual Conferences, to be sure. Sometimes you're afraid of becoming one of those 'holier than thou' types. And sometimes you think you'd rather be in control of your life than following Jesus.

Now, I get that, okay? I feel that way sometimes, too. But remember – you can't experience the salvation Jesus offers you without becoming a new creation in Christ!

So go ahead and claim the fact that you are different. You're not different because you're perfect, better than anyone else and loved more by God than everyone else. You're different because you're so passionately in love with Jesus that you are ready to follow him, to choose to be his disciple, to follow him and choose to live the way he calls you to live.

Yes, you're going to be different. In a world filled with too much selfishness, too much crime, too much greed, too much terrorism, too much violence, too much poverty, too much hatred and too much despair, you are going to live the Jesus way, with love, compassion, generosity and hope. Lots and lots and lots of hope.

Look, this isn't just nice-sounding rhetoric. It also works with real life issues. Even the most challenging issues we're facing as a church right now.

There's lots of talk these days about what the United Methodist Church is going to do about the issue of homosexuality, particularly same gender marriages. There's name calling coming from both sides, all kinds of solutions being put forward and lots of options being offered.

I've got news for you. Sex is not the only thing we talk about in the United Methodist Church.

We begin with Jesus. We continue with Jesus. And it's in the spirit of Jesus that we deal with real life issues in real life ways. And if we begin with Jesus and continue with Jesus, let me tell you, we're not going to divide just because we disagree. If we begin with Jesus and continue with Jesus, we're not going to let identities of left or right, red or blue and progressive or traditional determine what we do. We're not going to have winners and losers.

Why? Because you're different. We're different. We're sisters and brothers in Christ. You're one in the Body of Christ. You're the heart of Methodism. And even though we may not agree on everything, we know whose we are. And we're going to act like it.

If we talk about difficult issues in ways filled with love and honesty and respect, and we will trust that if we make that the main thing, we will be about the main thing, which will enable us to deal with all things.

Move into the community

When you get back home, it's time to **move into the community**.

I recently read a study – it was a fascinating article – and it said that the main reason traditional mainline denominations – aka United Methodist Church – are declining is that we have made it all about us and forgotten that it's about Jesus who goes out into the community and expects us to follow him.

So can I be honest with you? Really honest? Yeah, you sure? Okay.

I hear far more talk from pastors about what they don't like about their churches, how the appointive system has done them wrong or how they are not getting paid adequately than I do about their call to ministry, their passion for following Jesus or their joy in serving the Lord.

Are you ready, laity? I hear a lot more from you about 'my' church, or how all they want to do is wait until the pastor moves, or even "I just want my church to stay open long enough for my funeral to be held here and then I don't care what happens." Okay, is every toe in this room broken by now? I mean really? Come on!

No wonder we're stuck, no wonder we're declining, no wonder we're not sure who we are!

It doesn't matter who you are, whether you are lay or clergy – being a Christian is a privilege, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a privilege and being in ministry is a privilege. And we need to start acting like it. We need to spend far less time on ourselves and far more time moving into the community to share Jesus.

That's the whole point of the Next Steps Trajectory. So when you hear about district mission plans, mission field appointments, congregations looking more like their neighborhoods, every congregation having at least one more profession of faith, equipping laity and pastors, building strong African-American congregations and reaching the nones – you're really hearing about how we United Methodists in Arkansas are going to be intentional about moving into the community.

Are you tired – I'll admit I am – are you tired of the United Methodist Church being stuck, stuffy and slowly dying? Are you ready for our beloved church to be a movement again? Well we can be. We really can. And we can start right now by being moved by Jesus. You can't be a movement unless something moves you. And if we are moved by Jesus and follow him into the community, we will be sharing his life, his love, his joy, his hope, and his transforming power that will make a difference for all eternity.

Experience revival now

When you get back home, it's time to **experience revival now**.

Bet you didn't see that coming – it's a brand new thought for me, I know.

I recently was meeting with Launch Team #1 – the group working on Step #1: experiencing spiritual revival. Someone commented, "Church is the last place that you feel comfortable talking about your relationship with God and what God is doing in your life!" Everyone in that room – including me – said, "My gosh. That's true. It's sad, it's heartbreaking, but it's true."

Well, that's why we need revival.

Revival is not a three-night hellfire and brimstone preaching event every summer where you go, you get religion, and you go home and do whatever you want. Revival is not about someone having an emotional experience that mirrors your experience so you can feel good about yourself. Revival is certainly not about hiding in some spiritual 'la-la' land so you don't have to deal with real life pain and social justice.

Revival is about us getting ourselves out of the way and allowing the Holy Spirit to re-awaken us, re-new us, re-fill us, re-form us, re-direct us and re-energize us for what ultimately matters: the love of God in Jesus Christ. It's what happened to those disciples who were hiding in that upper room in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension.

They were trying to figure out 'What do we do next?' They were trying to figure out how not to be in trouble with the authorities. They were trying to figure out what they were going to do. And suddenly, suddenly, the Holy Spirit came, And with the sound of a rushing wind and tongues like fire, they were filled, and they proclaimed the Gospel so it was understandable to all of those around them. They were able to go proclaim the good news of the Gospel and thousands were converted. They were able to create a church that grew and changed the world.

You need revival – *we* need revival. You need it now – *we* need it now. And you need a lot of it – *we* need a lot of it.

In a couple of days, you're going back home. When you get there, you have to make a choice.

You can choose to gripe about how bad things are. You can continue to be who you've always been. You can make it all about you and your church. And you can watch the people for whom Jesus died continue to struggle from a distance.

Or...or... or... you can choose to focus on the most real thing of all - Jesus. Or you can choose to claim your identity as his disciple and be different. Or you can choose to move into the community and make disciples who make disciples who get on board with God's work. Or you can choose to call upon the Holy Spirit to revive us.

I know whose you are. I know who you are. I know what's in your heart. I know your dreams. And I know the incredible faith in what you are going to do when you get back home.

You are going to choose to move full speed ahead. God bless you, and Amen.