

**Claiming God's Frontiers: Our Communities –
Right Here! Right Now!
Annual Conference Keynote Address
June 8, 2006**

Greetings!

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Acts 2:1-4

What an awesome experience when the Holy Spirit is in our midst, a presence so powerful it feels as if we could reach out and touch it. The Holy Spirit empowers us to get past all that divides us and simply rejoice in our oneness in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit is in our midst. . .

- when our hearts are beating as one,
- when we are truly all together in one place,
- when we are here, in this place,
- when we've come from the north and the south and the east and the west, and our spirits are renewed because Jesus is in our midst.

The Holy Spirit is here when we are truly engaged in Holy Conferencing.

I thank God daily because I am most fortunate of people. There is no place in the world I would rather be than right here, right now! What an absolute privilege it is to be here in the Central Pennsylvania Conference. I am awed by your faithfulness, your creativity, your commitment to Jesus Christ. I am constantly encouraged by the strength of our conference.

This is a very important year in the life of the United Methodist church as we recognize and celebrate the grating of full clergy rights for women in the Methodist stream of our heritage. We take appropriate pride in knowing that the first woman to be recognized was our own Rev. Maude Jensen. And that's not all. When the Central Jurisdiction was acknowledged to be a hindrance to full equality, the first congregation to join a conference was our own Camp Curtain Memorial Church. We will celebrate both of these extraordinary milestones this year.

We have been, we are, and we will be a strong conference! I see evidence throughout our churches of the Holy Spirit breaking forth.

- The miracle of **Mission Central** is a place where miracles continue to unfold daily. The wonderful outpouring of resources spreads God's love in tangible and life giving ways literally all over the earth.
- When **Katrina devastated the Gulf coast**, Central Pennsylvania's immediate outpouring of money and flood buckets, health kits, layette kits, school kits water and every other conceivable resource brought hope to a forsaken people. And we'll be there for years to come.
- For more than a decade we've paid **100 percent of our shares of ministry** to the General church.
- I am awed by the incredible **talent** across this conference – clergy and laity. We never scramble for leadership – willing, gifted workers are everywhere.
- You made sacrificial commitments to our **Holy Grounds** campaign, over and above all the other giving requested from you, and our outdoor ministry will reap the rewards for years to come.

- There is a heart throughout this conference to do whatever it takes to **grow our churches!** Across the conference our churches are reaching out in dramatic ways to the last, the lost, the lonely – we are truly claiming God’s frontiers across Central Pennsylvania and beyond.

Can you feel the spirit? Moving through this conference? Moving through your church? Like the sound of the wind, we are seeing signs of new life, like a fire bursting forth, filling our hearts with a zeal to serve Jesus Christ! As I witness the bursting forth of vitality in our churches, I think of those words we heard just a few minutes ago spoken by that wild prophet in a cave!

“I will pour out my Spirit
 On every kind of people
 Your sons will prophesy,
 Also your daughters;
 Your young men will see visions,
 Your old men dream dreams.
 The spirit of God is truly upon us!
 When the time comes,
 I’ll pour out my Spirit
 On those who serve me, men and women both,
 And they’ll prophesy.
 I’ll set wonders in the sky above
 And signs in the earth below.

Acts 2:17-19

We are living in a time of signs and wonders! We are in the midst of an extraordinary time in the life of the church. What a time to be alive! We have launched a dramatic new way to be the church. We are turning this ship around! And you are proving your commitment to do whatever it takes to be God’s faithful people – to Claim God’s Frontiers – Our Communities: Right Here! Right Now!

We had unprecedented gatherings this past year. Many of you were there when in the fall we held meetings in every district to look at leadership for our churches. We challenged you to work together in new ways to provide transformational pastoral leadership, to empower not only pastors but laity to be the leaders God is calling you to be. Almost 3,500 people attended these meetings!

Then in the winter and spring we looked at our churches and challenged you to reach out to your communities, to push beyond the walls of your church and beyond old patterns, and yes, beyond your comfort zone. We invited you to write the next chapter of Acts, Acts 29, the ongoing story of the church in your community.

At these district meetings we had more than 3,500 people present. Most churches were excited by what they were discovering and the discoveries which keep unfolding. Churches that are meeting on an ongoing basis are reaching out with astonishing creativity and courage and are already bearing fruit for Jesus Christ! One of my greatest prayers is also coming true – you are talking to each other, working together, discovering that you can do much more together than one church can do alone. We have extraordinary resources right here in this conference to share with one another!

How will this journey continue? Where do we go from here? What next? What is our next faithful step as a conference?

We are aligning our Core values. As I have visited among you I’ve been astonished at the variety of ways we do church, the ways people are courageously spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to

their community. It's true we have some churches which are virtually on hospice care, more focused on keeping a building in place than in serving Jesus. But these are the exceptions. First, the Holy Spirit is sweeping through our churches. There is a determination to follow Jesus whatever that requires. We are increasingly committed to keeping the main thing the main thing. To proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is our central purpose as the church. Our first and fundamental value is our commitment to Jesus Christ.

Second, our core value is to raise up leaders, clergy and lay leaders.

We are launching a strategy to empower every pastor to be the transformational leader God has called him or her to be. This summer we will provide each pastor with an assessment of gifts and growing edges. This will help us in creative ways. Every pastor is in ministry because there was a stirring – perhaps it was the still small voice of God, a sound of sheer silence, a cacophony of voices saying, “You can do this” which became irresistible. But in the reality of parish ministry, that original call, that passion out of which the call was born sometimes cools. We hope to reawaken passion for ministry, to provide opportunities for skill development when needed. We will make coaching available and other strategies for helping our pastors become the leaders God has called them to be. God is calling forth LEADERS – both pastoral and lay leaders. The Holy Spirit rests on each person. You are the ones!

In *Narnia*, the movie, Peter protests to Aslan, “I’m not who you think I am.” The powerful lion Aslan, who is the Christ figure in the story, has just announced to Peter that he, Peter, will be the one who must defeat the evil White Witch Jadis. Aslan is seeing something in Peter that he himself cannot yet see. When Peter protests, “I’m not who you think I am” Aslan replies to Peter with absolute authority: “You are the one to fulfill the prophecy.”

God is calling each of you to fulfill the prophecy. You are the one.

Too often we shrink from God’s call to us. There is a voice inside of us saying, “I’m not who you think I am. I can’t do it. Our church is too weak. We can’t make a difference. We don’t have enough people. We don’t have enough money.”

The is the message God is sending to us, the people of the Central Pennsylvania Conference is, “Right here! Right now!” God is calling us to reach out to our communities, to those we have not seen, those we have not heard. Lose we have not love, right here, right now. We protest, “But God we aren’t who you think we are.” And God replies, “You are the one to fulfill the prophecy!”

Right here! Right now!

Third we are committed to growing vital churches, determined to continue this remarkable ongoing story of the church in their own Acts 29.

A crucial value is that we must be more than Sunday/Tuesday Christians: worship on Sunday and a committee or church board meeting on Tuesday is not enough. It is arrogant to believe that to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ all we need to do is show up in worship and serve on some church board or committee or fund raising project. The temptation then is to make church the center of our lives instead of Jesus Christ!

John Wesley [According to Lovett Weems] asked three questions: Is there faith? Is there fire? Are there fruits?

To be a disciple means this:

- participate weekly in worship, not as a spectator but as an active, involved, fully present participant;
- be a part of a small group, a Sunday School class, a prayer group which will help you grow in your faith, one that requires you to study and respond, one that includes prayer and that forces

you to ask the question constantly “how is God calling me to be a disciple?” One of the best strategies ever developed in the United Methodist Church is Disciple Bible Study! Last year in our conference we had a dramatic increase in the number of people in Sunday School and small groups at all ages – as much as a 50 percent increase in some categories. That is great news! There are many ways to tend the spiritual fire in your heart.

- take part every year on some “hands-on” mission project that will truly bear fruit for God’s people in their time of need; and
- tithe – give a percentage of your income to God or to put it another way: everything you possess belongs to God, prayerfully determine what percentage of all that belongs to God’s will you keep for yourself. The biblical requirement is that we keep no more than 90 percent for ourselves! If you are returning to God less than 10 percent, pray that God will help you increase that amount.

Many of you are already implementing these expectations of members. Colonial Park Harrisburg, for example, expects new members to sign a covenant. Others of you are making it clear that we are setting a high bar for members of the United Methodist church. We are not a club! We are servants of Jesus Christ!

The fourth core value is that we are here for the transformation of the world. It’s about OUR COMMUNITIES: RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW!

We must constantly ask ourselves in everything we do as God’s people, “So what?” How does what we do assist in bringing forth the kingdom of God? How does this activity lead to the second half of our mission statement, “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?”

Where are we seeing signs and wonders of the reign of God?

Just as the light of Christ glowed among us when we began our worship today, bringing light into the darkness, the Spirit of God is drawing us into a profound, exciting, challenging time in the life of the church of Jesus Christ! This is a time when, by God’s grace, that light will spread to our communities and into every corner of the world!

We are in a new day – what is the evidence?

Mission provides the hands and the feet of God. In the story Jesus tells in Matthew the question is asked, “Where have we seen you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison?” And the answer is, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt 25). A church which is turned in upon itself – trying to survive, focused only on its building, a club, will never grow. The church which is giving itself away is the church that will grow and thrive.

Those who truly have shining eyes among us are the people who have traveled to the Gulf Coast – who have seen the horrors of destruction but who have also worked to bring hope and healing.

The Austin charge, a three point charge in Wellsboro which is located in three communities which comprise the smallest school district in the state of Pennsylvania, is absolutely on fire because these folks understand it’s all about what you do for others. They will send a team of over 45 youth and adults again this summer on a mission trip to help others.

We have pioneering prison ministries in the Lewisburg district and the State college district.

I am meeting teams of people involved in the Angel Food Project in many of our communities who are so excited about providing low cost, nutritious food to their neighbors.

In Good Shepherd Tyrone a new hot meal program has absolutely taken off and hundreds of meals are being provided weekly.

When the most exciting thing happening in a church is the Easter egg project to pay the loan versus the church which has sent a team of adults and teens on a mission trip the values of the congregation are out of focus. I know for many of you I'm preaching to the choir! Tomorrow morning we're going to have a celebration of mission and you'll see that we have literally thousands of mission projects going on all over the conference.

One of my personal prayers is, "God help me get out of the way of the movement of your Holy Spirit. Help me not block the Spirit's activity in my life and in decisions I make for the church." One of the recent statistics we've discovered is that the vast majority of people in this country believe that they are spiritual beings. I think many of them are. They are not church going people, but they have a connection to God. Why are they not in the church? Some of these folks may be deceiving themselves. But some are not in the church because they refuse to become embroiled in the petty concerns that our churches spend their time on. We block the Spirit's ability to use our churches to change people's lives and to change the world when we dumb down the gospel, the gospel intended for the reign of God.

CONCLUSION

Most of you have heard me declare that we must change! And we must. We must be willing to risk what we've never done before, to risk stepping beyond our comfort zone. What must never change is our passionate commitment to serve Jesus Christ whatever it takes.

Jesus responded to the question, what is the greatest commandment with the simple statement, "to love God with all of your heart and mind and soul and strength, and a second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself."

And where is the source of that love? Jesus tells us, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

God is calling us to courageous action in living out this commandment. And God requires us to hold ever more tightly to fundamentals. We are Christians! We are people of the word! Everything we do must be grounded in that truth! Christ is our anchor and our cornerstone. Christ is our solid rock.

Passion! Enthusiasm! A fervent desire to respond to God's overwhelming goodness and power! A commitment to serve the last, the lost, the lonely, the longing! That unity of purpose brings the 'blessing.' "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity! For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." (Psalm 133:1, 3)

In Ephesians we read the prayer of Paul:

"I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, you may be granted strength in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what are the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Ephesians 3:16-19

Where is our passion? When a church is overtaken by a burning desire to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, by an unstoppable commitment to reach out to people, . . . something begins to happen. Show me a church which is absolutely on fire for Jesus Christ and I will show you a church which is growing.

We are living in a time when God's grace abounds. Thanks be to God these are days of hope and promise. And finally it is only by God's grace,

- by God's grace we can be the people God has called us to be;
- by God's grace we can be the leaders who will proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ and will call others to faithfulness;
- by God's grace we can be the churches which will truly reach those we have not seen, those we have not heard, those we have not loved;
- by God's grace we can truly claim God's frontiers in our communities – Right here! Right now!

Every promise we can make, every prayer and step of faith, every difference we will make is only by God's grace.

Every mountain we will climb, every ray of hope we shine, every blessing left behind is only by God's grace.

Every soul we long to reach, every heart we hope to teach, everywhere we share Christ's peace is only by his grace.

Every loving word we say, every tear we wipe away, every sorrow turned to praise is only by God's grace.

Grace alone which God supplies

Strength unknown God will provide.

Christ in us our Cornerstone,

We will go forth in grace alone.

† Bishop Jane Allen Middleton