

**Special Called Session of the Annual Conference
CTC September 17, 2022**

**Our Undeterred Mission
Matthew 28:16-20
Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.**

Beloved of God, called to be saints, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus Christ¹.

A reading from the gospel as written to us by Matthew:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”²

This is good news from our Lord.

Let us pray: **God of all nations, may it please your supreme and divine goodness to give us all abundant grace ever to know your most holy will and perfectly to fulfill it. Amen.**

“Go and make disciples of all nations,” this fundamental command of Christ - also known as the Great Commission - has not changed in 2000 years, nor will it ever change or be deterred. Making disciples formed into the likeness of Jesus is at the heart of our existence as the United Methodist Church.

Christ entrusts his disciples, and the Church, to make more followers for him that are more loving, more gracious, more faithful, more trusting of God, more peaceful, more joyful, more merciful, and more just as an alternative and corrective to the tit for tat, quid pro quo world we live in.

Disciples of Jesus according to His Sermon on the Mount, love their enemies. They do good to those who hate them and bless those who curse them. They pray for those who mistreat them. They don't retaliate when someone insults their dignity or integrity. They do not withhold from robbers and exploiters who take from them, instead, they place their trust in God's provision. They give to those who ask and do unto others as they would have others do unto them. They are merciful, just as God is merciful. Jesus' disciples do not judge, do not condemn, and they forgive because they have been forgiven by God. The reward of those that live this Christ-shaped life will be great, they are children of God.

¹ Romans 1:7.

² Matthew 28:18-20.

If we are honest, we must admit that we have a hard time living up to those Christ-like behaviors as individual Christ followers, as local churches, as a denomination, and as Christ's universal Church.

Yet, we can all agree that Jesus has given us this sacred life-changing and world-transforming mission to be his disciples that live an even better way as his people in the world, and that make other disciples in his likeness despite our internal disagreements and strife.

Disagreements and strife have always been part of the story of faith – a telltale reality of our fallen human condition that is as old as civilization.

In Genesis, for example, we learn that Cain disagreed with God's assessment of his offering which led him to anger and to eventually kill his brother Abel because God valued Abel's offering more than his. Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed Jacob. Joseph's brothers hated him because his father loved Joseph more than them. These internal disputes and hostilities do not deter God's redemption from moving forward from generation to generation.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses expresses being heavily burdened by the disputes of the people he leads³. He appoints wise and reputable tribal leaders to give the community — whether citizens or aliens — impartial and fair hearings regarding their disputes. Despite grumblings, disputes, and strife, God's ultimate leading of his people to the promised land goes forward undeterred.

In the gospels, Jesus settles disputes about who is the greatest among the disciples, about inheritance, about taxes, the interpretation of the Law of Moses, how many times to forgive offenses, and several other questions and issues. Often, Jesus landed on the other side of traditional religious teachings and social norms. He was feared, hated, and eventually crucified. Yet, despite grumblings, disputes, and strife, Christ's saving mission goes forward undeterred.

On numerous occasions, the apostle Paul admonishes the churches he planted to put an end to strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, and disturbances. He urges churches to have the mind of Christ, to be like-minded, and to live in peace so God's peace will be with them. Despite internal church grumblings, disputes, and strife, Paul's mission to bring Christ's name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel goes forward undeterred.

Internal disagreements and strife among God's people and Christ's body, the Church, hinders the witness of God's people to a watching world. But still, God's mission always finds a way to move forward undeterred toward the consummation of the ages and the coming reign of Christ despite our sinful human bent toward disputes and divisions.

³ Deuteronomy 1:9-18.

Our denomination has been in strife, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, and disturbances for 50 years regarding the marriage and ordination of persons with a same-gender orientation. Over the past 50 years, language regarding all people being of sacred worth, sanctions, and chargeable offenses have been included in The *Book of Discipline* to affirm the sacredness of all people while prohibiting the marriage of same gender persons and the ordination of self-avowed practicing gay and lesbian individuals.

Today's church, however, is comprised of faithful Christians that hold a broad spectrum of viewpoints on LGBTQ inclusion in the life and ministry of The United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice. Some oppose the ordination and Christian marriage of same gender persons. Others speak up to support justice and the full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ population in the life and ministry of the United Methodist Church. Both groups believe they are acting in faithfulness to their understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and the Church in the world.

In 2018, prior to the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis, I hosted 18 district town hall meetings in the Great Plains Conference to present the three plans developed by the Bishop's Commission on a Way Forward. As such, you will recall they were the One Church Plan, the Connectional Plan, and the Traditional Plan.

I understand that several similar townhall and other informational meetings occurred across the Central Texas Conference as well.

More than 5000 laity and clergy attended the 18 town hall meetings I officiated. They drove as many as 150 miles one way on Saturdays and Sundays to attend a two-hour meeting. Some caravanned to the meetings and some came in vans and buses. I was moved to see all the energy and passion about human sexuality demonstrated by both sides and **prayed that one day that great commitment and energy will be surpassed by a greater commitment and passion to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**

I presented all three plans impartially at the town halls even though I personally supported and voted for the Connectional Plan as the way forward for the denomination. I answered questions the audience had about the specifics of the three plans, had hundreds of conversations with people, and received more than 500 letters and emails on the subject. Some letters and emails supported maintaining the restrictive language and sanctions in the *Discipline* regarding the ordination and marriage of same gender individuals, other letters and emails supported the removal of the restrictive language and sanctions in the *Discipline*.

I recall after one of the presentations, a man came to me with tears in his eyes and said, "Bishop my son is gay, and he vowed never to step foot in church again because he feels judged."

After another meeting in another town, a woman saw me walking to my car, made her way over and said, “Bishop, I love my son, but he is gay and as long as he chooses to be gay, he’s not welcome in my home until he repents of his sin and stops his behavior.”

And at another church in the western part of the conference, as more than 400 people packed the sanctuary for the town hall meeting, a rugged looking cattle rancher walked up to me before the start and asked, “Are you the Bishop?” I answered that I was. Then he said, “I want you to know that we shoot straight in the West!” I thought I was going to be shot on the spot by that rancher in that moment. Then he said, “I’m a life-long United Methodist and I’ve changed my mind about this whole issue since my daughter came out and told me she was gay. She is now happily married to my daughter in law, and they live in Seattle because they are accepted and welcome for who they are there. I love my daughter and my daughter in law, and I miss them. I just wanted you to know that not everyone here is of the same mind. If you need something,” he continued, “I’ll be sitting right over there.”

I learned after meeting with more than 5,000 United Methodist laity and clergy during those town halls, and in subsequent conversations right on up to today, that not everyone is of one mind about the ordination and the Christian marriage of same gender persons.

Fr. Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest and writer on spirituality in his homily, “We create our Destiny,” says that most in the Christian religion were taught to believe that God is not compassionate, forgiving, infinite love, or merciful, rather that God is the Great Judge, the eternal tormentor who is always angry with people and judging people as inadequate. When we live with that image of God, he says, we directly and indirectly act the same way toward others.

And so, says Rohr, the young millennial generation – and there are not many in our pews - just reject the whole Christian faith because Christianity in their understanding, is a judgmental and exclusionary religion.

Demographic studies, religious research, and resource organizations like the Barna Group that focus on the intersection of faith and culture, all agree that the new Z and Alpha Generations will live into an increasingly diverse and post-categorical world. Larger percentages of these new generations will give up on the church, many will give up on God. They will find community, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and love beyond the Church. We need to pay attention to these signals and trends and seek ways to reach tomorrow’s generations with a message that is clear, convincing, effective, and inclusive, lest we as the Church risk becoming irrelevant.

All of us here, like Christians for centuries, seek to discern and interpret the truth of the gospel for our time. As United Methodists, our theological task is to identify the needs both of individuals and of society and to address those needs out of the resources of our Christian faith.

For Wesley and United Methodists, Scripture occupies a place of primary authority; the revelation of Scripture is the living core of the Christian faith. Scripture, however, is illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by the present state of human knowledge⁴. Our willingness to think afresh about God's gracious action in Christ, and to have discerning dialogue about important, even controversial issues, is not a sign of diminished faith, instead it is a sign of our quest to be faithful to our Christian witness and the Church's life and work as it intersects the world in troubled and uncertain times.

To date, 81 CTC congregations have fulfilled all the provisions of ¶2553 and the terms set by the Conference Board of Trustees to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. Some disaffiliating churches will become independent, and others will unite with other denominations. This is a difficult day.

We have all been through a very traumatic season in our lives, our nation, and our world over the past three years amid a global pandemic, heightened racial tensions, an increasingly more polarized political environment, and a changing religious landscape, haven't we?

At times we felt and too often still feel disoriented, helpless, and overwhelmed by what we face. Add to all that the denominational strife over the past six years and it can become too much to bear.

We are exhausted: emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

We grieve the loss of long-standing relationships.

We grieve the loss of familiar spaces and places of worship, of study, and of Christian fellowship with people we have known for many years.

We are disappointed because instead of staying at the table to engage in dialogue and prayer and find a way to maintain our unity in the bonds of peace within the United Methodist Church, we instead chose a path of separation.

If we are honest, some are angry but are wisely holding it back, putting it away from their mouth, and only by the grace of God overlooking it to give no opportunity to the devil.⁵

Clergy, laity, and congregations are anxious and stressed about what is happening or could happen in the future.

We have all paid a very, very, very high cost in time, energy, and money. Not to mention all the ink that has been spilled on articles, blogs, and posts.

⁴ The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, ¶105, Our Theological Task.

⁵ Ephesians 4:26-27.

The visible face of Christ, the Church, struggles with self-inflicted wounds, disfigured by our internal strife and sin against each other. Our witness as the outward face of Christ to a watching world has been marred.

And yet, we must believe that God is not finished with us, despite our disputes and strife.

God's mandate to the Church to make disciples and a new humanity in the likeness of Jesus Christ that love their enemies, do good, lend expecting nothing in return, are merciful, just, and forgive as they have been forgiven remains undeterred. This new humanity made in the likeness of Christ made possible through the cross, is a light of hope, peace, justice, reconciliation, and healing to a broken and groaning world.

We give thanks, today, for the love and grace of Christ our Lord who invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another, who makes us one with Him, one with each other, and one in ministry all the world, until He comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

While some have chosen to go a separate way, we all belong to Christ. [Carey Nieuwhof says](#) that as despairing as we might be over the church's future, we must remind ourselves that the church was Jesus' idea, not ours. The Church will survive our missteps and whatever cultural trends happen around us. We certainly don't always get things right, but Christ has an incredible history of pulling together Christians in every generation to share his love for a broken world.

Today, Matthew's gospel reminds us to stay focused on our undeterrable mission to make disciples in the likeness of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Today's gospel reminds us that Christ promised to be with us till the end of the age.

And in days like these for the Church, it's, by the grace of God, enough to keep us fighting the good fight, finishing the race set before us, and keeping our faith.⁶

Amen.

⁶ 2 Timothy 4:6-7.