

Episcopal Address
Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.
Central Texas Annual Conference
Fort Worth, Texas
Monday, June 13, 2022

Members and guests to the 2022 Central Texas Annual Conference,

The grace and peace of Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

I am Ruben Saenz Jr., and I began serving as your Bishop on January 1, 2022.

Thank-you conference episcopacy committee, Betty Alexander (Executive Administrative Assistant), Cabinet, and conference staff for your gracious welcome and openness to serve Christ with me during this season filled with change, challenge, and reimagined possibilities.

I want to communicate to you my hopes for this conference and how we will reimagine discipleship for a changing world.

I also want to communicate directly and honestly with you about where we are as a conference regarding disaffiliations and what you can expect moving forward as the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Before I do that, I want to begin by to celebrate the ways the clergy, laity, and congregations of the Central Texas Conference responded with agility and adaptiveness to meet the needs of their church members and communities, especially those that were isolated and most vulnerable.

We celebrate, honor, and give thanks to all United Methodists essential health care and frontline workers. These include, but are not limited to, protective service workers (police and EMS), cashiers in grocery and general merchandise stores, production and food processing workers, janitors and maintenance workers, agricultural workers, truck drivers, and educators. Thank you.

We celebrate the creative spirit and use of improvised ideas by clergy, musicians, and staff members who quickly adapted worship, bible studies, prayer, and administrative meetings to Zoom and Facebook Live, and other online platforms.

We celebrate how church members watched over one another in love calling and texting each other and setting up Zoom meetings for small group bible studies, intercessory prayer, and support. You offered each other Christian care that maintained your connectedness and sense of community amid disruptive, isolating, and troublesome times.

We celebrate the generosity of faithful members who continued to financially support their local churches during the pandemic with their prayers, virtual presence, tithes and offerings, service, and witness.

Several churches sewed masks for frontline workers and provided food stations to feed the hungry. In addition, several churches offered their facilities for COVID testing and vaccinations. CTC churches generously raised \$13,000 to provide relief for persons affected by West Texas fires. You raised \$220,000 to help Mooreville United Methodist Church rebuild after a fire destroyed their sanctuary. You sent \$380,000 to United Methodist Advance Specials and donated \$265,000 for relief in the Ukraine through the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

We celebrate clergy, poets, artists, and musicians that used their platforms to preach courageous, at times unpopular, prophetic messages that addressed what was happening in society from a Christ-centered and biblical perspective. Their prophetic messages pressed congregations to pay attention to the world around them, enabling United Methodists to be agents of healing, reconciliation, and justice.

For all the ways our United Methodists courageously served our communities in a season of crisis and for all the ways the Holy Spirit led and pushed us to be the church without buildings, we celebrate and give thanks to God.

Much has happened in our personal lives, local churches, communities, our denomination, our nation, and our world during the last 24-plus months.

For most, the last two years are behind them, as if all we experienced and lived through never happened. But, lamentably, for many others who have personally been touched by COVID and its wake of devastating impacts, the last two years are not in the past; the harmful effects of COVID and the losses experienced remain very much in the present.

God's beautiful world is in tumult. We've lived through a global pandemic whose end we have yet to reach. We have witnessed widening racial resentments, tensions, and growing political divisiveness. The prevalence of mental illness is a growing and serious concern. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a grave humanitarian crisis and threatened world security. Rapidly climbing inflation and fears of a recession are mounting.

Our beloved United Methodist Church is also experiencing tumult with three postponed general conferences and the recent launch of the Global Methodist Church on May 1, 2022.

While I firmly and sincerely believe there is more than enough theological space and need in the Central Texas Conference for traditionalists, centrists, and progressives, lamentably, 90 of our 261 Central Texas Conference local church administrative committees have signaled they are discerning whether they will remain United Methodist.

As your bishop, I personally and very much desire that no one would leave. We are stronger together, but, for those who have intentionally and prayerfully done the work and remain

convicted that their faith journey lies along another path, rest assured that I will do what I can to help you do so, so we can all get back to the mission of making disciples.

Therefore, considering several local churches are discerning disaffiliation, I have scheduled a Special Called Annual Conference for Saturday, September 17, 2022, at Arborlawn United Methodist Church, in Fort Worth to adopt resolutions to disaffiliate.

As a Cabinet, our projections are that the number of disaffiliating churches will be far fewer than 90 congregations after local church members prayerfully consider all the aspects of disaffiliation. And we certainly pray that those projections are true. Not only because of our belief that we are much more effective in our mission together, but also because there are genuine bonds of fellowship between our local churches, our laity, and clergy that will be ruptured.

Whether a few or several, disaffiliations will directly affect the entire ministry and witness of the Central Texas Annual Conference.

We will have to deal with a profound sense of loss. Yet, we will be grace-filled toward our departing clergy, laity, and congregations. We will be led by our general rules and do no harm, do all the good we can do, and stay in love with God by attending to the means of grace.

But make no mistake, we will not pause or lose focus on our mission as we grieve. With God's help, we must and we will continue to move forward as we Re-Imagine Discipleship for a new season, and offer the hope, peace and love that can only be found in a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ to our communities, nation, and world. Just a quick glimpse at our daily newsfeeds tells us that we've no time to lose.

Be assured that moving forward, the conference will provide continuous communication to share known details to keep everyone informed and connected. We will focus on the well-being of our people by conducting in-person meetings at the district level to provide emotional support, listen for what is needed, and supply local churches with tools and resources for fruitful continuity of ministry and mission. We will make the best possible decisions and implement effective strategies to move forward in mission and ministry as a conference.

Some of our clergy will discern that they must leave even when their church decides to remain part of the connection, and vice-versa.

Regarding clergy that choose to remain United Methodist, if the congregation you are currently appointed to votes to disaffiliate, you will have a new appointment to a United Methodist Church effective November 1.

Regarding United Methodist churches whose pastor withdraws, you will have a new United Methodist pastor effective November 1.

Your district superintendents will assist United Methodist members of churches that vote to disaffiliate to transfer their membership and join a nearby church. If a nearby church is unavailable, they will help transfer your local church membership to a United Methodist Church of the conference. You will fulfill your membership vows to that church by praying for the church and watching online worship services. You will continue your private spiritual practices to access God's means of grace, support their ministry with your financial gifts, serve others in your community, and give witness for Jesus Christ where you live until a permanent church home is found.

If a group of people are left without a United Methodist Church home in their community, the Smith Center for Church Growth and Evangelism will provide training to help you organize a Wesleyan class meeting. People that others already look up to for guidance and leadership in a faith community make excellent class leaders. Nearby elders will be assigned by district superintendents to support class leaders. They will meet with class leaders once a week to help guide ministry, discuss worship and spiritual formation ideas, and provide ministry for the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, funerals, wedding services, and critical hospital visitations.

In addition, our conference structure and leadership will be configured and aligned to connect with and fully support United Methodist laity, congregations, and clergy for a new season of fruitful ministry.

Effective July 1, Rev. Danny Tenney will join current superintendents Rev. Philip Rhodes and Rev. Beverly Connally as the superintendent of the North and West Districts. Danny's capacity for visioning, building teams to execute and complete a vision, his collaborative leadership style, openness to ideas, and approachability are key characteristics and skills sets for effectiveness as a district superintendent. As an extension of my episcopal office, your three superintendents will oversee the total ministry of the clergy in their districts and ensure that churches are equipped in their disciple-making ministry.

Dr. Will Cotton will also begin as Executive Director for the Smith Center for Church Growth and Evangelism starting July 1. Will brings 40 years of ministerial experience to this new role. He is a humble and wise servant-leader who deeply values the ministry of the laity and congregations.

Under Will's leadership and programmatic oversight, we'll remain relentlessly focused on reimagining discipleship-making for a changing world. Local churches will develop discipleship pathways and frameworks to help people of all ages and all walks of life to "Meet" Jesus, know the "Message" of Jesus, and live their daily lives in "Mission" for Jesus.

These disciples will love God and bring others to love God. They will proclaim new life in Christ, leading others to put their whole trust in Him as Lord and Savior. They will compassionately and joyfully serve others, especially the poor. And they will do no harm, love kindness, do mercy and justice, and walk humbly with God.

We will reimagine discipleship pathways for the already present Z and Alpha generations that are sensitive to their spiritual curiosity and desire to experience God's loving presence. The discipleship pathways and frameworks for these generations will be highly relational, missionally compelling, and wide enough to embrace a rapidly diversifying and changing world for Jesus Christ.

Rev. Lara Franklin will begin as Executive Director of the Robert's Center for Clergy Leadership also July 1. She is a critical thinker, strategist, and excellent communicator. She is known for building frameworks, systems, and processes that support, sustain, and enhance leadership capacity and ministry fruitfulness.

A reoccurring issue clergy mentioned in the survey I distributed for feedback in February was burnout, the need for peer and conference support, and training opportunities.

Lara will create connecting and covenanting communities for clergy to share in peer-group learning and support. In addition, she will provide continuing self and spiritual care resources for clergy renewal and wellness. Under her leadership, clergy competencies will be enhanced through continuous learning, sharing of best practices, and executive coaching to lead vital and flourishing congregations.

You can expect that intentional efforts will be made to reestablish trust and strengthen the connection between local churches, the annual conference, and the denomination. John Wesley first organized the Methodist movement into a connexion of multi-church circuits supervised by superintendents. The connection is what holds us together. It is one of our most deeply held values along with our emphasis on God's grace. We are held in connection by our theology, practice of ministry, and our appointment system that ensures every church has a pastor and every pastor has a church. We are in connection with United Methodist Churches, hospitals, universities, and mission agencies around the world. And we are in connection through our system of connectional giving that supports local churches and worldwide causes and ministries of the United Methodist Church.

We are hopeful for the future of the Central Texas Conference because of the gifts, graces, and passion of our clergy, laity, and congregations for God's mission in the world through the United Methodist Church.

We are confident, well-positioned, and have everything we need as a conference to reach our rapidly growing and constantly diversifying mission field with the gospel of Jesus Christ for decades to come.

Bob Johansen, the author of *Full-Spectrum Thinking*, says that we live in a "scrambled" presence. He says,

"There are many dilemmas, problems that can't be solved and won't go away, but we must try to make sense of them and act anyway, even with incomplete information and only partial visibility. In this scrambled future, leaders will need to be very clear about where they are going, but very flexible about how they get there."

As Central Texas United Methodists, we are clear about who we are and where we are going in the scrambled present and uncertain future, and we are clear that we will reimagine a deeper, more relational, and more robust discipleship that fully prepares the whole church to participate in God's saving work in the world.

We are clear that we are involved in God's great mission and grand story until all creation is brought to its final and glorious climax.

We are clear that we will be God's church for his mission in the world.

We are clear that we will be relentless in our mission to help existing disciples deepen their walk with Christ, and clear about our mission to make more disciples, more diverse disciples, new disciples, and younger disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are clear that we are Christ-centered, committed, connected, deeply rooted, disciple-making, diverse, faithful, generous, grace-filled, grounded in Scripture, justice-seeking, missional, praying, resilient, Spirit-filled, welcoming, and world-changing people of God.

We are clear that In Christ and in connection with each other as United Methodists, we are more imaginative, stronger, and more courageous to plant seeds of the gospel that will one day grow, to lay foundations for God's kingdom that always lies beyond us that will need further development, and to provide a world in tumult the yeast of God's hope and justice that produces far beyond our capabilities.

And finally, but not least, we are not frightened or dismayed about the future, whatever should happen, because we are most clear about this! For the Lord, our God is with us wherever we go, bestowing upon us prophetic imagination and resolve to keep striving for what he is making and will make possible.

Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wonderfully reigns!

Praise to the Lord who prospers our work!

Praise to Lord whose goodness and mercy daily attends us!

Praise to the Lord who fits us well for the tasks that that are ever before us!

Praise to the Lord who spreads wings of grace over us.

Praise to the Lord!