

Change the World
2010 Episcopal Address

“They (the believers) were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” Acts 4:31b

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Risen Savior Jesus Christ.

The Book of Acts chronicles an amazing moment of ferment in human history—the birth of the church. Just before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” For the next 24 chapters, we hear story after story of how the Holy Spirit leads this small band of believers to speak the word of God with boldness and to act with courage to change the world. In doing that, the church was born.

Dear friends, we gather today in another amazing moment of ferment in human history. Christ is calling The United Methodist Church to be his witnesses to our local communities and around the world. The Holy Spirit is leading us to speak the word of God boldly and to act courageously to change the world.

As your bishop, I want you to know how incredibly proud I am of you. In the last few years, I’ve had the privilege of being in numerous conversations with leaders across the whole church. They tell me how remarkably blessed we are in this annual conference. Ken Medema told me “This conference is special.” We have exceptional congregations, superb clergy, visionary lay leaders, and strong institutions. You have a long-standing reputation of leading the church into the world with boldness. I am humbled and honored to serve as your bishop.

The general agencies of our beloved church are in their own time of ferment. They are searching for a new kind of leader. This year two of those agencies

turned to the Texas Annual Conference to find that new leader. Two of our number—one clergy and one lay—have been elected to lead a general agency. People tell me this is a “first” for the Texas Conference. Mr. Gil Hanke of Peritte UMC in Nacogdoches now leads United Methodist Men. Reverend Cynthia Harvey now leads UMCOR, our global relief agency. Of course, we celebrate their personal honor. Friends, even more importantly, I celebrate what their selection says about you, the Texas Annual Conference, and the role you are playing in the larger church. Congratulations to them and to you.

I begin this address with five celebrations where the Holy Spirit is re-shaping the future of the Texas Conference. Then I want to share what we are learning as we explore new paths. Finally, I want to describe a church living in the power of the Holy Spirit. As always, I'll report on our measures of fruitfulness.

Five Celebrations

One of the first acts of the Holy Spirit was to empower the disciples to start new congregations. You know their names: Thessalonica, Macedonia, Corinth and more.

Our first celebration of the Holy Spirit is starting new congregations. Since last we met, this conference has chartered four new congregations. Chartering a church is different from planting a church. Planting means the bishop assigns a pastor to a mission field. It is a little like birthing a baby who needs lots of care and attention, so the conference and district support that new church.

Chartering means that a young church has enough fruitful disciples to sustain itself and to expand its mission in the neighborhood and world. Support and control transition from the district and conference to the chartered congregation. It can organize and elect its own officers. It can buy and sell property.

Like graduation, chartering is a time of great celebration. Join me in welcoming these four newly-chartered congregations.

If you are a member of one of these new churches or their pastor, would you please stand?

Living Water UMC served by Reverend Ed Jones. It is located in the Savannah development in Pearland. They currently have 265 members. Last month they averaged 258 in worship.

The Harvest UMC served by Reverend Jeff McDowell located in Sienna Plantation in Missouri City. They currently have 220 members. Last month they averaged 295 in worship.

Dayspring UMC served by Reverend Jeff Olive located in Tyler and mothered by Marvin UMC. They currently have 223 members. Last month they averaged 377 in worship.

New World UMC served by Reverend Robert Johnson is located in Southwest Houston and mothered by Windsor Village. They currently have 253 members. Last month they averaged 204 in worship.

These new churches and the 20 others in process are a primary place of making new disciples. For example, at Impact UMC in Port Arthur, a budding disciple put a small bag of marijuana in the offering plate with a note that said, "No more." He wants to offer his life to Christ, not drugs. At The Harvest, the parents of an adopted child with fetal alcohol syndrome talk about how this new community of faith loves their daughter and supports them as they raise this beautiful child. I could go on. By the grace of God and your willingness to be courageous, lives are being changed and the world transformed.

Celebration #2

No sooner did the Apostle Paul plant new congregations than some of them began to struggle. Disagreements morphed into conflicts—imagine that! I think of the church at Corinth and the church at Galatia—even the church at Thessalonica. They needed transformation.

Our second celebration of the Holy Spirit's work is in transforming existing congregations. In 2006, the TAC began a pilot program with 225 congregations of various sizes. It employed the services of DNA coaching to provide training and on-site consultation. That process has concluded, and we asked Dr. Don House to assess the results statistically. Which churches would you guess had the largest gains? Think size of congregations. It was churches with fewer than 50 people in average attendance. Every measure of fruitfulness improved: worship attendance, professions of faith and financial giving. Nationally, churches of this size have the fastest rate of decline, so that outcome was especially encouraging.

Improvements attributed to the transformation process led to an increase of \$2.4 million in giving to the local church. Almost half of this amount accrued to our smaller congregations. By the grace of God and your willingness to be courageous, lives are being changed and communities around our small and medium churches being transformed.

Listen to the folks at Faith Bridge. It is a rural church in the East District. It entered the transformation process in 2006. (Video.)

Celebration #3 Gifted, young, diverse pastors

Early in his ministry, the Apostle Paul began planning for the next generation of church leaders. He chose young Timothy. Timothy accompanied him on his

travels and Paul mentored him personally to prepare him to pick up the mantle of leadership.

Our third celebration of the Holy Spirit is in the area of recruiting, supporting and training gifted, young, diverse clergy. We remain grateful for the witness of those of us who are “chronologically-challenged,” but we also know the importance of helping the next generation respond to God’s call to ordained ministry.

Five years ago, fewer than 5% of our elders were under the age of 35. When the newest class of pastors is commissioned or ordained tomorrow night, 45 % of those pastors will be under the age of 35. 46% of our candidates are under the age of 35. By the grace of the God and your courageous willingness to change, we are welcoming many more gifted, young, diverse pastors who bring an energy and vitality that inspires us all.

Celebration #4

The Book of Acts tells us that Paul not only reached out also to adults, but to children and youth. In the sixteenth chapter, we learn that Paul baptized the whole family of the Philippian jailor. Our fourth Spirit celebration is with youth and young adults.

- Last night we sponsored our first-ever COLLIDE, which included an opportunity for our young people to attend the opening worship service and experience the United Methodist connection in action. I’m told that over 300 youth participated.
- Last summer we held our first-ever Youth Academy at Southwestern University for youth who want to learn more about the Christian faith and experience community more deeply. This event got rave reviews from the young people. Listen to what they said. (Video.)

Celebration #5

Finally, the early Christians made a difference in their communities. They cared for the sick, fed the hungry, visited those in prison. The world was watching. “See how they love one another,” people said. They wanted to be part of such a community themselves.

Our final celebration of the Spirit’s work is in hands on mission. (Video.)

These are simply four out of many high impact projects that change lives and reshape futures. They are made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit and the efforts of disciples from our congregations.

I believe that all these celebrations are outward and visible signs of the grace of God at work in the Texas Annual Conference. I believe they are signs of our renewed willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit, to speak boldly and act courageously so that lives can be changed here and around the world.

Measures of Fruitfulness

Now I turn to the measures of fruitfulness. These measures are the same ones we ask every local church to report monthly. Why are they so important that I share them every year?

Let me offer a story. Last month our niece Caroline Bonner presented her senior piano recital at the University of Texas. The expectation for fulfilling her degree was 30 minutes of excellent piano performance—all memorized.

As I sat in the pew at University Methodist Church listening to her play these complicated pieces so beautifully, I couldn’t help but remember Caroline as a child— taking piano lessons when her feet couldn’t touch the floor. I remembered her complaining because she didn’t want to practice. I remembered the

metronome. It is the little instrument that keeps time. It sounds like a clock. You set it faster pace or slower, depending on the piece. Musicians practice with the metronome to give them instant, external feedback about whether they are keeping the rhythm of the music.

Through all those years, Caroline was learning. She was growing. She was building musical capacity. Why? So that she could bring beauty and joy into the world through her gift of music.

The measures of fruitfulness are like that metronome. They are not an end in themselves. Rather, they offer instant, external feedback about whether our congregations are keeping the rhythm of disciple-making. They are markers of whether a congregation or this annual conference is growing in its capacity to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Let's see how the conference is doing.

First, attendance. I want you to see the difference that our new church starts are making. Our worship attendance figures for existing congregations for 2008 and 2009 are on page 89 in your pre-conference journal.

Average Worship Attendance of Existing Congregations

2008 105,037

2009 104,009

You see another drop of about a 1,000 in worship attendance. That is consistent with the trend we've been seeing over the last decade. You should also know that our decline is about half the national average for United Methodists.

Now look at what happens we add the 2009 average worship attendance of our new churches. Average attendance increases by a thousand. Our new churches are the difference between growth and decline. Beginning in 2010, our new churches will be officially reporting.

Professions of faith.

In the last ten years, professions of faith declined 25% in United Methodist Church in the United States. Now look at the Texas Annual Conference for the last ten years. These are only existing congregations. They are still almost the highest we've been in over a decade.

The same picture holds true for the percentage of congregations with at least one profession of faith. Nationally, only 47% of United Methodist congregations had at least one profession of faith last year. The Texas Annual Conference is well above the national average--63% and improving.

Apportionments

Here are the last five years of apportionment payout for the Texas Annual Conference. We improved significantly last year. I want to thank every church who worked so hard in a tough economic year to continue to support the connectional ministries of the UMC. Some of you even paid the original amount apportioned to you. All together your generosity meant that The Texas Annual Conference was able to pay 100% of World Service. Together, you helped to keep our connection strong. Thank you. Thank you.

Taking all the measures together, this conference has much for which to be thankful. You can see why other conferences and the general church are looking to us for leadership. We are clearly swimming upstream. The Holy Spirit is acting through us and among us. The work is difficult. The changes are challenging. The transitions are upsetting. Certainly, we've made mistakes. Nevertheless, God gave the Texas Annual Conference a vision of vibrant, growing congregations changing lives and re-shaping futures for Jesus Christ. So do you believe we are we generally moving in that direction of that vision? You decide.

What have we learned so far?

As a conference willing to be led by the Spirit in bold, new directions, what have we learned? Here are some of our key discoveries. In the area of new church starts, we learned that

- New churches mothered by existing churches grow faster, less expensively, and with less stress on the founding pastor than the “parachute model.” The four new churches that had to be closed in the last three years were all parachute drops.
- We need to diversify the methods by which we are starting new churches. For example, our conference needs to experiment with second and third campuses located in a different geographic area than the parent campus and targeted for different mission fields.
- Most importantly, we need to plant more new congregations more quickly. Ten new church starts per year is extremely ambitious, but it is much closer to what we need than the four or five new starts we are doing now.

So why aren't we starting more new congregations annually? We have two primary limitations. The first is a shortage of gifted pastors who feel called to start new congregations. The second is a shortage of congregations willing risk parenting a church. I encourage all of you to add these concerns to your prayer list and to talk with Dr. Don Waddleton if you want to explore what this might mean for you.

What have we learned about transforming existing congregations? We learned:

- The process of selecting and engaging congregations is just as important the process of transformation itself.

- My pastoral counselor husband Bob likes to say, “People don’t change unless they want to change.” We’ve learned that the same can be said of churches.
- Coaching must be contextual and culturally specific.
- Many churches are poorly located to reach their communities. In certain situations, relocation can be almost as effective in making new disciples as planting a new church.

Finally, in regard to youth and young adults, we have learned:

- With encouragement and support, young people are highly responsive to God’s call to ordained ministry.
- Young people want connection with each other and with us. They like to work in teams.
- Young people want to engage in hands-on mission. The more they do, the more they are inspired.
- Most of all, young people want to make a difference for good in the world.

Dr. Gil Rendle, Senior Consultant for the Texas Methodist Foundation, often reminds us that in times of ferment and change, the most important thing an organization can do is to remember its purpose. How the purpose is accomplished changes over time and place. The purpose guides us in determining the treasures to be preserved and those things we need to let go.

The Book of Acts teaches us about how Jesus’ disciples came to understand the purpose of the Church and how to live it out. It’s complete name is actually “The Acts of the Apostles.” Some scholars say it would be more appropriate to call it “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” A good Methodist would say it takes both to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. John Wesley often described the synergy of God’s grace and our human response. Sanctification, he said, requires both.

Reading through the chapters of Acts, we witness God's grace through the actions of the Holy Spirit, and we witness human response through the actions of the apostles. "You are my witnesses," Jesus told the disciples. But, the disciples could do nothing without the power of the Holy Spirit. There it is again. God's spirit. Our response.

Think about how the Holy Spirit worked in Jesus himself. He was birthed through the Spirit. The Spirit descended at Jesus' baptism. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. Jesus invoked the Holy Spirit in his first sermon, saying,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

So after his ascension, God gave the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples. But it wasn't at all what they expected. Even in the early church, being led by the Holy Spirit was complex, dynamic and messy. The Spirit was always pushing the apostles to take risks—to say and do things these good Jews had never done before.

On the very first day the apostles were filled with the Spirit, people thought they were drunk. Then the Spirit led them to share their possessions—all their possessions—imagine that! The Spirit sent Peter to Cornelius' house where Peter was given a much larger vision than he had ever dreamed: God's purpose included not just Jews, but Gentiles as well. Imagine how revolutionary that was. The Spirit converted Paul from being the greatest persecutor of Christians to being their greatest evangelist. By the 17th chapter, the people of Thessalonica complain, "These Christians are turning the world upside down."

Led by the Spirit, nothing stopped the early church. Across the ancient world, people watched and waited. Did these Christians really mean what they were saying? Over time, they saw lives change. Communities changed. They saw the world transformed. More and more people declared they too wanted to witness to God's new creation.

Dear Friends, five years ago you declared your intention to be "Spirit-led" in fulfilling God's purpose. Since then, led by God's Spirit, we've taken some extraordinary risks on behalf of the gospel, and we will be called to do so again. Yes, we have gotten into trouble a few times. Some might say the Texas Annual Conference has turned things upside down. Yet, look around you. Lives are being changed and the world transformed.

In our communities and around the world, people are watching. Do these United Methodists really mean what they are saying? Take a moment and imagine their faces. People in your area: young, old, African American, Latino, Asian, and Anglo. Wealthy and poor. Folks with high paying jobs and no jobs at all. Friends in Russia, Bolivia, Cote d'Ivoire, Belize and beyond. What will they see?

The Book of Acts begins with Jesus' promise of the Spirit. It ends by describing a human being, the Apostle Paul, "He welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness." (Acts 28.30)

Sisters and brothers, the Spirit is beckoning. The world is watching. "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand."

Janice Riggle Huie

Texas Annual Conference 2010