

Disciples Transforming the World
Laity Address to the 2008 General Conference
Lyn Powell, North Georgia Conference
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(Lyn Powell)

It is a joy to be with the saints of the Church!

The Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders looked at the theme of this great 2008 General Conference, "A Future with Hope." We decided if there is to be a future with hope, if there is to be hope for the world, that we must become more effective "Disciples Transforming the World".

We noticed that a good part of the Acts of the Apostles centers around this idea of "Disciples Transforming the World." In fact, our scripture this afternoon comes from Acts, Chapter 2, beginning with verse 46. Hear now the unfailing word of God:

Day by day, as they spent much time together, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number, those who were being saved.

The Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God!

(People)

Thanks be to God!

(Lyn Powell)

Most of us remember the setting of this passage in Acts. The disciples and probably many others are gathered in one of the homes, several weeks after the Resurrection of Jesus.

They are hiding from the authorities, and almost surely they are discussing in awe and wonder the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

They are discussing his final ascension into heaven, which many of them witnessed just a few days earlier.

They are talking about his promise, that they would receive power to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

Suddenly, while they are talking, the Holy Spirit does come upon them -- it comes as tongues of fire, filling them with a great Spirit, Spirit beyond their understanding.

Now they hide no longer! They are shouting with joy, and a great crowd gathers outside -- what is going on?

Now Peter steps forward, an important moment in New Testament history. He steps forward to deliver the first Christian sermon ever preached. He tells them facts of the gospel -- they have never heard it before!

He tells them Christ was born, that he lived to show us the way to our salvation, he was crucified dead and buried, on the third day he arose from the dead, and today, this day, sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and those who believe will live with him in eternity. And if that stirs your soul, say Amen!

The scriptures say that those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 were added to the church. A pretty good number of professions of faith for a church that is only three hours old!

It would appear that the New Testament considers it of utmost priority, "to be adding daily to our numbers, those being saved." Or at least adding weekly, as we do in the modern church!

Our Central Conferences understand this clarion call "to be adding daily to our numbers, those being saved." Some of these annual conferences are increasing membership close to double digit percentages most years.

We in the United States celebrate their passion and their faithfulness. Unfortunately, we do not have such wonderful numbers to report. The United Methodist Church in the U.S. lost 55,000 members last year, 70,000 the year before that -- in fact, we have lost membership every year since the 1970's.

However, we are not alone -- every U.S. mainline denomination has the same diminishing story to tell.

Let me ask you this: With staggering numbers of unchurched and under-churched surrounding every United Methodist Church in the U.S., why last year did 41 percent of our churches have not even one person join by profession of faith?

Why are 80 percent of the residents of most of our counties not meaningfully connected to a church? Why is that?

While you are thinking about that question, let me ask you how many remember, and there won't be too many of us, but how many remember the comic strip character Pogo? The animated possum? Remember his famous line, "We have met the enemy andthey is us." Well, we have met the answers to our questions, and they is us.

Let us take a look at history, and we will see where we are going with all of this.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica around 40 AD, there was no North Thessalonica Conference there. There were no church buildings, no laity, no clergy, no all-day preacher meetings, no all-night staff-parish meetings. There was no ecclesiology on site.

The first thing he did was preach the good news to anyone who would listen -- Jews, Greeks, women, slaves, whoever would listen.

Then, having established an understanding of the gospel, he went on to plant the house churches.

Next he trained the natural leaders of these house churches in how to do ministry. These were the precursors to our pastors today. He called them deacons, but they were like our pastors today. And then he moved on to do the same thing in the next town.

Take note, please -- these designated pastors did not do ministry themselves; they equipped the laity to go out and do the ministry. And indeed the laity did it! They did such a good job of spreading the gospel, using their varied spiritual gifts, that today, 2000 years later, Christianity is alive and well! A few pastors could never have accomplished that alone. Only the laity, on fire for Jesus Christ, equipped by the pastors, could do such a thorough job of converting the known world to Christianity.

On to the late 1800's -- How many of us have read the book Gilead? Gilead is a popular book now of historical fiction based on the experience of a non-denominational pastor in Gilead, Iowa. He says in the book that in the late 1800's about 300 Methodists would camp down by the river.

He said his church would throw open the doors and windows just to listen to their passionate preaching and joyous singing.

He said that whole communities were running to the Methodists! Imagine that, whole communities running to the Methodists!

Friends, these were not 300 ordained Methodist pastors gathered by the river. These were 300 committed, passionate lay Methodists, equipped by their pastor, and I want you to hear that -- "equipped by their pastor" -- who understood that it takes the whole congregation to win the community to Christ. The pastor cannot do it alone.

Well, today we laity have almost lost the skills to go out into the community, to win the whole community to Christ.

In February of 2006, our Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders invited Dr. Lovett Weems from Wesley Theological Seminary to be our keynote speaker. Dr. Weems said that when the community looks at the church, the community must see itself, and if the community does not see itself, then that church will begin to decline.

Friends, if we are going to be "Disciples Transforming the World", then we have to get out in it! My home church of 4500 members has presented a beautiful frontage on a major highway for many years. And for many years the community has come to us.

But today, in our increasingly secular and transitioning community, that is no longer happening. We know that if we are going to continue to be a healthy growing church, we are going to have to "get into the community," to convince the community to come to us.

And who better to get out in it than the laity? Laity, your pastor and mine are working overtime with the business of the church, with Sunday worship and a myriad of responsibilities in-between, all of them good things.

But it is unreasonable to ask our pastors to spend a significant portion of their time literally chasing the unchurched, going where they are, interacting with them, staying right with them. But we laity are already there!

We live with the unchurched every day, in the workplace, in the community, in the grocery store, every place we turn. And yet, so many of us are not reaching out to the community, are not doing personal ministry.

And that is the key word -- personal ministry. Ministry that transforms lives in the name of Jesus, ministry that offers Christ to the World. Yes, you heard me correctly, lay persons offering Christ to the world.

What a radical new idea! Even though we saw it in the 1st century church, even though we saw it throughout this country for the first 150 years of Methodism, but yet what a radical new idea, laity offering Christ to the world.

Obviously something has happened to the laity in the last 50 years. Somehow too many of us have disengaged from the idea of having a ministry of any kind, much less a transforming one.

And I submit to you that it is no coincidence that when the laity disengaged from the ministry, the denomination began its decline.

Some time ago I had an opportunity to address the Southeastern Jurisdiction College of Bishops. The last half of my presentation was a dialogue with the college, and during that dialogue one of our great bishops stood up and said, "Well, all this is very nice, Lyn, but I want to say that it just grieves me. It just grieves me, that too many of my clergy do not know how to lead a person to Christ!" I said, "But, bishop, at least your clergy remembers that it is supposed to be leading people to Christ."

Too many of our laity no longer claim that core responsibility, which is to find the lost, get them into our churches, so that one day they, too, might claim their salvation".

So what has happened to the laity over the last 50 years? How did we get to the place that too many of us think it is our calling as laity to sit back and RECEIVE the ministry from the clergy? It is not the calling of the laity to receive the ministry from the clergy.

It is the calling of the laity to be equipped by the clergy, with the clergy's unique gifts and graces, its unique education and training, to be equipped by the clergy to go out and do the ministry, to offer Christ to the world.

Well, if we agree that we laity should be equipped by our pastors to go out and do the ministry, what does all of that look like? Does it mean that we have to stand on the road outside our churches, cornering passersby, grabbing their collars and shouting "Are you saved?" Oh, my, please do not do that!

Let me share with you some better ideas. There is a large church in our denomination where 85 percent of the members say they first visited because someone invited them. The act of inviting acquaintances, and chance encounters with strangers is a transforming ministry -- lives will be transformed when we invite, invite, invite. And come on now, do not whine, "Oh, I can't do this"! It isn't hard, and, in fact, it really is kind of fun.

What you do is to look for a logical opening to mention your church. For example, at work you say to your co-worker something like, "Well, I can't work on the Smith account tonight, because my church is having Wednesday night dinner, and I never miss Wednesday night dinner." Your co-worker replies: "You know, I was brought up in the ABC church." You ask about that church, how they liked it, anything you can think of to keep the conversation going.

And then you ask the million-dollar question -- "Do you have a church home now?" You will not believe how many people will visit your church when you say "You don't? Well

if your family would care to visit my church on Sunday morning, I will meet you at the door and show you around." So many people will visit, if an acquaintance will meet them at the door.

Too many people in our society think that the church is a private club. They would not dream of being so rude as to walk through the door on Sunday morning and interrupt us. The invitation is up to us.

One of our pastors told me about the man who went to court to have the phrase "Under God" removed from the Pledge of Allegiance. The man is an avowed atheist.

Well, recently a small rural congregation in Alabama committed to pray for him every week, that God would put a change on his heart. During that period one of the members contacted him, and invited him to join them for worship next Sunday morning. He responded saying, "I think you should know that now that I am nationally famous, I charge \$3,000 for speaking engagements." The member said, "Oh we are not inviting you to speak, we are inviting you to come and worship with us and be our special guest."

The man was so intrigued by all this warm hospitality that he hopped a plane and attended their Sunday morning service. Later the media asked him why on earth did he come to this church?. And he replied, "I came because they invited me, and no one has ever invited me to their church before. Oh, I get plenty of e-mails from church folks about what they want God to do TO me, but no one has ever, in my entire life, invited me to their church. And not only that, but they gave me a Bible, and I intend to take it back home and read it."

Well, who knows where all of this will go, but what a difference it would have made in this man's life, if someone had invited him to their church years ago.

A second idea: one member, one ministry.

That large church we mentioned earlier has trained its membership that every member will have one ministry beyond "Invite Invite Invite," (which nearly everyone does), and also beyond elected church work. They are trained to have one personal ministry that, directly or indirectly, offers Christ to the world. Not two or three ministries, because that deprives someone else from doing ministry, but one ministry, which 90 percent of their membership has. Many of those ministries were visioned, birthed and managed by the members themselves. Not by the pastors, mind you, but the members themselves.

Their staff person in charge of volunteers told me that one night a member called and said, "The Holy Spirit has put upon my heart that I should start a Paws Ministry. He thought she said "Paul's ministry" -- he said what is a "Paul's ministry?" She said, "No, no, a paws ministry, you know, like arf, arf." Today they have over 100 members who take their dogs, and a cat or two, if you can believe it, into nursing homes, helping those residents reconnect with something wonderful.

This church also has an interesting commitment card. This card asks not only what dollars the member is committing this year, but also what one ministry will they commit to this year. Right on the commitment card, what ministry will they commit to this year. Now that is a pretty good idea.

Imagine if every member of every United Methodist Church had one ministry. Imagine the transforming effect on the communities around us. Many of those ministries would be new, and many would be outreach within five miles of our church. When we claim our passion and buy into "one member, one ministry," then exciting ministries will just bubble up from the grass roots, and soon we will be embracing more new members than we ever could have imagined. And that is the truth, trust me. Most people do not like church work, but they love doing the work of the church, and they will seek out a church that understands the difference!

Which leads us to Bill Easum's comment about mission ministry in the community. He says that there should be a seamless relationship between mission and witness. He says that we should give thought to seizing those opportunities for witness while we are in mission. How we can witness in this mission situation in a way that is appropriate to the situation, in a way that will help these persons come to know Jesus?

Dr. Easum would be excited about a letter that came to me last year from one of our small membership churches in the mountains of North Georgia. It says, "The new ministry at Tate United Methodist Church is to adopt the Public Housing Project next door to the church. We have asked each church member to adopt one household in this Housing Project. On March 24 we delivered a box of good, wholesome food to each family for dinner. We read stories to the children, and we invited every family to visit Tate UMC."

I remember years ago at my home church, every time our pastor, Garnett Wilder, said something important, those eyebrows would start to move and he would shout "Did you hear it?" Well, did you hear it? We invited every family to visit Tate United Methodist Church. Bill Easum, they've got it! Somebody had a passion for that Public Housing project. They developed that passion into their one personal ministry. Then they joined mission (delivering food) with witness for Christ (inviting every family to visit the church). They became "Disciples Transforming the World." It was a holistic process, mission and witness joined together, used effectively for the Kingdom. Praise God.

Well, we have talked about three things today that we laity can do to reclaim our Methodist heritage to win our communities for Christ:

One is to invite, invite, invite. Joyfully invite everyone to our churches. And we invite our pastors to go and do likewise.

Secondly, when in mission, across the street or across the world, carry the name of Jesus with you.

And thirdly, every person, every last one of us, claim our one personal ministry. You can do this today by living out the three simple rules and through support of the four areas of focus and claim the ministry.

Billy Graham has said that The United Methodist Church, with its powerful connectional system, could transform the world, if it chose to. An important key to that transformation lies in the vision statement of the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders: "Empowered Laity, Partnering with Clergy, Offering Christ to the World." There is a sleeping giant called the laity, and when we finally begin to stir, we just might fulfill Mr. Graham's prophesy, we just might become "Disciples Transforming the World."

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...Amen.