

## Many Voices, One Call

### Young People's Address to the 2008 General Conference

**The Rev. Annie Arnoldy**, (Grand Junction, Colo.), **Andrew Craig** (Denver, Colo.),  
**Becca Farnum** (Mount Pleasant, Mich.), **Matt Lockett** (Seattle, Wash.),

**Jason Rathod** (Hastings, Neb.), **Kira Volkova** (Kirov, Russia)

**April 24, 2008 -- Fort Worth, Texas**

***Matt Lockett*** (Pacific Northwest Conference):

I would like to welcome you to the first-ever Young People's Address in the history of General Conference. We thank God for the opportunity to be here with you today. We bring to you a very diverse group spanning the world. You will hear our hopes, our fears and our dreams throughout this time together. Our prayer is that God will use all of us, everyone here today, to change a hurting world—starting today, here and now. Will you join me in prayer?

God of all people, we come together, humbled, working toward a vision of unity. In our diversity, let there be strength. In our words, let there be power. And in our voices, let there be room for you. Let the people of God say, "Amen."

***Kira Volkova*** (Northern Europe):

My name is Kira Volkova, and I am a young adult pastor in Kirov, Russia.

***(continuing speech in Russian)*** Missionaries from the United States brought the Living Gospel to Russia in the early 90s. It was a time of spiritual revival after the collapse of the Soviet regime. People were seeking new ideals in their lives because they were disappointed in Communist ideas.

The United Methodist Church was an alternative to the traditional Russian Orthodox Church. Some people appreciated the free form of worship; the modern language of sermons and Bible readings; and the contemporary church music. Children and young people liked learning about God in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.

In spite of all these good things, The United Methodist Church, as well as other Protestant churches, has faced hostility from average Russians.

Often young people and teenagers have to hide the fact that they go to youth meetings and Sunday-school classes from their parents. It takes courage to admit you are a Protestant Christian in the Orthodox society where rituals and traditions can seem more important than personal relationships with God. The Russian Orthodox Church preaches against all Protestant churches, considering them cults. The United Methodist Church in Russia needs your constant prayers.

***Rebecca L. Farnum*** (West Michigan):

In January 2007, nearly 300 youth and young adults met in Johannesburg, South Africa, for the first-ever global Young People's Convocation and Legislative Assembly.

This event established the identity of United Methodist young people through legislation and cultural learning.

From the start, it was like any other annual conference: agendas, personal platforms, and politics. And then God spoke and we began listening to each other.

Rather than focusing on personal agendas, we spent time discerning God's direction for this church and for the world. We developed a series of principles, guidelines, for Holy Conferencing.

We wanted each individual to have a voice, each perspective to be represented and respected, each understanding of God to be understood.

We disagreed but slowly learned to talk with each other rather than *over* each other. We set an example for this church. Holy Conferencing is possible and can help to make disciples of Jesus Christ. It worked for the young people gathered in Johannesburg; it can work for those of us gathered here in Fort Worth. Listen to God! Listen to each other! Let God work!

**Andrew Craig (Rocky Mountain):**

"There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

This profound quote by Mahatma Ghandi helps us to understand the world through the eyes of the poor.

"Poverty is one of the world's greatest problems."

We all encounter the poor on a daily basis and may not even realize it. They are truly the world's invisible people. Who are the poor? They are individuals who share some of the same beliefs, opinions and principles as you and I; People...and yet the only thing that differentiates them from us is their financial status. If a few of us missed a paycheck or two, we could easily be included into the ranks of the poor.

If Jesus physically walked with us today, what would he do if he saw a homeless person?

What would he do if he saw an unbelievably large number of persons, perhaps, in a war-torn, famine-ravaged country, starving. Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 3 and 5 explain Jesus' feelings towards the poor. He said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom in Heaven" and  
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Blessed are the people who remember and help the victims of racial, ethnic, social and gender discrimination. Regardless of our ages, weight, sexual orientations, colors and ethnicities, we are all children of God.

And God expects for us to care for each other.

I ask you, what will you do the next time you pass a homeless mother or father begging on the street? What is your response to those things that we see in the media and through church programs, etc.? How will you respond to God's Word asking that we love and care for one another? Remember, "there are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

***Jason Rathod*** (Nebraska):

I grew up in a small town in the U.S. where everyone was assumed to be white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual, and Republican. From an early age, I rebelled, particularly against several facets of Christianity. I became disillusioned with the selfishness of the countless books on personal fulfillment instead of social justice and the gospel of hate preached by fundamentalists. In response, I embraced everything liberal, from the social gospel to soymilk and quarreled with any conservatives who crossed my path. After high school I fled the conservatism of my home state, Nebraska, to seek refuge in one of the most liberal corners of the U.S., Grinnell College. The culture war for some liberals was waged between the religious and the secular, and it often felt like there was no middle ground. As a Christian, I wasn't with them so I was against them. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that many liberals promoted a fundamentalism and intolerance of their own. Looking introspectively, I recognized that back in Nebraska I, too, was sometimes self-righteous and condescending just like those whom I so passionately opposed. My personal struggle is part of a larger struggle in our society and our church. General Conference has become a quadrennial affirmation, not of our unity but of our division. Floor debates have degenerated into showboating and name-calling. On the local level we've started believing that we're so far apart on the major issues of the day that we can only find common ground in hosting potlucks and singing praise songs.

Over time we've grown dangerously close to becoming what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "an irrelevant social club that remains silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows."

***Ann Arnoldy*** (Rocky Mountain):

What I know about the church is that it yearns for young people.

What I know about young adults is that they yearn for a place to belong. This seems like a pretty fruitful situation.

The problem is that college young adults are still figuring out what they want to do, who they are, what church and God and community mean in their lives. And career young adults want worship to be deeply meaningful and transformational after having a work week full of conversations where older superiors expect their young workers to conform, and perform, but certainly not reform or transform anything.

If you want to know where young adults today are finding their identities, it is in their communal spaces. To the everyday young adult, church does not appear to have this kind of safe space or vibrant possibility.

If you are wondering where young people are they are in cafes and coffee shops. They are in bars and restaurants. They are in parks and at home. They are at schools and in the great outdoors.

These are the places that allow identity to be formed. Think about your church building and your young adult programs. Open up your thoughts about the identity of young people and offer a place to belong.

***Young Adults in Unison:***

Is this our identity? The picture is dirty, smudged with the buildup of despondence, denial, division, and despair. Heaven and earth listen. The Lord is speaking:

“I raised my children and helped them grow up, but they have turned against me.”

Isaiah 1:2, CEV

***Kira Volkova:***

Young people want church to be a place they can belong and be themselves, receiving strength to become better self. In Russian society, where many young adults try to find happiness by drinking, or drugs, or smoking, The United Methodist Church offers a safe place where they can grow strong and find support and understanding. It is where you feel included, not excluded. Young people today can feel defined by the way they think, or look, or act, and can feel left out. Russian young adult women and men look for a community of people who encourage them to dream God’s dreams and teach them to improve the things which are around them instead of accepting the status quo or leaving their country to try and find a better place—a better life in a different place.

As for those young people who do the ministry in Russia, they talk about the need to raise pastors’ educational levels and professional skills. They want to see more laity involved in church activities. For young pastors in Russia, their first priority is to stay committed to the church and grow in holiness. When they do the things God calls them to do, they seek openness and acceptance from their colleagues and coworkers. What was started years ago by the American church in Russia ought to be carried out in spite of some failures and obvious—absence of obvious success right now.

I know that together—Russian, American, Asian, European, Latin American—we can do some great things for the glory of God, for he wants our faithfulness in sharing the good news with lost people. “Direct your children unto the right path and when they grow older they will not leave.” This is especially true for the country which rejected that for 70 years and formed people’s way of thinking on atheism. It takes time to develop good role models which are accepted in the community. We need Christian-Wesleyan curriculum specific to the needs of young adults and written in the Russian language. I

hope and dream that The United Methodist Church becomes more significant in the lives of people, more attractive to the young people, and more mindful of people's everyday concerns. I know that it is possible with God.

**Ann Arnoldy:**

When I think about hope, I think about when I came to my appointment at First United Methodist Church in Grand Junction, Colorado. I was horrified with the physical space of the church. I thought, "They want me to start young adult ministries here?"

It is the typical, downtown, First United Methodist Church, built more than a century ago. I'm not sure that as a visiting young adult, I would have come back. But, after I worshiped every week for a year, I felt won over by the people of the church. These are people who can tell you all the remodeling that has ever occurred, and who has gotten married there for the last 65 years. If this was a place I could belong, I knew it was a place where other young people could belong. This is the hope of our churches—to be places to belong.

It has been 2 ½ years since I started our 20-30s group and we have had eight new babies—five kids starting kindergarten together, and a dozen single career people. And we are still in our old, downtown church building. This is the hope of any church, any building, anywhere. This is God doing a new thing.

**Andrew Craig:**

Sometimes, I feel discouraged and wonder why I should just keep trying. Life, sometimes, seems so complicated. I mean, look at any newspaper and what do you see? Global warming, species harming, overpopulation, drug devastation, deforestation, war, crime, famine, disease, rising gas prices?

Then I remember that God loves me and has put people here to help guide me through life's struggles. God has sown the earth with wonderful people. When we care for others, people, just like you and me, become God's seeds of hope.

In the New Testament, Jesus used the metaphor of planting to help his listeners, who belonged to an agrarian society, understand the kingdom of heaven. If you break a seed into its individual parts, you'll find the ectoderm on the outside, the endoderm on the inside, and a tiny embryo. Our components, as God's seeds of hope, are courage and knowledge on the outside, faith on the inside, and a tiny embryo called love.

Service to God, by serving one another, provides sustenance for our seeds to grow. Our seeds flower when we live the life that God would have us live. We know that we're fulfilling God's plan when our plants bear fruit, or when we help others along their spiritual journeys.

Our God cares for us and gives us reasons to hope. Our seeds are planted; they're ready to grow.

Be not dismayed, what e'er betide. God will take care of you. Beneath his wings of love abide, God will take care of you. (*singing*) God will take care of you, through everyday, o'er all the way. He will take care of you, God will take care of you.

***Matt Lockett:***

“Injustice anywhere—injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

***Jason Rathod:***

Eighty years ago, a boy in India prayed. He lived in a rural village where life meant playing out a script written at birth -- taking up the trade of one's parents, getting married, having kids, and letting the cycle play again and again, just like a broken record. But this boy listened to an inner voice whispering, “Be not afraid,” and prayed to tell a different story. He prayed to be God's messenger.

His prayer was answered when an American missionary visited the village and saw so much potential in him that she asked her United Methodist Sunday School class in Arkansas to pay a handful of dollars every month to send him to a boarding school. He excelled and eventually earned a scholarship to begin seminary in a distant land, America, with only a few dollars and God's command to be not afraid.

That boy was my grandfather, the late Reverend Raaji Rathod. I stand before you today as a living testament of what the United Methodist Church can be when it's at its best, when it acts on its inner impulse to live out its core values without fear. I stand before you to show that sharing Christ's love by giving to those in need is not mere charity but an investment in a common future. After my grandfather got his degree, he returned to his home state in India and traveled the countryside like a twentieth-century Frances Asbury, raising money for eleven Methodist churches and a Methodist hospital. Three of his sons also became preachers. When, as a church, we do our part to plant a seed, we must rest assured knowing that it will bear the Lord's fruit.

Some say that this task is too great, that the church doesn't have the resources to make a big enough difference. But scripture gives us a different message. It tells us to have strength and to be not afraid because we can overcome any challenge.

***Voice:***

Be not afraid.

***Rebecca L. Farnum:***

The words that God delivered to the oppressed Israelites as they became witnesses of God's power.

***Voice (in English):***

Be not afraid.

**Jason Rathod:** The inspiration of a little boy in an Indian village who dreamt of becoming God's messenger.

**Voice (in Spanish):** No sientes temor.

**Becca Farnum:**

What God is calling us to do today, so that one day oppression, disease, and inequality will be no more.

**Voice (in Korean):**

Be not afraid.

**Becca Farnum:**

So that one day, all people will be seen no as black or white or rich or poor or gay or straight or free or slave or male or female, but as beautiful children of God, beloved in God's sight.

**Voice (in Shona):** Be not afraid.

**Becca Farnum:**

If we are not afraid, my brothers and sisters, if we are not afraid, then this church can rise up and transform this world for the glory of God.

**Young People In Unison:**

For our future, for hope, to come together. It is our call, we are the voices. Our lives are bound. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not for harm. To give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me I will hear you. (Jeremiah 29:11-12)  
Listen, listen, listen.

**Keira Volkova:**

I have listened to the people in Russian talk about how important the United Methodist Church has been in their lives. My friend Sireta tells me that she hopes that the church becomes a safe place where young people are accepted for who they are no matter their imperfections.

My friends Feda and Carta are a part of a Methodist church in Moscow that has partnered with a United Methodist church in Nashville, Tennessee. Together they restored the church building in Moscow. They've sponsorship youth camps. They have enjoyed rich fellowship and proven how powerful we all are when we serve God by loving each other.

**Becca Farnum:**

A man asked Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and then asked the man, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to

the man that fell into the hands of the robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go, and do likewise.”

In The United Methodist Church we have begun to break down geographical barriers. We have begun to love our neighbor as God calls us to do. Neighbors are not only those living next door to us. Geography, however, is not the only thing that separates us.

To the Jews, Samaritans were not merely foreigners, they were an evil, hated race. Jews didn't talk to Samaritans, didn't go near them, but still, Jesus called his disciples to love them and he calls us to do the same. Go and do likewise.

Who are the Samaritans in your life? Muslims? Immigrants? Wealthy businessmen? Gays? Oppressive leaders? A schoolmate or work colleague? Jesus calls you to love even them. Go and do likewise.

Jesus wasn't about serving only when it was easy or going as far as he felt like. You need to go further. You need to love those that you feel you can never love, for our Father in Heaven loves them just as deeply as he loves you.

We are a worldwide church. We are a diverse church. We have different views and opinions. What we share is a love for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and we are called to share that love with our neighbors. Go, and do likewise.

***Jason Rathod:***

I told you a story about division. About growing up as a liberal brown kid in the reddest of red states, and living as an active Christian in the bluest of blue colleges. Although led to believe that I had to choose between competing values of left and right, I opted for a third way: the way of Wesley.

In the world today, we are taught to think that our only options are to choose between head and heart, religion and science, faith and works, reading every word in the Bible literally and throwing everything we don't like out. The United Methodist Church has a message for this world: It's time to transcend the division. The father of Methodism—the father of Methodism, John Wesley, confronted a similar society fraught with division. He was not afraid to break down the opposing sides of the time and say that religion and reason go hand in hand. He thought outside of society's box to form a quadrilateral of his own. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a novel idea, in light of our times, that liberals and conservatives are both right, but that only when putting their values together can we attain a higher truth.

***Matt Lockett:***

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist. But I am afraid lest that they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”

John Wesley

**Annie Arnoldy:**

Working with young adults is a strange calling for me, just like it must have been for the fishermen called by Jesus. Jesus called to them and they answered. Young adults are my peers, the people I went to school with, the people I share stories with about college football games and old boyfriends and major life decisions, and yet I am called to lead and to teach. I've learned in the past three years that it is only when I turned to Jesus that I can see clearly and lead with some sense of assuredness. Jesus took his first followers and said, "We are going to form a community and it will be risky, but we are going to save people from themselves, from their sins, and we are going to show them a new life. Are you with me?"

The disciples answered, "Yes."

So did I.

Risking community means that my theology does not stand in the way of knowing who you are. My thoughts on abortion or immigration or homosexuality are not more important than my ability to see Christ in you, and my inability to communicate with you means that I need to work on that skill, not that you don't have anything valuable to say.

We can judge and demonize each other so much easier than we can learn to love each other.

You can choose that path because it keeps you safe, but I'd rather you risk community with me. I'd rather follow Jesus with you. I'd rather continue my journey with The United Methodist Church, because we have a true community.

Our Book of Discipline represents the way we risk community. There are parts I don't agree with and parts you don't agree with, but overall, I believe in it. I believe in us.

***Matt Lockett:***

Many voices, one call.

We have shared stories of persecution, homelessness, and what it means to be a young person in a world desperately in need of Jesus. Together we have transitioned from finding an identity, looking for hope, and finally now looking towards the future. You have heard about the struggles of teenagers in Russia from Kira, poverty and God's seeds of hope from Andrew, and risking community from Annie. You have heard about the first-ever global young people's convocation from Becca and transcending the division from Jason. And what you do with what you have heard is really up to you.

The fifth chapter of the Gospel of Luke describes a situation where Jesus is eating a meal with a group of tax collectors; and the Pharisees complain saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus said, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." This Methodist tradition of ours is not about being the righteous one.

We are constantly seeking perfection; and because of that, we are forever the sick person in this story. It is time for us to be honest with ourselves. It is time for us to set aside the

fear of not being in control and that ounce of comfort that comes with pretending to be righteousness. Because if we were honest with ourselves, we would know that the only righteousness left on this earth is the blood of Jesus.

I have faith. I have faith in knowing that what we do here transcends all human barriers. Looking towards the future always makes me extremely happy but a little sick at the same time. I wonder what will happen to this church that I love. I wonder what would happen to generations of students if they didn't have youth groups or Sunday schools to attend. As young adults, we hear all the time, "You are the future of the church." But what about you? What part do you play in the future of the church? Why are people always concerned about us carrying on the future of the church when there are billions of people in need right now?

Will the church even exist if all we ever do is talk about the future without acting?

For many young people today faith is less about internal beliefs and more about action. To take it one step further, it's not about the action itself but specifically about the interaction. I believe that connection with one another is where faith begins. So, yes, we want to be the future of the church. We want to make a difference in this world; but we are not willing to wait. So as I said earlier—

—what you do with what you have heard today is really up to you. Are you simply going to sit back and tell us the future of the church is ours; or are we going to work together to share God's love, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to live our faith so that everyone can see? We aren't willing to let this responsibility wait until the future. Love and faith in God requires action now.

Love and faith in God requires interaction now. Are you willing to wait, because we are not. We are ready. We are willing. What about you?

***Young People In Unison:***

It's not about action. There is action all around. Beating each other down, pushing each other around. No! It's about interaction. The future is about the call to follow Christ, the call to better ourselves. So believe! Believe in us. Believe that the future of the church is in good hands, and be with us now. Jesus calls us on the journey. We're ready! The time is now. Let us begin!