

The Foundation for Hope
Episcopal address to the 2008 General Conference
Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher on Behalf of the Council of Bishops
April 24, 2008 -- Fort Worth, Texas

(Bishop Christopher)

I am Sharon Brown Christopher, and this is the Council of Bishops' prayer for
The United Methodist Church and the world.

There is desperation in our times and an urgency about our mission as Christ's body in
our world.

All around this world there are national leaders for whom power and control and self-
interest take priority over the common good of the people. All around this world the
disparity between the rich and the poor is growing. All around this world there are wars
being fought for the advantage of a few and the annihilation of many. All around this
world children are left by the roadside, victims of human violence and deadly disease. All
around this world our climate is warming while our leaders bicker over financial profit
and national interests.

Yes, all around this world there is physical, mental, and spiritual hunger for the Bread of
Life.

People hunger for food, craving even small morsels to nourish and sustain.

People hunger for education, longing for knowledge that will empower self and others.

People hunger for work and living wages, hunting for an economic viability that will
support even a modest way of life.

People hunger for freedom from the tyranny of oppression, desiring release from the
chains that exploit and deny.

People hunger for meaning and purpose that cannot be provided by their material wealth.

People hunger for relationship with God, reaching for that which satisfies and fulfills, the
love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Our brothers and sisters in God's human family hunger for hope.

“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who
hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for
it with patience.”

Romans 8:24-25

As we, the church, receive God's love, known in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are filled with hope. As we, the church, offer Christ to the world, we offer hope to the world. In Christ, new life is born out of old, dying ways. We Christians set God's table of hope.

(Bishops)

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. The Lord be with you.

(People)

And also with you.

(Bishops)

Lift up your hearts.

(People)

We lift them up to the Lord.

(Bishops)

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

(People)

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

(Bishop Christopher)

All around the world, there are millions of people whose lives are being transformed as they encounter God made known in Jesus Christ. When they feast on the Bread of Life in Christian community, they receive hope.

Twelve-year old Kent, born in a cemetery in Manila, has a chance for a brighter future because of the congregation led by Reverend Allen Casuco. The congregation built a church just outside the cemetery walls to be closer to the many poor people who live in its tombs. The congregation provides Kent and other children like him with food, shelter, clothing, and even the opportunity to go to school.

Or like Candis Shannon from Fairbanks, Alaska, in the United States, who sought a relationship with Jesus Christ when her life was in upheaval at age 31. Meningitis took her hearing and she was struggling to find hope. Hope came when she started to get involved with worship services.

John Zirker's life as an addict on the street changed when he encountered the United Methodist faith community. And as a result of his transformation, more lives are being transformed in turn.

(Bishops)

It is right, and a good and joyful thing always and everywhere to give thanks to you, God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

(People)

Holy, holy, holy God Almighty! Heaven and earth are with your glory filled. Hosanna in the highest heaven. Blest is the one who comes in God's own name.

(Bishop Christopher)

All around the world, there are millions of communities, there are even nations, in which social relationships – human connections – are being reconciled as a result of their encounter with God through Jesus Christ. When they meet Jesus Christ, relationships rent by class, race, political and ideological perspective are mended and justice is restored. When they feast on the Bread of Life in Christian community, they receive hope.

This reconciling power can be seen in an historic partnership which has brought Christians and Muslims together, focused on saving lives.

United Methodist Committee on Relief and Muslim AID struck up a partnership in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami which has led to a worldwide alliance to deliver aid. The interfaith effort is now working in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Sudan.

Through this partnership, pairing vast ideological differences in one common mission, the physically and spiritually hungry are fed and our world is reconciled.

A connection between United Methodists and Presbyterians is bringing God's reconciling power to the South Side neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, here in the United States.

The Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community, a new church start, fills a rented cafeteria every Sunday with more than 300 people hungry for its unconventional brand of Christian fellowship.

Born in a tattoo shop, the congregation has tripled in size in the past two years, and today includes senior citizens, body-pierced young adults, wealthy suburbanites, former prison inmates, and the community's homeless people.

Social relationships reconciled through encounter with Jesus Christ.

There is no more perfect example of a community being made anew than the Transformation Project Prison Ministry in Colorado in the United States.

(Bishops)

Holy are you and blessed is your son Jesus Christ. Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people.

(Bishop Christopher)

We, the church, are God's agent in the making of disciples of Jesus Christ for the personal and social transformation of the world. Congregations formed as Christian community are the centers of inviting and receiving those who desire to live in relationship with God, forming them in the depths of God's grace, and sending those on the journey with God into the world to heal, to proclaim, to work for justice, and to invite others to live in personal relationship with Jesus Christ in the context of a community of faith.

Please raise your hand if you, your congregation or your annual conference has worked to touch the lives of those who suffered as a result of any of these things.

We are feeding the physically and spiritually hungry and our world is transformed and reconciled as we offer the Bread of Life.

St. Mark's United Methodist Church in El Paso, Texas is setting the example for all of us in disciple-living.

To strengthen and empower congregations, annual conferences are equipping congregations for their disciple-making ministries. Expressing this work, the Council of Bishops has identified what it calls Seven Vision Pathways that are essential to our disciple-making mission. They will be introduced to you shortly. And as some of you may know, four areas of focus are emerging from our conversation and learning around the seven vision pathways. These four areas of focus are powerful avenues in which United Methodists far and wide can express their faith. On critical topics such as how we grow and lead, and how our church can and should address poverty and disease, these areas of focus are not envisioned for the next quadrennium, but as far as the eye can see. In our mission lies a role for each and every United Methodist.

God's Spirit is moving among us!

(Bishops)

He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

(Bishop Christopher)

In the breaking of the bread, life is transformed:

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters...do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

Romans 12:1-2

In the breaking of the bread, Sin is transformed into forgiveness. Grief is transformed into joy. Conflict is transformed into peace. Fear is transformed into love. Despair is transformed into hope.

In the pouring of the cup, life is reconciled:

“Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us...so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two.”

Ephesians 2:13-14

In the pouring of the cup, broken life is mended. The rough places become plain. Walls become bridges. All our differences find their connection at Jesus' table where we all have a seat and ALL ARE INVITED TO FEAST.

In the breaking and pouring of ourselves as bread and wine, the body of Christ, we offer hope to our world. I invite those of you who are seated next to the bread and cup to stand and lift those elements now.

(Bishops)

On the night in which he gave himself up for us he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.” When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said, "Drink from this all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

(Bishop Christopher)

You may be seated.

In these times in which we find ourselves, times that give great evidence of the hunger of God's human family, we, the Body of Christ, have received the Bread of Life, for which people hunger. As we share this food with others, we are feeding the hungry. Yet, our United Methodist Church struggles within are diminishing our capacity to offer hope for the world.

Let's be clear. Membership and participation in The United Methodist Church grew between 1995 and 2005 by 34 percent. Across Africa and Asia, thousands of new people, many of them children and young people, are flocking to the church every day for spiritual nurture. The number of professing members across Africa and Southeast Asia increased more than 200 percent.

At the same time, however, in the northern hemisphere, our church body is faced with membership decline. Between 1995 and 2005 the number of United Methodist professing members across Europe decreased by more than 10 percent. The U.S. professing membership has slipped from its all-time high of 10.7 million people to less than 8 million. The average U.S. United Methodist is 57 years old and those under age 18 account for less than 5 percent of church membership.

With the Bread of Life, we are feeding the hungry. Yet, our United Methodist struggles within are diminishing our capacity to offer hope for the world.

And, it is not only a matter of numbers.

Our United Methodist mind is filled with distraction. While those of us on the edge of the digital world sometimes feel passed by, those of us who are digital feel inundated with volumes of information that overwhelm us and lure us on to many paths not aligned with God's vision. We often find ourselves attracted to the shiny, glitzy, novel and new for their own sake rather than our mission's sake, and we are distracted from God's intention for our lives.

With the Bread of Life, we are feeding the hungry. Yet, our United Methodist struggles within are diminishing our capacity to offer hope for the world.

And then there is division... Our United Methodist soul is fractured by it. We are plagued with deep fear and anxiety resulting in symptoms that mimic the reactivity of the world rather than the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We live in a divided world in which political solutions are applied to relational differences.

Likewise, there are ruptures in our United Methodist relationships. Left or right, conservative or liberal, we treat our baptized Christian brothers and sisters as if they are our enemies. We minimize and distort, judge and even slander those not aligned with our personal ideology.

We abase one another as if our own salvation depends on the destruction of our Christian and United Methodist brothers and sisters. In the name of God, we do harm to one another.

We live in a divided world in which our United Methodist categories, like the world's categories, are hardened, left and right, conservative and liberal, so that we go to war with each other over the nature of God and the role God plays in our lives, over the authority of scripture, and over the identity of Jesus and our relationship to him. We fight one another with mighty zeal over the complex social issues of the day.

In the name of God, we do harm to one another.

Our United Methodist table is in disarray. We argue over how we set the table, while ignoring the absence of any food on so many tables, and while ignoring the hunger for salvation that permeates our neighborhoods. Our fervent pursuit of being right takes priority over right relationship.

In the name of God, we do harm to one another.

Our anxiety with its rupturing of relationships and hardening of categories deafens us to the cry of our neighbor. The spiritual yearning of those in our midst goes unheard and unheeded because of our need to convince them of the "right" way based on our carefully calculated formulas of theology. Left or right and middle...we all are guilty. As a result, we do not listen to, much less hear, the yearnings of our neighbors' hearts. Our own need deafens us to the need of others.

(All)

Merciful God,

We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.

We have failed to be an obedient church.

We have not done your will,
We have broken your law,
We have rebelled against your love,
We have not loved our neighbors,
And we have not heard the cry of the needy.
Forgive us we pray,
Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Bishop Christopher)

In silence, let us examine our souls. Let us have the courage to identify our own complicity in the decline, distraction, and division within our church.

Hear the Good news. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That is proof of God's love for us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

(All)

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God.

(Bishop Christopher)

Turn to the person next to you and exchange a sign of reconciliation and peace. Say to your neighbor, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

As a young United Methodist leader in Liberia, Richmond Toby risked his life seeking to bring the love of Christ to others in the midst of a ruthless civil war in his country. Like so many of Liberia's citizens, Richmond still bears the scars of a war. But, he's discovered that offering forgiveness is the only way to heal.

"Living out forgiveness" ... a rich lesson from one who has endured so much.

We Christians, when we practice our faith, pattern our relationships not on the divisive ways of the world but on the way of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the Harbinger of Hope. The secret of fulfilling our mission lies in our own dying to live. The key to our missional engagement lies NOT in getting our own way. It lies in giving ourselves away.

Dying and rising, dying and rising, dying and rising. It is God's rhythm in the world and the heartbeat of our church when we dare to be faithful. Through Jesus Christ, the way of death and resurrection is God's gift to us and to the world.

(Bishops)

We offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

(All)

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

(Bishop Christopher)

The dying and rising way of Jesus, the key to our future in faith, is in our Wesleyan genes. Centered in Jesus' Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, John Wesley called those around him to focus on relationships. He gave us in "The Character of a Methodist" a picture of a Christian going on to perfection in love through the forming and sustaining of relationships. Said Mr. Wesley (and I paraphrase):

I encourage you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that we not be divided among ourselves. Is your heart right, as my heart is with yours? I ask no further question. If it be, give me your hand. For the sake of our opinions let us not destroy the work of God. Do you love and serve God? It is enough.

To Wesley, Christian faith was a connection with God and one another ... a connection bound by – and in place for – the practice of three incredibly simple rules:

Do no harm;

Do good; and

Stay in love with God.

Wesley called these three rules the General Rules of Christian life. They were modeled after the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and they are relevant TODAY – here in Fort Worth and in every corner of God's earth.

How?

In the words of Bishop Reuben Job, it was the practice of these three simple rules that strengthened our ancestors of faith to live courageously and faithfully in their time.

It was these three simple rules that transformed and gave new life to women and men of high and low estate and set them on a path that would become a movement that formed a denomination and transformed a forming nation in North America.

It is these three simple rules that lay the foundation of our mission: making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It is these three simple rules that set us on higher ground, a place that recognizes yet transcends our differences from which we can move together in our diversity toward the physically, mentally, and spiritually hungry.

It is these three simple rules that create healthy boundaries for holy conferencing whether it be in our local church or our local coffee shop, whether it be in our annual conferences or our General Conference.

It is these three simple rules that empower us to show the world the Jesus way of right relationship.

It is these three simple rules that hold the momentum of our 21st-century Wesleyan movement toward a world transformed by a United Methodist Church being transformed by the grace of God.

(Bishops)

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

(Bishop Christopher)

For such a time as this, God calls The United Methodist Church to be a sign, a demonstration of God's purpose for the world, so that when the world looks at us they see people living responsibly and gracefully by doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God.

They will exclaim, "I want to live the Jesus way, the Christian way, even the United Methodist way, for in this way is hope."

And now, this very moment, is our time to be the church of Jesus Christ.

For God's sake, we must threaten this world with resurrection.

We United Methodists in partnership with other Christians must go into the nooks and crannies, the highways and byways, the peaks and the valleys and invite the people we encounter into God's hope by doing no harm, doing good, and loving God.

In the midst of the world's desperation, we must set God's table of grace with conviction and passion so that the physically, mentally, and spiritually hungry of our world may know the hope we know in Jesus Christ.

(Bishops)

By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and for ever! Amen.

(Bishop Christopher)

At your place you will find a card with Wesley's three simple rules on it. I invite you in an attitude of prayer to sign it right now ... to covenant with the others gathered here to live a life through which you will do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. Sign the card and then when you go home, keep it in a place where it will remind you of your connectional covenant.

As we enter into this General Conference to do God's work on behalf of the people called United Methodist, let us do no harm, do good and love God.

Bishops, please stand.

(Bishops)

Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body, for it is one loaf of which we all partake. When we break the bread, it is a means of sharing in the body of Christ.

(People)

When we break ourselves as bread, we share the body of Christ.

(Bishops)

When we give thanks over the cup, it is a means of sharing in the blood of Christ.

(People)

When we pour ourselves out like wine, we share the blood of Christ.

(Bishop Christopher)

I invite those of you who are seated next to the elements to pass them down the row, serving the person seated next to you.

(Special Music: "Let Us Be Bread", "Jesu, Tawa Pano", "Solo Tu Eres Santo", "I've Got Peace Like a River")

Join me in prayer.

(All)

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Bishop Christopher)

Please stand. With your card in hand, let us offer our covenant to God as we pray together:

We are no longer our own, but yours.

Put us to what you will, rank us with whom you will.

Put us to doing, put us to suffering.

Let us be employed by you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you.

Let us be full, let us be empty.

Let us have all things, let us have nothing.

We freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

You are ours, and we are yours. So be it.

And the covenant which we have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

These are the times, and we are the people. For God's sake, do no harm, do good, love God, so that through us, The United Methodist Church, God's world may be transformed.