

'Our time to be the church of Jesus Christ'

Episcopal Address challenges delegates to adopt Wesley rules, heal divisions

By Dr. Joan G. LaBarr
Editor

In the 2008 General Conference Episcopal Address, Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher, Illinois Area, challenged delegates to the United Methodist General Conference and members around the world, declaring, "It is our time to be the church of Jesus Christ."

Claiming imagery from Bishop Ruben Job's "three simple rules for Christian life," based on John Wesley's General Rules for the Methodist Societies, Bishop Christopher declared:

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

Her address followed the General Conference 2008 pattern of grounding major addresses in a liturgical setting, specifically the remembrance of God's great act in Jesus Christ from the Holy Communion Great Thanksgiving prayer.

Stressing that the church is God's agent to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the personal and social transformation of the world, she provided examples of ways that United Methodist congregations have functioned as centers of inviting and receiving persons who desire to live in relationship with God at the same time as they have reached out to respond to persons caught up in natural disasters and acts of human violence.

The illustrations came in the form of multi-media video productions, making vivid examples like the new life at St. Mark's UMC, El Paso. The St. Mark's video depicted how the congregation reaches out to the nearby community, as well as offers two distinct worship styles. The contemporary service is led by preaching pastor Rev. Felicia Hopkins, who will be preacher for the June 8 opening service of the North Texas Annual Conference.

She explained that in order to strengthen and empower congregations, annual conferences are equipping congregations or disciple-making ministry. Bishop Christopher noted that the Council of Bishop's "Seven Vision Pathways," emerging from members' conversation and learning, and the Four Areas of Focus emerging from the Connectional Table, noting that they are "powerful avenues in which United Methodists far and wide can express their faith."

Acknowledging the struggles within United Methodism, Bishop Christopher noted that despite the evidence of great hunger for both bread for life and Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, disappointing realities compromise the capacity to offer hope to the world.

While membership in Africa and Southeast Asia grew more than 200% between 1995 and 2005, membership in the Northern Hemisphere, both in the U.S. and Europe, is declining.

“Between 1995 and 2005, the number of UM professing members across Europe decreased by more than 10%. The U.S. professing membership has slipped from its all-time high of 10.7 million people to less than eight million. The average United Methodist is 57 years old, and those under age 18 account for less than five percent of the church membership,” she said.

She reiterated that internal struggles diminish UM capacity to offer hope to 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,” she emphasized.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, we do harm to one another,” she said.

Quoting from the ritual of confession and forgiveness in the Communion liturgy, she challenged the delegates and guests to, “...examine our souls. Let us have the courage to identify our own complicity in the decline, distraction, and division within our church.”

During the words of reconciliation and forgiveness, Bishop Christopher asked persons to turn to those next to them and offer signs of reconciliation and peace.

Say to your neighbor, “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven,” she said.

Through another video, she told the story of Richmond Toby, a young United Methodist in Liberia, who risked his life to share the love of Christ in the midst of civil war. “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,” Bishop Christopher emphasized.

In a paraphrase of John Wesley, the bishop proclaimed:

“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 opinions, let us not destroy the work of God. Do you love and serve God? It is enough.”

She noted that each delegate had a card at their place inscribed with Wesley’s three simple rules. Bishop Christopher invited them to sign it, in covenant with others, to live a life of doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God.

In her closing remarks, she asked the delegates to hold the cards in their hands, standing to pray the classic prayer from Wesley’s renewal of covenant service. “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 your, 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.