

**THE MANURE PLAN  
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS**

**Dakotas Annual Conference  
June 9, 2016  
Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Church! May God's grace and peace be multiplied to you. (I Peter 1:2b)

This is the fourth conference session I have had the privileged opportunity to address the lay and clergy leadership of the Dakotas Conference. Together, we are on a shared journey toward God's vision in which each congregation in the conference is growing in its capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world – all to the glory of God and the fulfillment of our mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Let us pray.

Holy and gracious God, pour out your generous Spirit blessing on us as we gather for the 23rd Session of the Dakotas Annual Conference. We pray that all our activities will be rooted and grounded in Christ's love, and all our discussion and discernment will reflect your love, mercy and justice. Teach us, in these days of Christian conferencing, to live more generously and obediently as disciples of Jesus, in whose precious and powerful name we pray. Amen.

**OUR JOURNEY TOWARD VITALITY**

The journey we are on together is a Journey Toward Vitality. Our ultimate goal is to increase the vitality of each existing and newly formed congregation in the Dakotas Conference.

This Journey Toward Vitality has been reflected in the themes for each of our annual conference sessions throughout this quadrennium.

·In 2013, under the theme of *Unleashing Bold-Spirit Leaders*, we focused on *Developing Missional Leaders* and the absolutely critical role lay and clergy leadership play in increasing the number of vital congregations.

·In 2014, under the banner of *Unleashing Fearless, Spirit-Led Churches*, we focused on *Equipping Missional Congregations* and explored how vital congregations are fearless and Spirit-led.

- In 2015, our theme, *God's Vision, Our Mission – Unleashed*, reflected our commitment to *Extend the Missional Impact* of each of our congregations in its respective village, neighborhood, city and the world.
- This year, our theme, *Living Generously – Unleashing God's Gifts*, expresses our desire to *Generate Missional Resources* that enable us to renew and revive our churches, unleashing God's gifts to fulfill Christ's core missional imperatives and to make tangible, incarnate the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Our Journey Toward Vitality is producing much kingdom fruit. There are many signs we are growing in our capacity to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world. This fruitfulness will be reflected in the Missional Report you will receive later today.

However, I want to share just a few highlights of how Dakota United Methodism is living generously and unleashing God's gifts into the world.

- The number of Dakota United Methodists in mission grew from 4,417 in 2014 to over 5,000 in 2015, another 13% increase over the 39% increase between 2013 and 2014.
- Collectively, our congregations served nearly 129,000 persons through community outreach, justice and mercy ministries, community daycare or other education ministries in 2015.
- Our Miracle Offerings in 2013, 2014 and 2015 generated nearly \$600,000 to fund our Bakken Oil Rush Ministries and the Imagine No Malaria campaign. Our 2015 Thanksgiving Offering of nearly \$ 48,000, in response to the migration crisis in the Middle East and Europe, was the largest we have ever received.
- At this annual conference session we will celebrate the success of our Thrive: Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow Initiative.
- In 2015 our conference's average worship attendance grew by 3.3 %, the fifth consecutive year of growth.
- According to the Council of Bishops Vital Congregations Metrics project, 42% of the congregations in the Dakotas Conference are growing in average worship attendance. In the United States, we are surpassed by only the Oklahoma Indian and Alaska Missionary Conferences.

We are clearly a vibrant connection of United Methodist congregations expanding our missional impact. I cannot wait to see what miracle God will perform through us as we receive our 10,000 Hours Offering tomorrow morning.

- Did you bring your Miracle Offering?
- Are you ready to live generously, love extravagantly, witness boldly?
- Are you ready to unleash God's gifts to reach those whom no one else wants and to heal those whom others have forgotten?

## THE MANURE PLAN

There are many stewardship education and stewardship development plans on the market. You only need to go on the Internet or consult your Cokesbury catalog and you will be overwhelmed. They are all designed to help you create generous givers, generate more financial and human resources or practice extravagant generosity. And, of course, we have our own tested and true Methodist stewardship plan, promoted by John Wesley, himself: earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.

This morning, however, I want to teach you a new and radical plan for living generously. It is a biblical model Jesus gave us in one of his many parables (Luke 13:6-9, *NRSV*). I call it The Manure Plan.

The owner of the vineyard was angry that his fig tree had not borne any fruit for three years. So he ordered the gardener to "cut it down." Land was precious, so an unfruitful tree could not be allowed to use resources that could nourish a fruitful one. But the gardener interceded, offering to dig around it and fertilize it – to put manure on it. Then if the fig tree did not bear fruit in another year, he would cut it down.

By the way, the Greek word for manure, *koprion*, is a crude, impolite, four-letter variety expression. And, this is the only place it is used in the New Testament. Jesus used a four-letter word in telling this parable (I love it), so that there would be no mistake that it was time for drastic, earthy measures. Three years is long enough to wait for fruit!

Jesus wanted the crowds following him – and all of us – to identify with the fig tree that was given one last chance. Can't you just hear Jesus saying, "If you have ears to hear, this is about you; get off your backsides and be fruitful." The point is clear. The time is short; you have one last chance to put things right before the judgment – one last chance to bear kingdom fruit before I move on. You had better get your manure together before it is too late. Be fruitful or perish! That is the message.

Just a minute, bishop! How is this good news? How is such a harsh, judgmental word to help us live generously? Fair question. Here is the good news: There is still time! Due to the pleading of the gardener, there is still time for the fig tree. The gardener asks that the fig tree be left alone. "I'll put manure on it, dig around it. Let it alone."

The Greek word for “let it alone” is *aphes*. It is the same New Testament word for forgiveness. Dear friends, this is not a story about judgment. This is a story about extravagant forgiveness. This is a story about generous grace. This is a story about unmerited mercy. Not the dignified, “O Lord, have mercy upon us,” churchy kind of mercy. No, this is the “spread a little manure on it,” farm-animal, earthy variety of mercy.

The parable invites us to consider the gift of a second chance as an act of God’s forgiveness and mercy. Anyone here need a second chance? Anyone here need a little more time to bear fruit? Anyone here need a little more time to live generously? Anyone here need a little more time to offer everything to God?

Our desire to live generously – to practice extravagant generosity – is rooted in God’s unmerited mercy and grace made most manifest to us in Christ Jesus. God wants to give us a second chance. That is the joy of being born again, of growing toward perfect love, of resurrection hope. God wants to give us a little more time to bear fruit.

In the parable of the fig tree, we are listening in on a struggle – a debate – deep, deep within the very heart of God. This is a debate between justified judgment – the cut-it-down plan, and miraculous mercy – the put-manure-on-it plan. This is a debate about whether God should give us what we deserve or what we do not deserve. Mercy and judgment are given voices in this parable of the barren fig tree. One voice perfectly justified in anger calls for “cutting it down.” The other voice amazingly forbearing, pleading, “Let it alone and fertilize it.”

God has given us many gifts with which to build and nurture and expand the Body of Christ. But, none is more precious than the blessing of “manure.” By now you do realize, don’t you, that manure is a metaphor for forgiveness, grace, mercy, a second chance? God is giving us a second chance, more time to bear fruit.

Many of you have heard me speak affectionately of my Uncle Ed. I officiated at his funeral a couple of years ago. He loved to farm. He loved God. He loved the land. He loved manure. During my teens, I spent five summers as his “hired hand” on the family farm. He taught me about manure and he taught me God’s “manure plan” for living expectantly, joyfully, generously. He taught me about being a steward of God’s life-giving resources. It is difficult to make a living farming the semi-arid, rocky glacial fields of northwest North Dakota. But every year, year in and year out, my uncle tithed whatever God gave him. In 2010 he had a serious health crisis and spent several days in the hospital. In a conversation shortly after he was discharged, he said to me, “Well, it seems God has given me another year to spread my money around.” Another year to fertilize!

## LIVE BEYOND THE IMAGINARY LID

Living generously is rooted in God's generosity toward us. God has given us all great gifts, a story of saving grace, a new day every morning, abundant resources – to go forth and fertilize:

- to give an already fruitful ministry the nourishment it needs;
- to love someone whose soul is drying up;
- to call someone out of darkness into Christ's marvelous light;
- to spread our (dare I say it?) manure around!

The only things constraining us from being like the gardener, the only things constraining us from unleashing God's gifts are our own impoverished imaginations, our fear or disdain of change, our scarcity thinking, and our tendency to limit who we embrace as our neighbors. These are the obstacles we face as we seek to live into God's preferred future.

- When we focus on limited financial resources, scarcity thinking paralyzes us.
- When we fear change, we become entombed in the status quo.
- When we discount the beliefs, values or theology of others, we become imprisoned by our own conservative or progressive fundamentalism.
- When we fail to embrace our God-intended and God-given power, we become comfortable with mediocrity.

If we, or our congregations, live with these fears and barriers too long, our behaviors are set for the rest of our lives, or the lifespan of our congregations.

I recently saw a brief PlayStation 2 video clip that makes this point better than I can. It is called *The Flea Circus*. Please watch the screens.

### *The Flea Circus*

I was amazed to learn that it takes only three days of living within undisturbed boundaries for fleas to be conditioned to not escape. More incredible, still, is that the fleas' off-spring automatically follow their example and live within the limits of the imaginary lid. Only three days!

As followers of the Christ, we know something about three days, don't we? We know that Jesus, crucified and dead, was placed in a tomb and three days later was raised up. Jesus went into the tomb on Good Friday, but three days later it was Easter Sunday! We know three days in a tomb did not and cannot impede God's victory over sin, or fear, or impoverished imagination, or unbelief, or even death.

Dear friends, we are not fleas jumping around, unable to live beyond the limits of an imaginary lid. We are Easter People. We are followers of a Risen Christ who escaped every limitation known to the human spirit. We are not called to let imaginary lids limit our ministry, witness and generosity. We are not called to live in the tomb. We have been set free by God's love for

us. Christ is risen! Christ is risen! And, so should we arise and live expectantly, joyfully, generously – unleashing God’s extravagant gifts on a hungry, hurting, hope-starved world.

## **DEFINING OUR NEIGHBORS**

Some time ago, I heard a sermon by Rev. Don Underwood based on the Good Samaritan text from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:25-37). I have read, heard and preached this text many times. I have always focused on the Good Samaritan’s capacity to practice radical, Jesus-like hospitality. But, Rev. Underwood said this is really a story about us and our sinful tendency to define our neighbor as narrowly as possible.

Most of the disunity and mistrust I observe across the entire denomination, and certainly at our recent General Conference in Portland, is rooted in our human tendency to define our neighbor as narrowly as possible. Jesus was constantly expanding the boundaries of whom God loved and included in the Kingdom. It often seems as if we are constantly trying to more narrowly define who is included and who is not. Rev. Underwood was not preaching a theology of anything goes. Neither am I. Clearly, there are thoughts, actions and behaviors each of us engage in that need redemption, healing or correction. But, it often appears we may be forgetting that Jesus first focused on the person’s heart and love of God. It is God’s extravagant, unmerited love and grace that sets the ultimate boundaries for defining who is our neighbor.

Trevor Hudson, a pastor in the Methodist Church of South Africa, tells a wonderful little parable that asks the profound question: When do we know that the darkness is leaving and the dawn is coming? Is it when we can peer into the shadows and tell the elm tree from the juniper? Is it when we can distinguish the fox from the wolf? No; we know that the darkness is leaving and the dawn is coming when we see that the other is a child of God.

Dear beloved Church, we cannot leave undone, much longer, wrestling with the fundamental, theological question: Who is my neighbor? Dear beloved Church, we cannot leave undone, much longer, seeking the coming dawn and seeing that everyone is a child of God. When we limit who our neighbors are; when we limit our definition of who is a child of God, we limit God’s gifts and our capacity to live generously.

## **PEARL OF GREAT PRICE**

Living generously, living in a manner that unleashes God’s gifts of saving grace and abundant life is rooted in

- remembering how we have been blessed by the gardener interceding on our behalf,
- removing the imaginary lids that keep us locked in our preferences and fears,
- expanding our definition of who God loves,
- and finally giving it all away.

Theophane, The Monk, tells a compelling story (based on one of Jesus' "the kingdom of heaven" parables found in Matthew 13:45) in his book, *Tales of a Magic Monastery*, about what it means to truly give it all away – to truly live generously.

He asked me what I was looking for.

"Frankly," I said, "I'm looking for the Pearl of Great Price."

He slipped his hand into his pocket, drew it out, and gave it to me.

It was just like that! I was dumbfounded.

Then I began to protest:

"You don't want to give it to me? Don't you want to keep it for yourself? But . . ."

When I kept this up, he said finally,

"Look, is it better to have the Pearl of Great Price, or to give it away?"

Well, now I have it. I don't tell anyone.

From some there would just be disbelief and ridicule.

"You, you have the Pearl of Great Price? Hah!"

Others would be jealous, or someone might steal it.

Yes, I do have it. But there's that question –

"Is it better to have it, or to give it away?"

How long will that question rob me of my joy?

God has given each of us the Pearl of Great Price. God has given us the ultimate Pearl of Great Price – the blessing of salvation. Will you keep it or give it away? Will you relish and hold tight to your blessing, or will you give this blessing to others?

Some years ago, I led a workshop on intercessory prayer for a group of clergy in north central Iowa. During the workshop I told of a mystical encounter with God's Spirit that I had experienced during an intense period of prayer in my life. I had been praying for a sign of God's presence and assurance in my life. On that day, God came to me as a ball of light, entered my head and flowed through my body. A person seated next to me told me later he had felt heat radiating from my body. During a break time in the workshop, nearly half the pastors in the workshop came to me individually and shared that they had also had mystical experiences – powerful experience of their lives being flooded by God's grace – but were afraid to share them with anyone, let alone their congregations. I was not surprised, but I was deeply saddened. When we all came back together again, I shared what they had told me during the break. My questions for them were: "What are you preaching, if you are not remembering and reciting your spiritual experiences with your congregations?" What are you testifying to? What are you bearing witness to? What God story are you withholding from those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? What Pearl of Great Price are you keeping for yourself?

Every one of our congregations is one or two generations from extinction. If we do not witness to God's saving grace; if we do not recite our God stories; if we do not grow in love of God and neighbor; if we do not reach new people; if we do not heal a broken world, our faith will perish – the fig tree will be uprooted – cut down. Our power as Easter People comes from the kingdom narrative. Our power as Pentecost People comes from the Spirit's witness. Our power

as People of God comes from our story. Do not forget it; do not give it up; do not let it wither away for lack of being remembered and recited. Put some fertilizer on your story and go bear fruit.

As we go into this new conference year, I am praying that each of you, each of our congregations, will live and witness with generous abandon and unleash a mighty, magnificent and miraculous torrent of God's generous love, grace and justice upon the world. Let's go spread some manure! If we do, our joy in the Lord will be complete. May it be so.

Please pray with me the Prayer for Living Generously. The prayer cards are on your table and also projected on the screens.

Gracious and Generous God, send your Holy Spirit to:

- Break through and renew and revive our churches, unleashing your gifts of radical hospitality, saving grace and abundant life on a broken world.
- Empower our clergy and lay leadership to offer you, O God, all the gifts you have bestowed upon them.
- Boldly use me, without limits, delays or excuses to live generously and serve the full arrival of your reign on earth.
- Create in me a generous heart and a desire to live in your presence with ever-growing gratitude.

I pray in the name of Jesus whose love, mercy and justice know no bounds.

Amen.

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough**  
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