

**2018 Great Plains Episcopal Address**  
**Rev. Dr. Ruben Saenz Jr., Resident Bishop**  
**Hyatt Regency, Wichita, KS**  
**June 12, 2018**

**“HELD TOGETHER BY CHRIST”**  
**Colossians 1:15-20**

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in<sup>o</sup> him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Lay and clergy delegates, friends of the Great Plains Annual Conference, and distinguished guests, grace and peace in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior, the fullness of God, the one in whom all things hold together, and through whom God reconciles all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

The Cabinet read and studied the book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, by Todd Bolsinger this past year. Bolsinger applies insights from the story of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s expedition of the unexplored western half of the continent now the western portion of the United States. Lewis and Clark and the Corp of Discovery adventured toward the unexplored west expecting the territory was the same geography as the familiar east. They were wrong. The western territory in front of them was nothing like the eastern territory behind them. They had to adapt and adventure to succeed in the unfamiliar and uncharted territory. They were canoers that had to

abandon their canoeing ways and instead learn how to be mountain climbers as they marched off the map into unfamiliar and rugged terrain.

Today's church finds itself in unfamiliar terrain in a post-Christendom world. The 1700-year era with Christianity at the privileged center of western culture is increasingly behind us. Historians and researchers say that the Christian story and ethics are now marginal and that today's Christians are a minority in our secular society. Although people may identify themselves as 'Christians,' the majority do not belong to a worshipping community or have any inclination to do so. More and more people have no identifiable interest in religion. The church that shaped our faith, our values, and our ethics now finds itself an alien, an exile, and a pilgrim in a culture where it no longer feels at home. It seems that culture is building a wall to keep the church out of the public space.

At a time like this, we have the choices of huddling together hoping for things to return to what they used to be. We can quit. Or, we can move forward into uncharted territory with a spirit of adventure, faith in God and each other, and hope for a new future.

We are hopeful because many churches are healthy and missionally vibrant. We are starting new faith communities. The Word of God is still being proclaimed. People's lives are being transformed. The Holy Spirit continues to call children, youth, and adults into ministry. Christ continues to build his church in the world. We are hopeful that the Holy Spirit will help us to carry out the Great Commission in new ways for a new day.

Leaders of churches and within the larger church leadership group in a post-Christendom world, says Bolsinger, need to live by the maxim: Start with conviction, stay calm, stay connected, and stay the course.

## **WE WILL START WITH CONVICTION**

Friends, we are a people of unwavering conviction, faith, and hope in the risen Christ. Our unwavering conviction is that the church is not an outdated institution with an irrelevant message for a post-Christian culture. We are convinced that the God of mission has a church in the world for his mission to

a fractured world in need of help, hope, and healing. (Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 62). Throughout our Great Plains Conference, there are signs that we are doing just that as we shift from institutional maintenance toward an outward focused missional mindset that is influencing lives by truly seeking missionary encounters with unchurched and nominally church friends and neighbors in our communities. Together, we are helping people to respond to God's love, proclaim Christ, serve others; especially the poor, and do justice.

### **On Loving God**

Our churches are becoming more focused and intentional on the mission of making disciples as we proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome, and gather persons into the body of Christ. For example:

- Like Faith UMC in Gibbon, Nebraska, a church on the verge of closing its doors, discerned a new vision for themselves and their community. They are growing numerically and are enjoying a renewed spiritual and missional vitality.
- Congregations are helping people to accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to live their daily lives in light of their relationship with God. We are developing discipling cultures and pathways for all age levels with an appropriate mix of invitation, support, and challenge to help people grow spiritually within and to help people live into and out of their identity as a son or daughter child of God.
- In 2017, we had an increase of 314 baptisms and professions of faith over 2016! We increased from 4013 baptisms and professions of faith in 2016 to 4,327 baptisms in 2017!

### **On Proclaiming Christ**

We are convicted of the gospel's power to bring people into the obedience of faith to Christ and into a new realm of living as people are lifted from sin to goodness, from chaos to harmony, from selfishness to sacrifice, and from self-centered living to Christ-centered living. New churches and faith communities are reaching and making disciples of new people, younger people, more diverse people, unchurched, and nominally church people. These new churches and faith communities utilize existing church buildings, unconventional locations, homes, and build new facilities as a tool that helps

them extend and expand their ministry to people helping them to become deeply devoted Christ followers. For example:

- Water's Edge in Omaha, a daughter church of Faith Westwood in Omaha, Nebraska.
- RezDowntown, a satellite of Church of the Resurrection whose purpose is to build a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians.
- ConnectionPoint, an extension campus of Christ UMC in Lincoln that links the ULN campus and the community and helps free people from poverty through education, mentoring, and job skills training.
- Presence Worship, a home-based outreach movement of St. Paul's in Lenexa, Kansas.
- The Word, an outreach ministry of St. Paul UMC to the residents of the revitalized Haymarket area in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska.
- The "Neighboring" movement that strengthens communities, connects individuals and revitalizes churches continues to multiply and expand throughout the conference's boundaries.
- And there is another movement that is beginning to yield a harvest (Luke 10:1; Acts 8:1). That is the lay missionary movement. This movement involves spiritually mature and active laity that understand that the only way to reach new people, unchurched people, and nominally churched people for Christ is to do it through their secular occupations and social networks. Unchurched and nominally churched people can no longer be reached in the old ways. They can only be reached from within their circle of friends, relatives, associates, or neighbors. Our laity are sharing their faith and speaking about their experiences of Jesus Christ.

### **On Serving Others**

Our congregations are impacting lives as we marshal and direct our gifted laity and resources toward the least of these in our communities and our world in efforts that seek their welfare. For example:

- Salina Church of the Cross UMC and Kansas Wesleyan hosted "A Night to Shine," a prom for individuals 14 and older with intellectual disabilities.

- Living Hope UMC (a largely African-American congregation in Omaha) was one of three Omaha churches to start a mentoring program and launched the “Roots and Wings Education Mission Trip” to Washington, D.C.
- Wichita Saint Mark UMC launched its RISE campaign to focus on mission and evangelism. It is doing so by increasing partnerships with Wichita State University on advocacy issues and Working Men of Christ, which houses ex-offenders. It’s also focusing on a five-point money-management plan to help members diminish debt, save, invest, pay it forward and leave a legacy.
- The Nebraska United Methodist Bike (NUMB) Ride nears \$1 million in funds raised over the 20+ years to combat hunger.

### **On Seeking Justice**

Our congregations ‘act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God’ (Micah 6:8) as they engage in the most pressing social issues of our day. They are fighting for justice and loving the vulnerable. They are unbinding the bound, freeing the oppressed, and mending the broken through advocacy, ministries of presence, ministries of accompaniment, and ministries of empowerment. For example:

- About 250 people gathered in front of Trinity Heights United Methodist Church in Newton, Kansas, on Aug. 16 – five days after a violent racial attack in Charlottesville, Virginia – for the first “Stand for Love Newton,” a rally and celebration of peace.
- First Church Omaha, St. Mark’s in Wichita and Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City hosted community-wide symposiums on race and reconciliation.
- Clergy and laity throughout our conference are advocating for reforms on the systemic causes of poverty, immigration policy, incarceration, the death penalty, and environmental justice.

### **On our Collective Impact**

We are convinced that as individual congregations we make a difference in our world, but that together, we make a tremendous collective impact greater than what we can ever achieve alone. For example:

- Hundreds of our congregations and thousands of our Great Plains United Methodists unified to collect over 6,500 flood buckets and over \$ 850,000 for the victims of Hurricane Harvey in September 2017!
- Our congregations blessed over 20,000 families with gifts this past Christmas!
- Our 2018 Easter worship service attendance swelled from an average of 82,000-weekend worshipers to over 147,000!

**We start with conviction, and we will stay calm.**

### **WE WILL STAY CALM**

**Friends, we will stay calm and know that God is God though the earth should change, shake, roar, or tremble with its tumult (Psalm 46).**

Only a foolish optimist would deny the swirling scenarios and realities of this moment in the life of our great United Methodist Church. As you are aware, the Council of Bishops, having received and considered the extensive work of the Commission on a Way Forward, will submit a report to the Special Session of the General Conference called for February 23-26, 2019, in St. Louis that includes:

- All three plans (*The Traditionalist Plan, the One Church Plan, and the Connectional Conference*) for a way forward considered by the Commission and the Council.
- The Council's recommendation of the One Church Plan.
- And, a historical narrative of the Council's discernment process regarding all three plans.

There is support for each of the three plans within the council. The values of the global church are reflected in all three plans. The majority of the council recommends the One Church Plan as the best way forward for The United Methodist Church. The One Church Plan provides conferences, churches and pastors the flexibility to uniquely reach their missional context while retaining the connectional nature of the church.

The One Church Plan allows for contextualization of language about human sexuality in support of the mission; and allows for central conferences,

especially those in Africa, to retain their disciplinary authority to adapt the Book of Discipline and continue to include traditional language and values while fulfilling the vision of a global and multicultural church.

Our thoughts are anxiously directed to the impending General Conference 2019 and the implications of the decisions reached by the delegates for the future of the United Methodist Church and our common witness in the world. No one wants conflict. Many dread it. Many seek to avert it. And yet, the hour has come.

We recognize that our members hold a wide range of positions regarding same-sex relations and operate out of sincerely held beliefs. All are convinced of the moral views they espouse and seek to be faithful to what they see as the truth God calls the church to uphold. It remains the case that views on this matter are distinctly different, and in some cases cannot be reconciled.

However, we also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences.

These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them. Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about how each of our views may stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we lift-up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.

We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with those who share our fundamental commitments to scripture and our doctrinal standards, and yet whose views of faithfulness in this regard differ from our own.

Gil Rendle, a United Methodist clergy and the lead consultant for the Commission on a Way Forward in his monograph “**Knowing How to Read**

**the Signs,”** says that we are standing in a palpable moment in our church’s history when it’s difficult to make sense of the swirling events and information that immediately surround us. We are doing our best by faith to perceive a hopeful future for our church. In time, this moment we are living in will be history. Others will come after us who will have the luxury of time and perspective to offer a more ordered understanding and coherent narrative of our work and the movement of the Holy Spirit. For now, we move forward into the future by stepping on the stones we can see without fully knowing the path of our journey, and certainly not our final destination.

In preparation for the Special Session of General Conference, I have convened a **Great Plains Forward in Unity Process Team** to serve as an advisory board. The purpose of the team is to provide me with non-binding strategic advice and assistance in the development of processes, tools, and resources that can strengthen the resiliency and robustness needed by our lay and clergy leadership and congregations to maintain our unity and move forward in mission together.

The team first met in March of 2018 and will continue to meet throughout 2019. **I will also visit our 17 districts in the fall to meet with laity and clergy to share new information and updates, receive feedback, and answer questions you will have as more specifics about the three plans as well as other related proposals become available.**

I am also inviting the Great Plains conference to **set your daily alarm for 2:23 p.m. to pause for a couple of minutes and join together to pray the Lord’s Prayer and Psalm 23 each day until General Conference begins, February 23-26, 2019.** More prayer resources will be developed and shared with you in the coming months.

Todd Seifert has created a **Way Forward Toolbox** that churches can access to find books, study’s, updates, and other materials that will help with learning, dialogue, prayer, and discernment.

Amid so much swirling uncertainty, it is easy to become anxious and emotionally reactive. Our minds, hearts, and spirits are always in a constant state of turmoil, disarray, and confusion. We easily assign blame. We become desperate for quick short-sighted fixes to relieve the pain rather than pursue

long-lasting change. We can become rigid and narrow in our view of others. At worst, we “horribilize,” wound, and harm others with whom we disagree.

**What if we took the long view and steered away from insisting on clear agreements about the presenting issues, the solution, and the plans, and move toward experimenting with different perspectives and possibilities?**

For the sake of our Church’s collective mission and impact in the world, **What if we would first give ourselves the opportunity to hold together, focusing on what unites us rather than what divides us, as we co-create our way forward?**

**What if we took a creative stance? That is, we step forward together, we act, we reflect on the results of our actions, and then find out what next step we should take.**

Throughout the coming year friends, **we will begin with conviction, we will stay calm, we will stay connected, and we will stay the course** knowing that God is God and a very present help in a time of trouble (Psalm 46).

## **WE WILL STAY CONNECTED**

**As United Methodists we will start with conviction, we will stay calm, and we will stay connected because we have a DNA that yearns for connection and a DNA passionate for helping people and making a difference in the world. One way we are connected and making a difference is by seeking the welfare of children near and far.**

### **On Caring for the Spiritual and Social Welfare of Children**

Children are a gift from God. Jesus Christ honored and placed a child at the very center of the vision for what a beautiful Kingdom would look like. Our United Methodist Church and our predecessor bodies have a long history of ministering to the needs of children and caring for the quality of their lives. John and Charles Wesley’s Holy Club taught the poor children of Oxford.

We will continue to focus our ministry on meeting the spiritual and social needs of children in our communities and our world. Many children are raised carefree and happy. But the reality for a growing number of children is very different. Children suffer. They worry. They have material, social, and spiritual needs.

Our congregations make a huge and positive impact on the lives of children as we seek the welfare of children in our communities and seek to close gaps in food insecurity, education, poverty, and child safety. We do this by providing meals for children in poverty, by donating school supplies and books for reading, by providing school clothing, by tutoring, by improving our schools through volunteer work projects, and by offering children other resources to protect and provide for them.

Vital congregations are providing sacred spaces where children in need of God's hope, healing, and faith can experience and receive it through a caring and listening adult, through prayer, child-centered worship, spiritual formation, and counseling. More congregations offered Vacation Bible School and mid-week children's programming that includes children from the community.

This August, we will measure the collective impact our churches have on the lives of the children in our communities and our families by gathering stories and metrics of all the ways we champion the wellbeing of children near and far.

### **On Networks**

A vision for organizing the conference into networks was cast at last year's annual conference. This year, 11 of our 17 districts organized into networks. Our district superintendents, functioning as missional strategists, are organizing the work of their districts into networks of churches assigned according to their proximity to each other and their mission field affinity.

Passionate clergy and laity within those networks work together to share best practices, solve problems, and capitalize on opportunities to serve in ministry within their mission field. Together, congregations are extending and enhancing our Wesleyan witness throughout the conference by uniting to help people respond to God's love, by sharing their faith, serving others, and

alleviating suffering and injustice. Through regional networks, new possibilities are opening, innovation occurs, and our resources, gifts, and graces are synergized and harnessed to produce a greater growth in new disciples and a greater, more comprehensive missional impact in the region.

### **On Being a Global Church**

Our United Methodist Church is a global church with a **global membership of 12.7 million**. We have **56,000 clergy** and **44,000 locally organized churches**, and we are **in mission in more than 140 countries**.

We have 677 mission personnel, 125,00 Volunteers in Mission worldwide, 177 active Deaconesses and Home Missioners in the United States, 550 relief and refugee workers, and 97 United Methodist-related community centers and institutions in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Our health and welfare ministries related to the United Methodist Church serve more than 32 million people in 1,555 locations across the United States and provide more than \$ 2 billion in charity care annually.

We have three two-year colleges, 92 four-year colleges, and universities and 13 theological schools.

In 2017, United Methodists gave over \$6.3 billion for all purposes.

This year, our Great Plains Conference **congregations gave 90.1% of our assigned mission shares** - the highest percentage in mission share giving in our Great Plains history. Your mission shares supported our ongoing global mission work, our camping ministries, our campus ministries, and numerous colleges and universities in our Kansas-Nebraska area. Your mission shares support mission agencies in our conference, new churches, lay leadership training, clergy leadership development, resourcing for congregational vitality, and our networks. Thank you for your generosity and for supporting the work we do together in our conference and the world.

We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with each other.

## **Lastly, WE WILL STAY THE COURSE**

Friends, amid swirling uncertainties, disputes without and fears in our world, in our denomination, and in us, we will start with conviction. We will remain calm. We will stay connected to God and each other. And, we will stay the course as we move forward together in mission and ministry for Christ to work for the peace and healing of our fractured world in the coming year.

We will stay the course come what may. Because, we are convinced that the wisdom and stories of God's faithfulness handed down through the ages, and the witness and testimony of mature Christians help people enter into the realm of a whole new way to live. A whole new way to look at life and this world. A whole new way to orient the totality of their existence and desires toward seeking and living into the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

We will stay the course. Because, we are convinced that the grace of God cleanses the world from sin from the inside out and makes life different, joyful, hopeful, purposeful, and grace-filled.

We will stay the course. Because, we are convinced that the narrative of God's reign is transformational, transcendent, eternal, grander, marvelous, hopeful, and more compelling than any other personal or nationalistic narrative we can conceive or that has ever been conceived.

We will stay the course. Because, we are convinced that a depth of grounding in God's love and faithfulness is an anchor that saves our souls in times of volatility, uncertainty, chaos, and ambiguity.

We will stay the course. Because, we are convinced that in seasons of deep cynicism, suspicion, acrimony, and disagreement, Christ is in our midst, holding us together, reconciling all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

Make no mistake friends. The unchartered road ahead will be difficult. We will resist adapting ourselves to the challenges we face, but by God's grace we can, and we must do so together so that we can thrive.

As the Father sent the Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:17, Romans 8:1), Jesus Christ sends us in the power of the Holy Spirit

on a mission (John 20:21). Our mission is to build relationships with friends and neighbors, offer the peace of God, to heal the sick and broken, and to announce the nearness of God's kingdom.

We hold onto our convictions that the church now more than ever is needed by our fractured world to continue Christ's mission of saving, healing, and liberating a world groaning for a new creation that will one day be revealed (Romans 8:18; Rev. 21:1-4).

We will stay calm in our spirit amid the storms.

We will stay connected through our ministry with children, through our networks, and through our global United Methodist connection.

We will stay the course and walk into the future in Christian faith, hope, and love.

We will not quit.

We will find a way forward together as Jesus Christ holds us together.

We will keep on adventuring into uncharted territory pressing on as a missionary church in a post-Christian culture focused on the mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

With God's help and grace, we will lead and work to hold the church together in the uncharted territory we find ourselves in with conviction, calmness, connectedness, and a mutual commitment to stay the course. "We will plant the seeds that one day will grow, and water seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We will lay foundations that will need further development." (From a prayer offered by Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit in a homily in 1979)

And, we will offer the yeast of our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness that will produce far beyond our capabilities.

Christ, our risen Lord and Savior, the fullness of God, the one in whom all things hold together, will hold us together in his one Lordship, in our one faith, in our one baptism, and in our Oneness with God, who is above all, and through all, and in all of us (Ephesians 4:5-6).

Friends, we will move forward into the coming year together with the **conviction** that Jesus is the hope for our fractured world.

We will **stay calm** knowing that God is God and our help (Psalm 46).

We will **stay connected** to God and each other in love, prayer, and mission.

And we will **stay the course** because we have good news of God's love and healing in Christ our ever-fracturing post-Christian world needs to hear and know. So that, others can respond with faith and enter into the realm of a whole new way to live, a whole new way to look at life and this world, a whole new way to orient the totality of their existence and desires toward seeking and living into the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

The peace and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with our spirits now and forever more.

*Ruben Saenz Jr.*