

Mission and Outreach Lunch
Great Plains Annual Conference
June 8, 2017

What is the story that we will tell?

Good afternoon. My name is Susan Burton. I serve as the Director of Women's and Children's Advocacy at the General Board of Church and Society. I bring greetings from our General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe.

I want to thank the Mercy and Justice team for the invitation, and for your warm welcome and hospitality. It is a blessing for me to be able to be among so many friends who are following Jesus' call in Matt 23: 23 to follow the "weightier matters of the law: mercy, justice and faith".

As the Director of Women's and Children's Advocacy, it is my responsibility as one of my colleagues says, "to make sure that the Social Principles don't sit on a shelf and collect dust".

The issues in the Social Principles for which I am responsible are domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS and access to women's reproductive health care to increase mother and child survival.

We have an extraordinary group of Healthy Family, Healthy Planet Ambassadors in Great Plains who are educating and advocating to increase the number of women and children who survive childbirth.

The number of women surviving childbirth is increasing around the world; however, approximately 830 women and girls die each day – mostly from preventable causes.¹ United Methodist Bishops in the Philippines wrote a letter to the Supreme Court of the Philippines supporting the legalization of birth control. As one woman described, she had 23 children and had given birth to each of them in her home.

¹ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>

She could not tell her husband that she would not have sexual intercourse with him. Her daughter who is 17 already has two children and she hopes that her daughter can access birth control so that she doesn't end up with so many children to care for.

It is also important to remember that in many places around the world, little girls are being married off to older men. Forced to have sex before their bodies have matured, girls become pregnant and, if they survive the delivery, often end up with an obstetric fistula – a permanent hole in their colon resulting in her being ostracized by her community.

Our work to ensure that women have access to medically proven contraception so that they can plan and space pregnancies is essential if we want mothers and babies to thrive.

I am grateful for all of you who have met with your elected officials, signed postcards and had conversations with your friends and neighbors to advocate for women to have the health care services that they need so that they and their babies can thrive.

As you might imagine, being a mother of two girls now 10 and 14 deeply influences my work. My commitment to the dignity of women and girls, safe motherhood and child survival is influenced by many different relationships. My oldest daughter's birthmother placed her in my arms when she was one week old. We met at the hospital because Maya weighed only 4 lbs 2 oz and the doctors were not sure if she was strong enough for us to drive her back to Washington, DC.

In addition to supporting the people working tirelessly to help women recover after they have been beaten, raped or trafficked, our God, our church, and our children are calling us to end the exploitation and abuse of women and girls, and ensure access to education, comprehensive, quality health care and economic opportunities.

That seems like an overwhelming feat when we hear new stories or experience dehumanizing behavior every day.

When my daughters joined my family, I knew that I needed to tell a new story about adoption. The old story where birth mothers are delinquent and the adoptive mothers are the saviors is a damaging stereotype that I didn't want told in front of my children. My daughters' birth mothers were responsible young adults who summoned a lot of courage to place their babies for adoption.

I began collecting story books for my children, for family and friends that helped us talk about the dignity of the women and men who created my children and made an intentional decision to ask someone else to raise them.

I quickly realized that not only were there few books with these messages about adoption, there were few books where girls and people of color were portrayed as strong, trusted leaders.

How would my children and their peers with whom they were learning in school learn to respect and value women and people of color if they were not being taught that at an early age?

Now that my children are no longer reading picture books, their books have become the foundation for a searchable database of children's books on Church and Society's webpage so that people who want to nurture children with these values can easily find book titles to order for the children in their families and churches.

I also think that I keep children's books in my office because they are beautiful works of art that teach very simple lessons that mirror the lessons that Jesus teaches us throughout scripture.

ON THE DAY YOU WERE BORN²... (by Debra Frasier)

My question for us tonight is: what story will you tell? How will you, church, be part of shaping the times?

² <http://www.debrafrasier.com/pages/books-events/on-the-day/index.php>

Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. As a child, I was taught that to “go and do likewise” ...to serve people in my community. What was often not emphasized in the telling of the story but was exemplified in my family is the dignity and worth of the stranger.

Growing up in North Carolina and South Georgia, my parents taught me to value and respect the diversity of people living in my community. From the decision for me to ride a school bus across town during the desegregation of schools when most white children were being pulled out of public school and put into non-accredited Christian academies, to sharing my home with Salvadoran refugees, I was told that community matters. That my life and well-being is bound up in the lives of others. My family wanted me to understand deeply that my comfort and access to resources and experience was not more important than any one else's.

These are the values that my parents learned from their parents and instilled in me. That is why I am a very proud Methodist.

All 4 of my grandparents were active leaders at First Church in Tifton, GA and committed to living their faith through their work and service.

My paternal grandfather grew up on a farm in Bartley, Nebraska near McCook. He farmed for a year with his father after high school. After seeing the tractor their neighbor purchased and realizing that there wouldn't be enough work on their farm to support two people, he decided to attend the University of Nebraska. After graduate school, he took a job as a grass breeder in South Georgia with the US Department of Agriculture. From 1935 - 1945 my grandfather developed coastal Bermuda grass that made pasture feeding of cows possible in the southeastern United States.

Seeing the impact this had in an economically depressed and impoverished south as well as he and my grandmother's passion for Methodist mission around the world, both became deeply passionate about using their gifts to alleviate world hunger. When they returned from their travels, my grandmother gave me dolls from countries where they had traveled to symbolize the people with whom they had learned and worked to improve access to food.

Today, when I look at our nation, especially through the lens of our United Methodist brothers and sisters around the world, I am deeply saddened that we seem to be embracing a vision of individualism that goes against who and how Jesus calls us to be.

Jesus reminds us that everyone, including strangers, is our neighbor; and, that we, like the Good Samaritan, must care for one another. There are many risks and fears that we must overcome to be faithful disciples. It is possible that the priest and Levite passed by the man left for dead because they were unable to overcome their fear of someone different from themselves or the fear that their livelihoods would be jeopardized if they stopped to help.

What is the story that your life and the life of your church will tell?

How many of you have been in relationship with people in the United States or around the world who have been impacted by more frequent storms or irregular weather patterns? By drought and increased conflict to secure land for crops? By high rates of asthma and cancer as a result of pollutants in our communities? I wondered when I saw people applauding the decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement if they are connected with people who are directly impacted by the changes occurring on our planet as a result of climate change.

Last year, I traveled to Mindanao, Philippines to be with United Methodists from across the Philippines who gathered to learn about the intersection of climate change and violence against women. Only two of us were from the United States. One of the participants from the Philippines looked at us and asked, “what are you going to do to stop your country from changing the climate? We only emit a tiny percentage of carbon dioxide, but the stronger typhoons that are resulting from climate change are destroying our people and our country.”

What will be our role in changing a narrative that puts Profit before The Prophet?

The Good Samaritan approached a stranger, bound up his wounds and

paid for his health care.

I have spent the past few months focused on the national health care debate. The Affordable Care Act -- current health care law -- has many flaws that need to be fixed. Unfortunately, the legislation that passed the House of Representatives and is being considered in the Senate does not fix those problems. Rather it creates more problems by kicking people off of Medicaid and decreasing access to quality, affordable care by doing away with essential health benefits such as maternity and newborn care, mental health care and rehabilitation and treatment services.

Discussing the current debate around health care policy in Washington, DC is risky because it is being framed as “us v. them”, “Conservative v. Liberal”, “Democrat v. Republican” and “Right v. Left”. It risks tearing our families, congregations and communities apart. This framing keeps us from seeing the Gospel mandate to care for our brothers and sisters, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Jesus says, “let the little children come to me.” Jesus does not say, “let the healthy children with medical insurance living in wealthy nations come to me”. Jesus draws no distinction between who is deserving of care.

Genesis 1:27 – All made in the image of God; therefore quality, affordable health care must be available to all people regardless of ability, race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation/identity; all people must be valued because the divine is in each of us.

Psalm 95:5 — Everything belongs to God, we don’t own it. We are stewards of people, of each other, of life.

Luke 12:48b, Ezekiel 34: 4 — Larger community has responsibility to care (provide health care) for people who are most vulnerable.

As long as we frame the health care debate in this polarizing way rather than with Gospel values of community, stewardship and humanity, the people who are most at risk are the 237,000 Nebraskans and 416,000 Kansans who could lose health insurance if there are cuts to the funding

or changes in the structure of Medicaid³.

Western PA –

Pastor with daughter who has autism

Community librarian – single mother working as a part-time teacher with a child with a rare disease. Had medical assistance, but not money for tires for her car to travel to the hospital.

*health care for all children

*first Senate visit this month

I'm sure you or someone close to you has stories similar to these...

*Think of the employment opportunities in your community or county. How many provide medical insurance or enough income to purchase health insurance?

According to the non-partisan Kaiser Family Foundation, 80% of adult and child Medicaid enrollees in KS and NE are in families with someone who works.⁴

In 2011, most Medicaid beneficiaries in KS and NE were children and adults, but most spending was for the elderly and people with disabilities.⁵

Medicaid, like other safety net programs, is a covenant we made as a nation to make sure that people on hard times could get medical care. Medicaid is a shock absorber that allows each state to take care of its people when something unexpected happens — downturn in the economy, an aging population, a natural disaster or a public health crisis such as the opioid epidemic or Zika outbreak. As United Methodists — descendants of John Wesley — we know that holistic care that allows every child of God to thrive is our call.

³ <http://www.kff.org/interactive/medicaid-state-fact-sheets/>

⁴ <http://www.kff.org/interactive/medicaid-state-fact-sheets/>

⁵ <http://www.kff.org/interactive/medicaid-state-fact-sheets/>

United Methodists are not the only ones working to ensure access to high quality, affordable health coverage. The March of Dimes recently sent a letter to Congress advocating for “affordable health coverage for every pregnant woman, woman of childbearing age, and child”.⁶ In their letter, they noted that “prenatal services such as folic acid supplementation, tobacco cessation assistance, and screening for preeclampsia and gestational diabetes, and counseling about the benefits of breastfeeding”⁷ must be available so that mothers can give birth to and raise healthy infants. Studies have shows that maternal mortality rates are higher for women who do not receive prenatal care, and that early access to prenatal care reduces rates of low birth-weight babies and infant mortality.

This kind of consistent medical care and health education must be available to all women and babies.

Standing up for all of God’s children (young and aging) in these times requires us to be courageous. God is with us. God is expecting us to step out on faith, have challenging and loving conversations about who we value and what we value, and ensure that all people with whom we minister inside and outside of our churches have the resources needed live in safe, nurturing communities so that they can thrive.

What is the story that we will tell to the world in these times?

⁶ <http://www.marchofdimes.org/materials/05-18-2017-March-of-Dimes-Healthy-MOM-Act-Endorsement-115th.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.marchofdimes.org/materials/05-18-2017-March-of-Dimes-Healthy-MOM-Act-Endorsement-115th.pdf>