

California-Pacific Annual Conference 2012

Erin M. Hawkins, General Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race

Good Morning. Thank you to Bishop Swenson for the gracious invitation and to you my brothers and sisters in Christ, I greet you in the name and spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I would like to offer a word of thanks to the Cal-Pac General Conference delegation for their courageous witness and leadership. This was a contentious and stressful General Conference and yet the voice of justice was present.

Many of the proposals that received the most debate and attention at General Conference responded to some of the changing realities that are facing the church

- Numerical decline – worship, membership, finances, average membership age
- Not reflecting the face (age, race, class) of a changing mission field – demographic changes
- Creeping crisis of relevance

I would propose, however, that the problem we are facing is not simply numerical decline, but the fact that we have too many churches where members indicate such a poor quality of life (worship, outreach, relationships, leadership) as a congregation and that it is difficult to invite new people to join them.

There is a book that I would commend to you that I believe is helpful in addressing the true crisis that is plaguing the church. The name of the book is Journey to the Common Good by Walter Brueggemann

Brueggemann defines the common good as the sense of community and solidarity that binds all in a common destiny – the have and have nots, rich and poor. He goes on to assert that there are forces at work that defy solidarity and deny common destiny.

In Pharaoh's Egypt, we are confronted with the image of immense power corrupted by all consuming self-interest that lays siege to the common good and the welfare of others. According to Brueggemann, Pharaoh is the example and embodiment of a complex system of monopoly, that along with the wealth it produces, produces anxiety that affects every dimension of the system he controls.

When Pharaoh comes to power, he has ample food and enough to supply the whole world. Now he was facing the most severe famine ever known. Joseph, who interprets Pharaoh's dream by letting him know of the relentless famine, is placed in control of the food supply on Pharaoh's behalf. Joseph successfully gains a monopoly over the food supply which allows Pharaoh to use it as a source of power and control. The poor not having access to sources of food give Pharaoh all of their money to have their basic needs met adding to Pharaoh's wealth. When their money is gone, they give their cattle, and when that is gone, they give their freedom, happily becoming slaves to Pharaoh in exchange for the food that will secure their survival. It is important to note that the Hebrews became slaves in the first place, because of the manipulation of the economy in the interest of a concentration of wealth and power at the expense of the community. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? And all of this was based on Pharaoh's

anxiety about the famine and his fear that he would not have enough. Anxiety provides a flimsy basis for caring for all of God's creation. Fear and anxiety only create systemic greediness and cause the formulation of policies and exploitative practices that work against the common good.

Where in our world today and in our church, do we see fear and anxiety being the basis for action?

Action based on fear only produces more self-interest. Fear only breeds more fear. Pharaoh's anxiety was rising as he faced the consequences of his actions. Since enslaving the people, he feared uprisings, loss of production, and his own downfall. Receiving word of his imminent demise, his anxiety deepened and he called forth even more ruthlessness in the name of control. He orders the killing of all newborn Hebrew babies. He begins to work against his own self-interest by killing the next generation of his own labor force. That is what fear and anxiety based decision-making will do. It will lead you to harm yourself as well as those you serve. What started as economic exploitation grounded in fear has now become intent to produce suffering. Much like how the American slave trade which fueled the early American economic engine turned into the system of Jim Crow that was created largely to heap great suffering on African Americans or the exploitation of Native American peoples in the name of manifest destiny which devolved into the humiliation and suffering of life on reservations and in boarding schools for the purpose of stripping the identity of the Native American people and promoting the denigration of their culture and language.

Brueggemann reminds us of two things that happen when untold suffering is heaped upon people: 1. They cry out and, 2. God hears their cry and responds with grace and provision. The Hebrew slaves cried out and God responded through Moses with freedom and their exodus. When they wandered in the desert, they cried out for food and God delivered manna.

I believe that there are 3 themes, which Brueggemann identifies that we can take from the story of Pharaoh.

First, the kingdom of scarcity and the ideology of anxiety are alive and well and aggressive among us. When we are confronted by mentalities of scarcity and anxiety, our response is often entitlement and consumerism in which we prioritize the acquisition of more. Some indications that we are held in the clutches of fear and anxiety: We say, "If only we had more money for troops to encourage democracy around the world. After all, freedom is not free." Or "If only clergy would understand that they have to get more people in the pews and more money in the plates, *then* we can thrive as a church." Or "If only we would stop focusing on divisive issues such as human sexuality, *then* we can talk about what really matters." Persons living in a system of anxiety and fear and consequently greed have no time or energy for the common good, because they are so focused on their own worldview and defending themselves against the assault on their own way of thinking, that they cannot think of anything or anyone else.

Second, there is an alternative to scarcity and anxiety – a covenantal commitment to the common Good. This commitment is not easy, nor automatic. It requires an intentional departure, an exodus, if you will, from the systems that perpetuate the cycle of exploitation and suffering and build on fear and anxiety. An immense act of grace and generosity is required in order to break the death grip of the system of fear, anxiety, and greed.

Third, those who give and receive the gifts of generosity are able to get their minds off themselves and can be about the work of the neighborhood- thinking, imagining, living, and acting beyond the system of fear, and creating a future of hope for all – the common good.

So, what applications can we make to where we are as the California-Pacific Annual Conference?

- When the church *rehearses* the world's practice of scarcity, then it has failed in its mission.
- When the church *recreates* societal systems of fear based decision making and coercive action in the name of survival, it has failed in its mission.
- The church must be the prophetic voice that argues against the claim of scarcity and stands unapologetically for the common good.

What will it take for us as a church to move from the wilderness of scarcity to a renewed commitment to community, so that we may be a relevant and credible witness to the transforming power of Jesus the Christ?

Peter Block in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* picks up where I believe Brueggemann leaves off, in calling us to the covenantal commitment to the common good. Block says the key to a new future is to focus on gifts, the quality of associational life, and on the insight that all transformation occurs through language.

- Gifts - focusing on the gifts we have to share
- Associational life - the ways in which people come together to do good works and serve others
- Transforming systems and circumstances through language and dialogue

The Call to Action lifted up the Adaptive Challenge to the church –*To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of **vital congregations** effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*

Responding to the Call to Action requires faithful action on the part of both the Annual Conference and the local church in facing the challenges that confront the church and working for the common good.

The Constitution of the Church identifies the Annual Conference as the basic or core structure of the United Methodist Church. Its role is to organize and make provisions for the United Methodist witness within the geographic boundaries of the Conference. The Conference is a powerful expression of our connectional polity as it connects congregations to the United Methodist way of living and it connects the denomination to the gifts and passions of the people of this Conference that are offered in the name of the church. The Conference has the responsibility to be the voice that challenges mentalities of fear, anxiety and scarcity, and calls all to the table of community where the common good, solidarity, and shared destiny are the priority. The Conference can do this by extending ministry to populations that are not always served or represented in our congregations. Through partnerships and collaboration, the reach and scope of ministry offered on a Conference level can often be larger and more comprehensive than any one congregation working alone. For example, Conference ministries with young people often

give training and leadership development opportunities to youth and young adults that are not available or well executed in the local church setting.

In addition to organizing and making provisions for ministry on behalf of and within the boundaries of the area, a key role of the Annual Conference is to resource the development of vital congregations and lay and clergy leadership. This requires several things. First, the Conference must decide who it is called to help and who it is called to serve. The Conference provides assistance or help to its members. Through leadership development, financial and administrative resources, training and equipping, the Conference helps congregations and congregational leaders to be effective in their roles of fulfilling the mission of the church. The Conference does not exist to serve its own people, as we have a biblical and missional call to meet the needs of the people outside of our walls and our systems. This does not mean that we do not care for one another and work for the good of our lay and clergy leadership. It simply means that when a Conference becomes more concerned about responding to the wishes, desires, entitlements, and complaints of those on the inside, it forgets and often ignores those most in need – the people on the outside.

In order to make the development and support of vital congregations a priority, the Annual Conference must provide assistance to local church leaders requesting help and demonstrating a willingness to change and grow in effectiveness. This help must be provided to all church regardless of church size, ethnic background, or theological perspective. This help can be grouped into 3 categories:

- Equipping church leaders (lay and clergy) to reach new people
- Equipping church leaders (lay and clergy) to help members become growing vital disciples
- Cultivating a high quality of relationship that members have with each other and with those they serve, essentially changing the culture of conflict, fragmentation, and close-mindedness present in many local churches

While the Conference is making improvements in fulfilling its role in working for the common good, there is also a role for local churches. While the Conference is the basic organizing unit of the denomination, the local church is the primary venue for making disciples. The local church must, like the Conference step up to its role of being the prophetic voice that challenges scarcity and self-interest, opens itself up to God's presence and provision and focusing on a commitment to the community.

The role of the local church is to connect people with God and connect itself to the local and/or global community. No congregation can be vital apart from a living and ongoing experience of God's presence in the life of the church and of the people. It is from this powerful relationship with God's spirit that all other work of the church flows. If the church does not have a spiritual message that is relevant to the lived experience of the people it serves, it has nothing of substance to offer. That requires dynamic and transformational worship and journeying with people through their suffering, not simply preaching that there will be an end to their suffering in the life to come. We must offer mercy and hospitality to the

poor, while challenging the systems that create and perpetuate poverty. We must provide assistance to the immigrant, and challenge the inhumanity and racism of the immigration system. We must preach love and acceptance of the GBLTQ community and challenge laws within the church and outside that marginalize them.

The role of the local church is also to connect with the community. We must fall in love with our communities again. It is part of our Wesleyan heritage to go to where the people are and love and care for them. For the vast majority of our churches, the community in which they stand has dramatically changed since when they were first chartered. In his book *Focus*, Lovett Weems shares that the longer a church has been in existence, the less knowledgeable it is likely to be about its community and the less connected it is to that community. Without a connection to the community, an external focus, congregations become worlds to themselves where the focus is on caring for current members and not reaching new disciples for Christ. Lay and Clergy leadership in healthy and relevant congregations seek to link the internal life of the congregation to its external context – caring for members because they are children of God and are seen as partners in the mission of cultivating disciples and transforming the world. Churches exist to serve – without an outside, there really is no inside. During hard times, churches can forget their purpose and heritage. Here is a litmus test of whether your church is faithful to the Wesleyan tradition of serving others: *If your church closed today, who would miss it other than your members?*

The growth of the Wesleyan movement in the US and other countries particularly Africa was due to our unique coupling of evangelism and service (we know it as personal piety and social holiness). Some of the most enduring institutions of this nation have been built because of the ethos of service driven by an attentiveness and responsiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Universities, hospitals, schools, and training facilities have been built all over the world as a result of our living the Methodist way. In Africa, a well is dug and the community worships, a school is built and the community worships, a hospital wing is added and the community worships. As the church serves the needs of the people, it offers them Christ and provides an opportunity to experience and build relationships with God. That is the church being vital, relevant, and working in service to the common good.

Weaving communities of shalom and wholeness is the Cal-Pac way of embracing the common good. This requires a continual recommitment to exodus from the mindset of scarcity central to the empire building of the world. We tolerate acute poverty in an economy of affluence, we berate and dehumanize the immigrant while supporting systems and policies that thrive on cheap labor and economic exploitation, we abuse the environment to boost the economy, and we are willing to abide by almost any type of social or environmental sinfulness as long as it creates jobs.

Christ's answers to these and other expressions of our fear, anxiety, and mentalities of scarcity are simple - everything must be lost, so it can be found again; we must give up the comfort of our lives, so our true lives can be found again. God demands a seamless integrity that joins every aspect of our lives, which means we constantly work for that which is life bringing and good and against everything that causes destruction and death. God's shalom is made visible as we leave the wilderness of Egypt and scarcity in favor of wholeness in community where the common good of all is our aim. May it be so.