

## Go and Make Disciples

*Let us pray: Dear God, you have entrusted us with your good news and promised to be with us always. Let us be faithful to this charge, reaching out to all the world in words and deeds of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Of course, we had plenary sessions where we elected clergy and laity to represent Iowa conference at the General Conference next year. Legislative actions were also voted on during the four days. If you have questions about those actions, get in touch with me later. Today I want to focus on the worship and God moments I experienced.

The theme of Annual Conference this year was “Therefore Go and Make Disciples” from Matthew 28: 19-20 (also known as The Great Commission). During conference, I saw God at work in many of the speakers and events we celebrated. How has the Iowa Conference made disciples in the world? In 1989, four Iowans travelled to Nigeria in response to the invitation of the Great Commission. From this has grown a 25 year relationship helping Nigeria receive full conference status, helping build school and seminary, digging bore wells for clean water and growing their Methodist membership from 100,000 in 1989 to 1.6 million in 2014. One of the students attending college at Morningside shared his story. I would love to invite him to come and speak to our members about how the Iowa-Nigeria partnership has impacted him. I enjoyed listening and watching the Nigerian dancers before we started our session on Monday.

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Bishop Julius Trimble opened his address with an invitation-“Jesus has extended to us an invitation. Jesus invites us to come close and then go out,” he said. “RSVP saying yes is not always easy, but absolutely necessary, if we profess Jesus Christ as our savior and put our whole trust in his grace. Jesus is expecting a response from us. Jesus never asked his followers to play church,” the bishop continued, “but he did invite them to come close and go far.”

Bishop Trimble then revisited one the Strategic Priorities adopted in 2013: *1) Establishing new communities of faith—increasing vitality in existing churches and ministries; grace-filled communities; equipping lay leaders to disciple others and partner with clergy in our joint efforts to make disciples and transform the world; and directing our resources—people, communication, finances toward mission alignment and staffing for the sake of the mission.* He shared the efforts of the Design Task Force and gave an invitation for the whole Conference to submit to prayer and consider implementation. The Bishop introduced the Poverty to Opportunity initiative which focuses on children's literacy.

The Bishop also charged the clergy to "Love the People, Love the People, All the People". I feel this is an important charge not only to the clergy but to us as the church. We need to love the people, love the people, ALL the PEOPLE. It is easy for us to love the loving but we need to pray for guidance to love all the people. How will we do that? Bishop Palmer has a saying which is very powerful: "I want you to remember; no prayer-no power, little prayer-little power, much prayer-much power." As we think about what our church can do to reach out to others, let us remember to pray.

When First Lady Racelder Grandberry Trimble spoke at the laity session, it was a God moment for me. She invited us to put on Joy. In January when I spoke at a Christian women's retreat, my sister-in-law (Cheryl) was in charge. Her theme for the weekend was Joy. Here again I was to look for the joy around me and put on Joy. She encouraged us to "Go with the joy that is Jesus, others and yourself". As she shared, Joy represents love of Jesus, love others and finally love yourself. When we have Joy, God's presence will always be with us. Like 'random acts of kindness', we need to look for those around us who are hurting and needing encouragement and write them a "love" note. Many times I think about an individual and think God wants me to get in touch with them. How many times have I not listened to God's

voice? This reminder hit home with me. As Mrs. Trimble suggested, as a disciple, I need to go forth and tell a story in love and in joy. I will take small steps and try to take those few minutes that might help someone know they are loved.

Earlier, I mentioned the Bishop's Task Force which is focusing on Poverty to Opportunity. The task force focused on reading as a way to combat poverty through education. This reading initiative is called "Change a child's story." It is estimated approximately 8,000 children are living in poverty in the state of Iowa that are not reading at grade level. Members of the task force called on Iowa United Methodists to give time and books for the project, and set a goal of collecting 500,000 books. They shared almost anyone can read to a child and help that child to read back to them. One of the task force members said, "Today we are calling on United Methodists to love God's children." The youth pages at Annual Conference started the effort by pooling money and purchasing 50 children's Bibles from the Cokesbury booth. Is this a project we as disciples could move forward with?

Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS, was invited to present his three-session program "Leading Beyond the Walls" at this year's Conference. Rev. Hamilton said the church is in need of a revival because statistics indicate young millennials today are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the faith. "While the overall issue affects most denominations, the United Methodist Church population is aging and not being replaced", he stated. According to Rev. Hamilton, the United Methodist church has less than 40 years left at this rate. We need to thank God for those in their 70's & 80's because they have held the church together but now we don't have people to replace them. He stated "We're going to be a shadow of who we are today if we don't change. We have to find some way to do something about it."

What does it take?, asked Rev. Hamilton, to create United Methodist Churches where young adults, middle-aged and others will say, "I don't want to miss church? We

have challenges in the United Methodist Church,” he said. “This is an issue for us.” Rev. Hamilton stated, “Change, innovate, improve, or die”. Example: record, 8 track tape, cassette tape, CD’s and now IPod.

He challenged us to take the path less traveled, the one that makes you nervous. If our church is to be the leader, we have to take the path less traveled. In his experience, it’s always been the path that made him queasy that ended up being the path he should take. Example: Rev. Hamilton was meeting a volunteer in a local bar (like The Pub) and the waitress asked about his job. He said he was a pastor. She said she didn’t know a pastor who came into a bar and then shared she was a single mother with a special needs child trying to make ends meet. He invited her to come to the church but she said she tried to protect her child from being stared at or made fun of. He encouraged her to give them a try. He had several volunteers greet them the first Sunday they came to church. Now there is a group of volunteers who work with this special child and this mother and child have made Rev. Hamilton’s church their home.

Rev. Hamilton challenged the Iowa Conference to think about how we engage people in worship. Worship is not about your Pastor but about God!! When a church thinks they have hired the pastor to do all the ministry, the church will not grow. The pastor is to equip laity to also reach out and minister. He suggested to create worship that is exuberant, joyful, exciting and has a welcoming spirit. His church rewards regular attendance by having a way that makes people want to show up—they have small giveaways.

Instead of inviting people to go to the Church of the Resurrection, Hamilton invites many to join in the church’s mission first. Activities like blood drives, a 5K run benefitting AIDS relief in Africa and serving in soup kitchens are just a few things his church hosts to show what his church believes in to entice new members.

Part of the sessions also focused on effective church leadership: touching on the role of a leader, personal characteristics of leaders people follow and the practices of effective leaders. One characteristic: Don't take yourself so seriously. People are drawn to leaders who can laugh at themselves. Leaders also need to focus on people and relationships, and having a clear mission, vision and plan. He said, "Leaders help people take the hard path". Leaders will be criticized but they need to learn from that and not give up!

Adam Hamilton started his final session at the 2015 Annual Conference by posing three questions:

Why do people need Jesus Christ?  
Why do people need the church?  
Why do people need my church?

Rev. Hamilton suggests each church set a goal to find as many young people as you can to nurture to find their call in ministry for the future of United Methodism in Iowa. He encouraged churches to start a scholarship fund for students to attend seminary.

At the end of his third session, Bishop Trimble called members of the Board of Ordained Ministry and District Committee on Ministry to come forward. Then Bishop Trimble asked those who had heard a call to come forward. There were around 75 to 80 individuals who came forward. Pastor Alberta was in front and a woman came up to a man on Pastor's right. Within minutes a young woman came up to Pastor, the woman on her right turned and realized the young woman was her daughter. I didn't fight the tears which came from watching all those who came forward. A God moment!

Lots of God moments but I come back to Bishop Trimble's invitation – the same invitation Jesus made to the disciples. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." How will Denison First United Methodist Church go forth and make disciples? What do you hear God calling you to do?