

The Arkansas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church
Episcopal Address
“The Gift of an Unexpected Pause”
June 3, 2021

Bishop Gary E. Mueller

Our Reality

What a year!

COVID. Virtual worship. Wars over masks. Financial strains in churches. A presidential election. Political polarization. A challenging wake-up call to address the sin of racism. More pain, suffering and hopelessness than ever. Uncertainty about the future of your congregation. Conducting church virtually for almost a year-and-a-half.

And yet.

Here we are. Together. And I am so filled with joy at seeing you that I claim Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 1: 4-6 as my own: *Every time I think of you—and I think of you often!—I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There’s no end to what has happened in you—it’s beyond speech, beyond knowledge. The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives.* (“The Message”)

Indeed, the evidence of Christ in your lives has been crystal clear as we have journeyed through this COVID crisis. Some of you have become so adept at social media that you now qualify as televangelists. Many of you have had people from other other states - and sometimes other countries - become part of your worshipping community. Most of you have found new ways to be in mission with hurting people at the very time it has been most difficult to reach them. Some of you have had new people join your church because of your online presence when they probably never would have come in person. Many of you have been part of a resurgence of connectionalism that is emerging as you have joined hands to be in ministry with each other, sister congregations and the Arkansas Annual Conference. And the ‘piece de resistance’ - all of you have become incredibly creative at blaming your Bishop when people did not like decisions your church made about COVID! And I’m glad you did!

And yet.

There is ‘THE QUESTION’ that keeps overshadowing everything, “What is the future of the United Methodist Church going to be - and when is it finally going to be decided?” The fact that we cannot answer it - and anyone who tells you otherwise is just wrong - has led to uncertainty, anxiety, frustration, anger and growing impatience.

Wandering in the Wilderness or The Gift of an Unexpected Pause?

No wonder we seem to share so much in common with the people of Israel who were delivered from oppression in Egypt and then spent the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

Their journey began after a dramatic deliverance from Egypt, and God's promise that they would end up in a land flowing with milk and honey. Along the way, God gave the 10 Commandments, parted the Sea and destroyed Pharaoh's army, provided manna from heaven for sustenance when there was no food, and won seemingly unwinnable battles. And how did the people respond? Sometimes faithfully. But often they were impatient and impertinent, grumbled about how much better life was back in Egypt, threatened to rebel against Moses, and built a golden calf to worship.

Our journey began nearly fifty years ago with differences about theology and human sexuality that have reached the breaking point, and our decision to create our own promised land. Not a place, but the promise of a solution that will finally 'fix' the deep division in our denomination either by ensuring that certain people leave the United Methodist Church or finding a way to exit the United Methodist Church. And all time, we refuse to treat each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

I understand why so many of you have reached the point you have: just ready for something to happen so it is all over. But I wonder if our impatience, anger and desire to settle things in ways that make us comfortable are signs that we do not trust God, and so God is keeping us wandering until we are formed into a more faithful people like God kept the people of Israel wandering until they were finally formed into a more faithful people.

You have a choice to make. I have a choice to make. We have a very important decision to make.

Are we going to be like the people of Israel who threatened to overthrow Moses, constructed idols and grumbled about returning to Egypt because we do not think things are going the way they should? Or are we going to trust that God is leading us on this journey designed to take us to the future God dreams for us?

I choose to see this period of time leading up to General Conference - and whatever it decides whenever it decides it - as the gift of an unexpected pause during which God wants to form us into a more faithful church as we engage in three holy ventures that are at the heart of the Christian faith, the Wesleyan movement and the United Methodist Church.

And I pray you do, too.

Three Holy Ventures

Holy Venture Number 1 - Strengthen your congregation.

Traditionally, we United Methodists have assumed that the denomination - General Conference, *The Book of Discipline*, General Agencies and Bishops - determines the direction, health and vitality of the local congregation. But here's what I've recently realized. I become depressed when I look at the United Methodist Church in this usual way from the denominational level. However, I become hopeful and excited when I look at it through the life of local churches.

This unexpected pause allows us to flip-flop how we view things. Instead of letting denominational issues - as important as they are - determine the health and vitality of local churches, let's allow local churches in which so many amazing things are happening make the denomination more alive and faithful.

Here's what you can do to make that happen. Pray for your church. Invest in it. Love it passionately. Be bold in your ministry. And when you do, you will discover how much you need it. How much your community needs it. How much people who don't know Jesus yet need it. How much those who are hurting need it. And how much Jesus needs it.

Holy Venture Number 2 - Double down on the mission.

Jesus gave his followers a mission in Matthew 28: **18** *Then Jesus came to them. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. 20 Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end."* (NIRV).

Laity, congregations, pastors, budgets, buildings and the connection all serve the mission Jesus has given the church. Our current unexpected pause gives us the opportunity to double down on our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped and sent to transform lives, communities and the world.

Here's how you can do it. Double down on the mission instead of spending all your time figuring out how your side can prevail at General Conference. Double down on the mission instead of insisting that your church do everything the way you want it done. Double down on the mission instead of trying to make your church just the way it was before COVID.

Here's why all of this matters. You may end up in a church in which you are comfortable and align theologically. But if your church is not making disciples of Jesus Christ who are engaged in serious transformation work, you will not be the Body of Christ. You will be just another organization.

Holy Venture Number 3 - Put Jesus at the heart of everything.

It seems that almost every United Methodist meeting I attend these days includes the following words and phrases: liminal, asynchronous, actionable, emotional intelligence, nimble, new normal, transparent, and adaptive. They certainly can be helping in describing the world in

which we find ourselves. In fact, I even use them myself. But here's what I want to know. Why do we so seldom seem to talk about Jesus?

We United Methodists have a Jesus problem. For some reason we no longer think we need him. Or at least we act like it. Do a little research and see how many United Methodist Church websites fail to reference Jesus. Or how many services of worship only mention him in a creed, Bible reading or liturgy. Or how often he is an assumption at best and an embarrassment who must be explained away at worst.

Jesus is the reason we're here. God has done something in him that is unique and essential. He gives human beings what we absolutely need and cannot get in any other way by reconciling us with God, with others and even with ourselves through his death on the cross. He is not just a liberal thing and he is not just a conservative thing. He is everyone's thing.

It's that simple.

And yet.

It's not at all simplistic.

Jesus cannot be reduced to a creed or walking the aisle of salvation. He is not just a theological construct or an emotional experience you have when you sing. He is not just someone you believe about or believe in.

Jesus is someone with whom you have a personal relationship that changes everything. Your relationship with God. Your relationship with others. Your relationship with yourself. Your feelings. Your thoughts. Your beliefs. Your actions. This is why Jesus must be both your Savior and and your Lord.

And the proof of your relationship with Jesus is how you live. If you don't lead with his love, Jesus has some more work to do in you. If you insist on demeaning people who are different from you because of the color of their skin, their theology or their political belief and you think that gives you the right to do whatever you want to them, Jesus has some more transformation to do in you. If you use Jesus as a weapon in a theological battle instead of letting him use you to further his mission, he has some more formation work to do in you.

I believe Jesus is at the heart of everything. As imperfect as I am, I believe it. As many times as I have turned away from him, I believe it. As educated as I am, I believe it. And on this - the 40th year anniversary of my ordination as an elder - I believe it. In fact, I believe it so much that if I could have one do-over in my ministry, it would be to make it more about Jesus and then more about Jesus and then more about Jesus.

My brothers and sisters of the Arkansas Annual Conference, let us use this unexpected pause to fall head-over-heels, passionate and crazy in love with Jesus regardless of whether we are

traditionalists, moderates, centrists or progressives. If we do, we will discover something that will fill us with joy, reconciliation and hope. We no longer will be wandering in the wilderness - instead, we will be on our way to the promised land God has set before us.