

We're Moving Forward

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Philippians 3:13-14

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Good morning, Upper New York! Welcome to Syracuse! I am Hector Burgos, and it is my absolute joy to serve as your bishop, United Methodists of Upper New York!

It is so good to see your faces, hear your voices, and feel your spirits as we gather as United Methodists in Upper New York for our 2024 Annual Conference session over the next three days.

Holy conferencing is a foundational experience in our Christian journey as United Methodists. By faithfully engaging it, we experience God's love, grow in our faith, and share God's love with our siblings in Christ.

Part of me still can't believe a year has passed since we last met. It still feels like yesterday when we were here dancing our hearts to God in a conga line, celebrating our togetherness, and another part of me is mindful of all that has transpired over the past year. **We have been through a lot together over the past year.**

A new season of ministry as you received a new episcopal leader – and all the transitions and newness that come with it (you have been so graceful and welcoming). A season of discernment as we clarified our missional priorities and began living into them with a renewed sense of purpose and possibilities.

A painful season of disaffiliations as one hundred and eighteen of our congregations and a similar number of clergies decided on a different path due to their beliefs and attitudes towards ministry with and by LGBTQ persons.

A challenging season given the new realities presented to us by an extended trend of membership consolidation and the new normal handed to us by COVID and church disaffiliations. Not to mention all the craziness happening around the world – natural disasters, war, political and religious extremism, among many other things.

This has also been a season of expectation, as the General Conference met in Charlotte to discern our next faithful steps in our journey of faith as United Methodists around the world. And, above all, a season of courageous persistence as our disciples, leaders, and congregations, many times against all odds, continued to live the gospel joyfully and embody God's love through the personal witness of our more than one hundred thousand members and the ministries of our six hundred and seventy congregations. **We have been through so much together over the past year!**

This morning, as we gather, we begin with worship – loving God. We start by remembering who we are in Christ. We begin by offering our lives to God in thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. Today, like the people of God in the Bible, we build an Ebenezer to remember, celebrate, and give thanks for God's faithfulness, constant provision, and healing grace, which have sustained us through it all.

United Methodists of Upper New York - God has been good to us!

God has been good to us!

God has been SO GOOD to us! Alleluia!

If you feel that God has been good in your life, good to us as a faith community, and faithful to God's promises, don't just sit there—get up! Get up and lift your hearts and voices in praise to the Lord. Get up and raise your hands and sing a song of thanksgiving. Thank God for Jesus Christ – our hope.

Thank God for your siblings in Christ; they embody God's promise that we will never be alone. Thank God for the constant flow of provision because, whether we realize it or not, we have always had what is sufficient to fully live into God's vision for our lives and ministries. Thank God for God's mercy. When we have been wrong or fallen short, God has forgiven us and offered us new opportunities.

Thank God that when injustice hit us, God's justice prevailed. Thank God for Christ's healing balm. When we have felt broken and discouraged, Christ has tended to our wounds and lifted and restored us!

Church, we stand in this place, in this holy moment, because, and only because, GOD IS GOOD AND ALWAYS FAITHFUL! So, let's shout and sing our Alleluias to God. Let's proclaim boldly God's love, mercy, and justice.

The theme for this year's annual conference session is "FORWARD - Claiming God's future with joy and hope. But more than a theme, it is an invitation from God to enter a new season together as United Methodists in Upper New York—a season marked with abundant joy and hope. Joy, understood not as the absence of difficulties, but as the peace that fills us when we are reassured by the Holy Spirit of God's love, guidance, and provision. Hope that is not based on the circumstances surrounding us but that finds its beginning and end in the reality that NOTHING in this life can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ! – Alleluia.

As we reflect on God's invitation for this season, let me clarify something very important: God is not inviting us to *move on* as many times we do or as some suggest. God is inviting us to MOVE FORWARD. When people or organizations decide to *move on*, they take a different path. They tend to other matters, often leaving behind hopes, aspirations, people, and relationships—that's not what God is inviting us to do. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Philippi, told them, "I don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."

This season, God is inviting us, as followers of Christ and as United Methodists here in Upper New York and worldwide, not to *move on* but to MOVE FORWARD.

God is inviting us to recalibrate our hearts again to Christ, to recommit to one another as those called to journey together, to put aside everything that might be harmful, to forsake anything that may be distracting us, and to take the next faithful steps into God's vision for our lives and ministries as United Methodists.

We meet as an annual conference just a few weeks after the postponed 2020 General Conference, which was marked by pivotal decisions that will shape our ministry as United Methodists for generations to come. And because the invitation is not to *move on* but *forward*, we must address the elephant in the room. Among many other significant decisions, the General Conference removed the restrictive language inserted 52 years ago in our *Book of Discipline* against LGBTQ persons. It also reaffirmed our trust in clergy and congregations to discern how to gracefully care for LGBTQ persons seeking marriage.

The General Conference prayerfully discerned that it is time for United Methodists to move away from harmful and distracting disagreements and divisions and toward missional unity

that is Christ-centered and focused on the essentials. To create space so that ALL of God's children can experience the healing love of Christ and live to their full God-given potential. The General Conference discerned that it is time for

United Methodists to move towards a more excellent way of loving God and one another.

In this new season, guided by the Holy Spirit, United Methodists are moving forward as a diverse worldwide Christian community that welcomes people from all walks of life—a big tent/ big table denomination with varying views, from conservatives to progressives and everything in between.

We are moving forward proclaiming that:

- Our faith and hope are solidly grounded in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Our shared mission and faith journey is anchored in Scripture and guided by our distinctive Wesleyan heritage, articles of faith, doctrinal standards, theological task, social principles, general rules, and polity.
- We are moving forward - desiring to see all persons grow to their God-given potential.
- We are moving forward - striving to be good stewards of God's creation.

Although we may not always agree on specific issues, we are moving forward united in our love of Christ and our desire to live the gospel, share the good news of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible, and embodying God's love with our neighbors in all places through concrete acts of love, mercy, and justice. We are moving forward, not as progressives, centrists, or conservatives we are moving forward as ONE DIVERSE BODY, all beloved children of God, all called to be light and salt in the world, all needed to make God's reign a reality.

We are moving forward - claiming God's future with joy and hope! Church, we are pressing towards Christ's upward calling.

So, how do we take the next faithful steps to claim God's future in this new season?

I believe John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, inspired by the Holy Spirit, provided us with a framework that, more than ever, can help us as we seek to love God and our neighbors the way Christ loves us – The Three General Rules. These are three simple principles that, if we engage and apply them with humility to this crucial moment in our journey as United Methodists, will help us stay focused on Christ's calling.

**Upper New York, let's move forward, claiming God's future with joy and hope –
recommitting ourselves to doing no harm.**

- We must stop questioning each other about the validity of our relationship and experience with Christ.
- We must stop expecting all disciples to believe and think exactly like us on matters that are not essential.
- We must stop seeing fellow disciples who think or believe differently from us as our enemies or less than us.
- We must stop assuming the worst of fellow disciples who think or believe differently from us.
- We must stop using harmful language to refer to fellow disciples who think or believe differently from us to share our beliefs and opinions in matters of faith and life or pass harsh judgment on others.
- We must stop pushing out fellow disciples who think or believe differently from us and, thus, continue dividing and weakening our fellowship, witness, and ministry.
- We must stop these practices because they do harm!

Upper New York, let's move forward, claiming God's future with joy and hope—recommitting ourselves to doing good.

- Honoring each other's encounter and relationship with Christ as sacred.
- Acknowledging that we are all still a work in progress on a journey of sanctification.
- Protecting our unity in Christ as something not achieved by us but something we have received as a gift of the Spirit for all who call on the name of Jesus.
- Let's move forward, living our faith in humility, remembering that we are who we are, and do what we do only by the grace of God.
- Gracefully assuming the best of intentions of each other – trusting that we are all striving to be faithful to God.
- Desiring the best for our siblings in Christ – blessing them in prayer, with our words, and most importantly, with our actions.
- Speaking our truth in love, intentionally sharing our beliefs and opinions gracefully, and using life-giving words to edify each other.
- Let's move forward, celebrating our theological diversity as a gift from God and making room in our hearts for all people—especially those who believe or think differently. All need to really mean ALL.

- Let's move forward gracefully, holding each other accountable when we do not live to this higher standard.

Let's move forward, claiming God's future with joy and hope – recommitting ourselves together to constantly grow in our knowledge, experiences, and outward expressions of the love of Jesus Christ.

We can only stop the harm and do good to one another and the world if we put Christ front and center in our individual and communal lives. If we prioritize our relationship with God first and as crucial to building healthy relationships with others.

If our sole goal is to know Christ, to be like Christ, and to share Christ with all – this goal needs to absorb all our energies.

This mindset and heart change is only possible by God's grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hearts at war with others can't live into this invitation. We need to fervently pray to God to grant us hearts of peace so we can move forward and claim and embrace God's future with joy and hope.

I don't know about you, but like Paul, I humbly acknowledge today that I've not yet reached the finish line and that there is still much race to run. Knowing that God promises a future with joy and hope, I leave behind the things of the past because while the past is a good place to learn from, it is a horrible place to live. I will not use the past as a barrier to the future, as an excuse to drop out, or to avoid healthy accountability. I am leaving behind the ugliness of the past season and opening my heart to the possibilities ahead, knowing healing will find me in the journey, clear of the goal I pursue: "to love God and my neighbor as Jesus loves me fully" — or as we say in Upper New York: I am moving forward, pursuing with joy and hope God's invitation to live the gospel and embody Christ's love with my neighbors.

I end by reading the lyrics of the song "Imagine the People of God," written to celebrate the creation of the Upper New York Conference in 2010.

May these words, prophesied over this conference many years ago, reconnect us to God's vision and provide us with a clearer picture of the future God is inviting us to claim in joy and hope. May they inspire and energize us for the journey ahead.

Imagine, imagine the people of God,
believing, receiving, becoming God's love,

Imagine, imagine the people of God,
caring, sharing God's love in the world,
Seeking the way of Jesus Christ,
trusting the courage to change,
being God's love with our neighbors and friends,

Imagine, imagine the people of God.
Growing, becoming community,
Trusting in God's abundant grace,
speaking the truth in love,
nourished in the Spirit's power,

Imagine, imagine the people of God,
believing, receiving, becoming God's love,
we are your people, O God.

United Methodists of Upper New York, we are moving forward together, claiming God's future with joy and hope—all for God's glory.

Amen