



Grace and Peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness and Hope of the World!

I give thanks to God for each of you and your ministry. I deeply appreciate each of you who has taken time to be with me today.

About three months from now, the Special Called Session of General Conference will gather in St. Louis to consider the report of the Commission on a Way Forward. The eyes of the global United Methodist community will be focused on St. Louis during February 23 to 26.

The West Virginia Conference will have 3 clergy (Mary Ellen Finegan, Sharletta Green, Ellis Conley) and 3 lay delegates (Judi Kenaston, Erin Sears, Rich Shaffer) in attendance as well as 3 alternate clergy (J.F. Lacaria, Lauren Godwin, Mark Flynn) and 3 alternate lay delegates (Connor Kenaston, Royce Lyden, Fred Kellerman).

It is critical that as pastoral leaders we lift these delegates up in prayer. I would encourage you to print their names in the prayer section of each church's bulletin so that our delegates, like all delegates, are surrounded and bathed in prayer – not just during the days of General Conference, but all the days leading up to and through the end of General Conference 2019.

Without a doubt, our beloved United Methodist Church is at a critical juncture. For many United Methodists, this is a most anxious and fearful time. For LGBTQ persons, they are wondering how and if there will be a place for them in all aspects of the ministry of the church. For those who have a conservative understanding of scripture and human sexuality, they too are wondering if there will be a place for them.

It is indeed an unnerving time in our church and this is exactly why I desired for us to spend some time together. Today I will remind you of the vision, mission, and scope of the Commission's work, review the plans included in the Commission's report, and share with you how recent Judicial Council decisions impact the report and plans. Please read the report going to General Conference for yourself. As leaders, it is our responsibility to read the whole of the report for ourselves instead of allowing another person or group to interpret or define the report for us. There is a great deal of misinformation out there about the entirety of the report and the plans therein.

Secondly, I want to share with you essential traits that I expect from you as spiritual pastoral leaders for such a critical time as this. They are:

- a non-anxious presence – If we do not embody this essential trait, we are being unfair to our congregations. Peter Steinke describes a non-anxious presence as a “steady and calm way of being that acknowledges the anxiety but does not let the anxiety drive behavioral choices.” Eugene Peterson paraphrased Matthew 16:24 in these words: Then Jesus went to work on his disciples and said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am.” A non-anxious presence comes from the calm assurance that Jesus is in the boat and Jesus is in the driver’s seat.
- an authentic spirituality - Authentic spirituality is the foundation of trust for spiritual pastoral leaders. Make your devotional life a priority in a more focused and disciplined way. We cannot lead well unless we are tuned in to God.
- a heart of peace - The Anatomy of Peace asks the critical question, “Is your heart a heart of peace or a heart of war?” When you enter discussions and/or disagreements, is your heart at peace? Being at peace means that you will not see the other person as an object, as an adversary, as someone to be convinced of your way. A heart of peace isn’t about changing the other person’s mind – it’s about mutual respect, convicted humility and understanding each other in the midst of disagreement.
- convicted humility - To live out of a convicted humility, is to know that life is not all about you - and to know that God is God. Humility – it’s looking at life as it really is, instead of thinking highly of ourselves while looking down on others. Humility – it’s a value to pursue, to allow to convict us, and in being convicted - to live out of because it can and will transform our lives in incredibly healthy and spiritual ways.
- resourcefulness – equip yourselves to have Christian conversations so that you can help others do the same. Not engaging in a conversation is not an option. As pastoral leaders, we are to serve our congregations by equipping them for a Christian conversation and holy conferencing.

It is an anxious time – but we know for sure that we do not worship an anxious God. God’s word is full of reminders that God is in control. We are not alone, God is with us. This is not our Church. It is God’s Church and God will care for the Church.

Most importantly, no matter what happens in February we have work to do here and now. There are souls that need the saving power of Jesus Christ, there are people to feed, and there are lives to be touched and served by God’s love in Jesus’ name. In the midst of the other things that try to distract us from our mission and ministry, now is the time for us to once again align our hearts to God’s heart, throw off fear and live in faithful trust that God will lead God’s people to God’s preferred future.

Grace and Peace,

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball