

NIC Annual Conference Episcopal Address
7/16/2021 Barrington UMC (Virtual)

“JESUS MAKES A WAY”

Greetings to my new colleagues in Christ! It is hard to believe it has been just over a year since it was announced I would be your Interim Bishop. Since that time, I have been praying God would use me to bless you and strengthen your ministries.

I officially started working January 1 in the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic, a Capitol attack, and a long overdue effort to confront and dismantle racism in our country. Immediately, I was in Zoom meetings with the cabinet making appointments, although I did not meet my district superintendents in person until April 24th at the Commissioning and Ordination Service. In 6 ½ months, we have only had two in-person cabinet meetings!

At the same time, I feel close to many of you because you have Zoomed your way into my heart. Amazingly, I have met with many of you in meetings, conference events, district gatherings, and in small groups. You have had the opportunity to learn about my background, listen to my sermons, receive my greetings, and read my articles. Likewise, I have had the opportunity to learn about you and your churches; listen to the stories you tell about the heart and soul of this conference; and feel your love of Jesus and some of your anxiety about the future.

I want to pause to say, “Thank you”, for welcoming me. Even more so, I want to say, “Thank you”, for the way you have shared the love of God in Jesus Christ over this past year and a half. Our pastors and staff members, our musicians and video technicians, our Sunday School teachers and small group leaders, and a host of others have been “First Responders” for those who need spiritual and physical care.

Many people lost loved ones, with no opportunity for a memorial service. Others continue to suffer from the effects of Covid, delayed medical care, and isolation. Much of the world still awaits adequate supplies of vaccines. I am grateful for the pastoral care and social services that you have extended from food pantries and vaccine sites to pastoral visits and special offerings for those in need. We also owe gratitude to all those who have marched for racial justice, inclusion, and equity for immigrants and marginalized people. A virus will not keep us from giving our witness!

Most of this work would not have been possible without the faithful commitment and sacrificial giving of our local church members in this conference. Thank you for having a vision of God’s love that is both local and worldwide. Our church depends on every member doing their part and I am grateful to every one of you.

My task, as an interim bishop, is to help you continue your good ministries, name current realities, and provide some direction in a time of uncertainty. I have divided my reflections into

two parts. Today, I will share some of my early observations about the realities I am discovering. Tomorrow, I will talk about Pentecost as a model for what it means to be the church and share ways we can address our challenges.

Realities can be positive and negative. Most of the realities I have discovered are incredibly positive. We can celebrate and be proud of the many strengths in our Conference.

- **Gifted and dedicated clergy and laity.** Just think of the talented people in your church. Give thanks for our pastors who provide care and direction. Many of our leaders speak multiple languages to communicate with growing populations in our area.
- **We take a strong stand for equity and justice with full inclusion of everyone.** You have been a Reconciling Conference for 36 years and 85% of your Annual Conference voted for full inclusion of LGBTQIA people.
- **We are committed to celebrating diversity.** Over 40 different languages are represented in our churches. We have many cross-cultural and cross-racial appointments. This past year, in all categories, we have 79 Asian American clergy, 56 African American clergy, 28 Hispanic clergy, and 1 Native American.
- **We continue to have a devotion to missions.** The new “**Missions Links: Living the Beatitudes**” Booklet that replaces the “Rainbow Covenant” is an impressive compilation of our extensive mission work. Every church is challenged to make a difference through missions.
- **We have an effective advocacy ministry for immigrants.** Northern Illinois “Justice for our Neighbors” (NIJFON) is widely supported, has special expertise, and augments our local church work in ministry to immigrants.
- **Our new structure is a plus.** It may have taken a long time to develop, but it is streamlined and productive. This morning, you heard from Myron and Liz, the NIC News reporters, about some of the effective ministries developed with support of the Annual Conference Shepherding Team.
- **Our local churches are doing amazing front-line ministry.** This past month, I heard from many pastors grateful that their congregations continued to give faithfully during the past year. Two of our larger churches even completed Capital Campaigns during the Covid pandemic and will break ground soon.

Many churches are now equipped to continue an online presence as they open their doors for in-person worship. In cabinet meetings, I get updates of people in ministry that provide a broader appreciation of what God is doing among us. Look at this unrehearsed sharing of Cabinet celebrations on Zoom.

As you know, this is just a small fraction of our celebrations. The health of an Annual Conference is determined by the strength of its local churches. To keep it simple, the churches and pastors ARE the Annual conference. Every pastor is a member of the Annual Conference, and every church was started by the Annual Conference. We are in covenant with one another. If the pastors and churches are healthy, the Annual Conference is healthy.

Let us look at our health. When I go for my annual doctor's appointment, I have short list of conditions talk about. What conditions do we need to talk about as a conference? **What are the realities that need to be addressed to make us stronger?** Over the past six months I have listened to stories, read reports, interviewed some people, and come with some tentative observations.

I studied our 2020 Report to North Central Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy when we were preparing for the assignment of a new bishop. Our Conference Committee on Episcopacy did some research and listed the following challenges:

1. Financial challenges
2. Concerns about divisions and full inclusion
3. Need to increase capacity of clergy and laity to address the culture of our communities that are in a state of flux.
4. Need to Develop a pipeline of diverse clergy
5. Low clergy morale
6. Division between progressive and conservative viewpoints and lack of respect for opposing views
7. Lack of support for our connectional system
8. Need to close or "right-size" some churches

This is not a complete list, but it captures some areas of concern. Do any of these resonate with you? What is missing?

As we entered 2021, the Annual Conference Shepherding Team selected 4 priorities for this year. And they are right on target! These four priorities encompass almost all of what is in the report of the Committee on Episcopacy. The priorities are:

1. Guiding the NIC in the event of a significant shift in the denomination or jurisdictional realignment of conferences.
2. Facilitating communication and healthy relationships between districts, NIC leadership, staff, committees, and ministries.
3. Focusing NIC resources to equip local churches and ministry settings to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

4. Advocating, monitoring, and celebrating diversity at every level of leadership throughout the NIC.

Some of these “realities” are hard to understand because they are anecdotal. The one reality that has hard data is our financial situation. It is listed #1 in the report to the Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy.

We know money is not just about dollars. Giving is indicative of other factors within the local church and the conference. Like stewardship, trust, accountability, transparency, and responsibility.

I have asked Stephanie Uhl and Tammy Scott, leaders of the Conference Council on Finance and Administration, and Lonnie Chafin, our Treasurer, to give us an overview of the history and current reality of our economic life together.

Thank you, Stephanie, Tammy, and Lonnie, for helping us understand our financial situation. As you can see, we have work to do not just with our financial situation, but with all of our challenges. I am aware my perceptions are limited by my short time with you. So, I continue to invite your perspective and insights to give me a complete picture of our conference.

A boat is often used as a symbol of the Church. It is depicted as an open boat with a cross as the mast. It represents a spiritual journey, a crossing, an adventure. I like to think of that mast as the church having its sail up to catch the winds of a new spiritual awakening.

The church moves forward, not as much by our schemes and strategies as by the Spirit of God. Our job is to catch that Spirit and let it call us... let it direct us... let it carry us... to a place better than we can imagine. I do not think we can find our direction any other way.

I close with three axioms to help us understand our situation.

I cannot think of any place I would rather be than serving in the Northern Illinois Conference. I hope you feel the same way. Let us make room for others!

Our attempts to fix the church do not seem to be working. Narratives of the church breaking up, have stopped many people from building it up. Maybe God wants us to repair the boat while we are all still in it. Keep rowing!

Turning to God does not let us off the hook for taking personal responsibility and doing our part. Too often we reverse this process. We know where we want to go. And then pray to God to get what we want. When we call on him and trust him, “Jesus Makes a Way!”

In **Mark 4:37**, Jesus was in the boat with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. “A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, **“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”** He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, **“Peace! Be still!”** Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, **“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”** And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, **“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”**

The Church is the body of Christ—built by Jesus—according to Matthew 16:18. It may be buffeted by storms, but it will not be swamped. “Jesus Makes a Way” when we are willing to wake him up, seek his peace, and have faith in him. Let us stay in the boat, keep rowing, and follow Jesus! May his peace be with you. Amen.