

NIC Annual Conference Episcopal Address  
7/17/2021 Barrington UMC (Virtual)

**“JESUS MAKES A WAY”**

Good morning Annual Conference! If I remember my church calendar correctly, we are still celebrating Pentecost. Tomorrow is the 8th Sunday after Pentecost—a season that goes all the way to Advent on the last Sunday in November.

Why does this season last so long? Well, 1) It takes a long time for the church to get its act together. And 2) The work of talking the walk... and walking the talk is never done.

Pentecost—the birthday of the Church—is the day when the church was “cooked up” or “fired up” I should say. It was the day, when “Jesus (*with the help of the Holy Spirit*) Made a Way” for God’s work of reconciliation and redemption to continue through us!

Listen to Acts 2:1-4

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

- When the Holy Spirit came to those who followed Jesus, they were unified and empowered and sent on a mission.
- With the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to do things that were not possible by themselves.
- And when the followers of Jesus shared their faith... those from other countries, with different languages, could understand their witness. (*Sounds like the Northern Illinois Conference, doesn't it?!*)

The Church is most faithful when it is Unified, Empowered, and sent on a Mission. The Church needs all three—Unity, Power, and Mission. Two of the three are not enough for Pentecost! The Church needs to be Unified...

The scripture says on Pentecost, “*They were all together in one place.*” Whenever God’s people come together in one place—watch out!

- You simply cannot be a follower of Jesus by yourself—or just with your own kind. This is why we need a diverse and inclusive church!
- Even Jesus did not work alone. That is why in Matthew 18:20, he says “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.*”

The Church needs to be Empowered...

The Church was energized—ignited, set on fire, cranked up—when the Holy Spirit came upon them. It was not their Power... it was God’s power that had been forecasted by Jesus in Acts 1:8.

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

In a time where everyone wants political power for their own interests, we need some of God’s Holy Spirit power to be shared with everyone! Power is both the energy and the authority to carry out the mission.

In the early days of electricity, many people experimented with this new power. Some Frenchmen wanted to know how fast electricity moves, so the abbot of a large monastery volunteered his monks for the experiment.

He lined up a thousand of them, each holding the hands of those next to him. Then an electric current was applied to the first man in line, and according to an account of this experiment, every one of those 1,000 monks jumped up in the air at precisely the same moment.

Three conclusions were drawn from this story:

First, electricity moves with astonishing speed;

Second, abbots in French monasteries in the 18th century had tremendous authority over their monks;

Third, wouldn't it be wonderful if 1,000 people in the church could get excited enough to jump into the air at the same time!

The Church needs to be Unified and Empowered. The Church also needs to be clear about its Mission.

Our mission is to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment: To make disciples; to love God with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- “Jesus Makes a Way” through us to make disciples for the transformation of the world.
- You and I are now the heart and mind, the eyes and ears, the hands and feet of Jesus after his death and resurrection.

Unity... Power... Mission. Do you think the Northern Illinois Conference has all three? Which one do we need more of?

To face the current realities before us, we are going to need all three. We cannot do this alone. We need the spiritual energy and authority to act. We must be clear about our mission.

Out of gratitude for the many strong ministries God is working through us, I humbly want to reflect on the challenges that face us. Let me bold as a newcomer to share my initial impressions.

You have already heard from our Conference Commission on Finance and Administration about our financial realities. If apportionments were paid in full, we could start new ministries or reduce apportionments to everybody. So why are our apportionment payments so low?

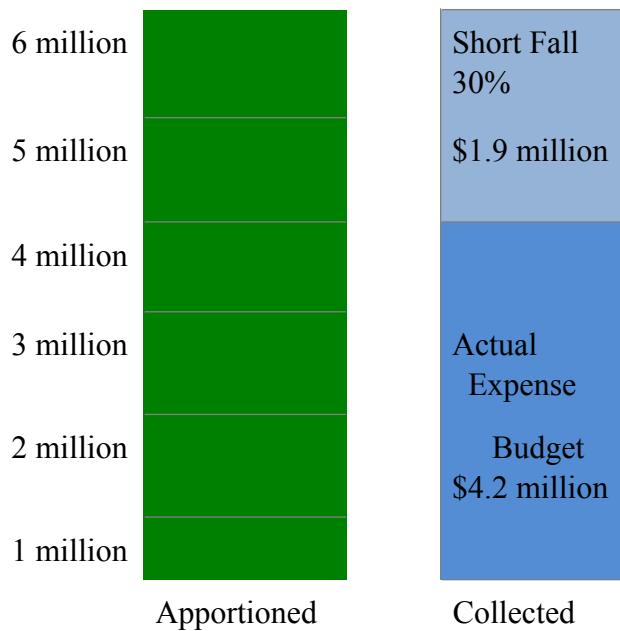
Of course, there are external cultural reasons, but mostly it is because of the declining strength of our local churches. More churches are struggling to pay apportionments, salaries, and other expenses. Just as some churches need to “right size” to have resources for mission rather than maintenance, so does the Conference.

Here is the challenge: Shared ministry is supported by apportionments through a covenant made among our churches when clergy and laity adopt a budget at Annual Conference.

- A bishop appoints a pastor with a salary set by the church with the expectation that the church can balance its budget and pay all its apportionments.
- A church that cannot balance its budget often reduces apportionments paid, reduces the salary of an incoming pastor, or eventually asks for a less-than-full-time pastor. (*In essence, a church that cannot balance its budget and pay apportionments cannot afford a pastor at the current salary level.*)
- By not paying apportionments, a church shifts expenses to other churches that are paying apportionments. Let me explain.

Here is a graph of our Northern Illinois Conference Budget apportioned for 2020. We apportioned approximately \$6 million and collected \$4.2 million. That is a shortfall of \$1.9 million or 30%. That \$1.9 million might as well be a line item in the budget of support to those churches who do not contribute because churches paying apportionments are asked to pay for those who do not.

2020 Northern Illinois Conference Budget



If every church paid their apportionments in full the conference could either lower the total apportionments by \$1.9 million or engage in more far-reaching congregational developments as well as ministry and mission.

- Likewise, when our Conference does not pay its general church apportionments in full, other conferences like Great Rivers and East Ohio are paying our share.
- As churches right-size to balance their budgets we have fewer full-time appointments, and more pastors must move to a church with a lower salary.

I do not think this situation is about money alone. It is about relationships and knowing what we do affects everyone else. It took us a long time to get into this situation and we need to expect several years before we can bring budgets, salaries, and appointments in line.

We also need to be gentle with ourselves as we come out of the Covid pandemic and get our church systems going again. As we make progress, I believe we will be a stronger conference because of our shared responsibility.

Let me briefly share some recommendations to respond to our situation.

- We need to work with churches to help them balance their budgets and pay apportionments while sustaining the salaries they set.
- The Board of Ministry needs to work with the Cabinet to determine how many full-time elders are needed based on the size and strength of our churches.
- The Conference Council on Finance and Administration needs to keep the budget and apportionments at a low level until the percent paid increases.
- Local churches take pride in meeting their financial responsibilities as part of their covenant with other churches.

We should be grateful that our conference has been willing to support churches as they serve—especially in difficult financial areas. Even those churches know what it means to live within their means.

In addition to offering a plan to meet our financial challenges, I want to briefly comment on the Priorities identified by the Annual Conference Shepherding Team for this year.

1. **First, there is concern about a significant shift in the denomination.** Since the 2016 General Conference and the creation of the Commission on a Way Forward there has been an intensive search for a way to keep The United Methodist Church united and provide full inclusion for those in the LGBTQIA community. The Special Called Session of General Conference in February 2019 increased the animosity of opposing views leading to a few proposals to the 2020 General Conference recommending a split in the denomination.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the General Conference to 2021 and then to 2022. At this time, it is unclear if General Conference will pass legislation to split the

denomination and if any legislation passed will be ruled “unconstitutional” by the Judicial Council. So, we live with uncertainty.

The questions I get asked most are, “*Will my local church or annual conference be required to make a choice of which denomination to join?*” Or, “*Will I as a pastor or local church member have to make a choice?*”

Pastors of larger or “purple” churches say to me, “*If my congregation is forced to make a decision it will divide us because we are too inclusive to have a single view on almost anything.*”

So, we do not know what the General Conference or the Judicial Council will do. That does not mean we are not looking at contingencies, but our plans may not be God’s plans. We need to focus on strengthening the local churches and ministries in our Conference.

As I have studied the churches of our Conference, I think it is unlikely that a split in the denomination would affect us in Northern Illinois very much. The 2019 Annual Conference vote on full inclusion had 85% support. Using this percentage, only about 50-60 churches or pastors would want to go to another denomination. And some of those churches do not have the financial strength to meet the requirements for leaving.

The membership of “purple” churches might be reduced and that could weaken our numerical and financial strength. Conference finances could be adjusted with some reduction of ministries.

I personally, would regret having any pastor or church leave our conference. We would be less inclusive and diverse without that pastor or congregation.

In the meantime, we need to concentrate on the important ministries of our church locally and globally. We need to pray and believe that Jesus will make a way for us as he has so many times in the past.

2. **There is a concern about a jurisdictional realignment of conferences.** The questions I hear from people are, “*Will we need to share a bishop with another Conference?*” “*Will our Conference be required to merge with another Conference?*” “*What happens if we become an Episcopal Area with two or more another conferences?*”

Let me be clear, the Northern Illinois Conference will *not* “merge” with another conference if you share a bishop. (At some future date two conferences can vote to merge if they desire.) You would remain a conference with a bishop and that bishop would oversee two or more conferences, called an “Episcopal Area”.

An “Area Office” would be put together by the two conferences and an “Area Budget” established to support the Office and Episcopal Residence. The main difference is that the

bishop would not be available for as many local church visits. However, with our new digital video skills I think you would not see much difference.

**3. There is a perceived need for better communication, coordination, and relationships between districts, NIC leadership, staff, committees, and ministries.**

Maybe the pandemic contributed, but there have been some gaps communications and coordination of ministry initiatives. These are difficult times and relationships have been harder to maintain across our conference.

You should be aware our conference expectations have not been reduced, although our staff is much smaller than it was a decade ago and our structures remain the same. Without staff, it is difficult to provide same coordination and communication across volunteer groups.

As we move to 5 districts, we now have an opportunity to reset our relationships between district and conference initiatives. I have been impressed by the creativity of our local church, district, and annual conference efforts. You have some great cluster groups!

Our new capacity for virtual meetings already has helped us communicate information better. We have even learned the power of small groups on Zoom. However, we all miss the infusion of spiritual strength that comes from singing praise to God in large gatherings.

Remember, the local church is where most of our attention should be directed!

**4. We need to focus resources to equip local churches and ministry settings to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**

Most Annual Conference sessions today hear reports on conference agencies, the budget, and pass legislation and resolutions. That was not always the case. Historically, the Annual Conference session was a time of accountability and celebration of local ministries.

*What has happened in your ministry over the past year? How many baptisms have you performed? New members received? Have you paid your apportionments in full? What was your second mile giving to missions?*

When I was ordained in the North Indiana Conference in 1972, the registration packet had a stapled sheet with the major year-end statistics on every church. As someone was speaking at the microphone you could look up their local church to see how they were making disciples and transforming the world. You could see their salary, apportionments, and benevolent giving paid. You could see their number of baptisms, new members, and worship attendance. When a church was doing well in an area, you could learn what they were doing from the pastor or lay members.

I have heard stories where the bishops in the AME Church, would call someone out in a conference session, if their church had no baptisms or did not pay their apportionments in full.

Our need to focus resources on the local church is not only about conference programs, budget, and strategy. It is about us.

Can we focus our attention on the people in our communities who need to know about the God we serve? That is the shift we need to make. And that focus cannot be given over to a conference committee or task force. Each of us is responsible!

We cannot do our mission and advocacy work unless we can reach people with a love that will convert their hearts and call them to repentance. Our supply lines for those who will give witness are declining and the local church is where we must put our attention. We need more vital congregations!

**5. Finding common purpose in advocating, monitoring, and celebrating diversity.]**

Northern Illinois has found a sweet spot around diversity. Partly because we have such a diverse, cultural mission field and leaders to reach that mission field.

We celebrate our wonderful diversity, but we yearn for a unity of ministry and purpose. We want to see some progress, some momentum, some fruit for our collective work.

Despite our gifted and diverse leadership, we have been in decline for some time. I do not think this is because we lack spirit or resources for ministry. The question is how can we leverage our diverse leadership to have a stronger conference?

Our growing area may be keeping people loyal to the larger mission without limiting or restricting their ability to find meaning and strength within their own cultural base. We know that unity does not mean uniformity, but it does mean living in covenant together.

Discipleship requires Evangelism, Mission, and Advocacy. Some might say, “Saving souls—Serving others—Seeking Justice.” It could be that more of us pay attention to Mission and

Advocacy than we pay attention to Evangelism? Maybe it is easier to rally people to give and serve others, than to offer them faith in Jesus Christ.

We may not be leveraging our diversity because we are more loyal to the people we lead, than to the larger conference. Leaders tend to be more loyal to the team they lead than the team they belong to. Unfortunately, the people you lead can tell if you are not loyal to the conference where you are a covenant member. That erodes their confidence in the large conference. Are you willing to be as loyal to your Conference as you are to your caucus or cultural group?

Finally, it is relatively easy to lead someone just like us. We need leaders who can celebrate diversity and lead people unlike themselves.

In closing, I have to say I am not sure we can find what we want by ourselves. We have been working hard and strategizing in so many ways. But our ways are limited. Maybe we need a miracle. **What we need is a Pentecost!**

There are really two miracles in our lesson:

1) The first is God's gift of the Holy Spirit that **unified, empowered**, and gave the believers a **mission**. 2) The second is that after Jesus' death and resurrection, the **disciples** (*followers or students*) of Jesus became **apostles** (*messengers or missionaries*) for Jesus.

Those same miracles can happen in us. The Holy Spirit can bring us together and make us messengers and missionaries for Jesus.

The world is due for another spiritual awakening. It will not happen by our own power. It will happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus will make a way for us—when we are United, Empowered, and clear about our Mission!

O Come, Holy Spirit. Surround us, Unite us, Empower us, and Send us to proclaim your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.