

**Back to the Future:
Who Do We Want to Be?
Philippians 3:14-21 (The Message)
Northern Illinois Annual Conference
Episcopal Address
June 3, 2019**

14 I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

15-16 So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

17-19 Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them.**20-21** But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ...He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

Some of you may remember the movie, *Back to the Future*, a science fiction film from 1985, starring Michael J. Fox who plays Marty McFly. The year is 1985 and his parents are unhappy as is Marty. His father is bullied by his boss; his mother is overweight, depressed and alcoholic; his life is miserable. Marty meets an eccentric inventor who has built a time machine out of a modified DeLorean car. Stuff happens and Marty accidentally sends himself back to 1955, where he meets his future parents, and ultimately gets them together. His efforts change history so that when he is finally returned to 1985 (after many misadventures), his parents are successful, fit and happy. And everyone lives happily ever after...until the sequel.

The movie, *Back to the Future*, “fixes” the past so that the present is made perfect. Maybe many of us here, in the church and in society as well as in our personal lives, think it might be a great thing to be able to “fix” the past so that the present and even the future will be better than it seems from this vantage point. So much has happened since we last gathered as an annual conference. Uncertainty about who we will be as an annual conference and even a denomination continues to hang over us.

Short of a time machine, particularly an ecclesiological time machine, we can't fix the past...but we can reclaim our future when we understand our history in order to be clear about just who we are and want to be as followers of Jesus. The image that we have for this annual conference year isn't that of a DeLorean car (so emblematic in the movie, *Back to the Future*) but the West African sankofa.

The sankofa is a mythical bird from a tribe in Ghana. It literally means “to return (to the past) to look, seek and fetch” that which is at risk of being left behind. The sankofa flies forward (into the future) while looking backward (at who it has been in the past) with an egg in its mouth (symbolizing that future of potential).

We often have to go back to the place where we lost our way or our identity in order to regain/ fetch who we have been at our best. Then we can go forward, knowing who we are. I think the sankofa is a beautiful image of what our task is at this point in history as the UMC and the NIC!

This is a perfect year for us as an annual conference to look back in order to fly forward. It’s a year of anniversaries. One anniversary that we’ll hear about later is 200 years of mission in the Methodist tradition. Another anniversary is 150 years of women’s mission in the Methodist tradition and I’m pleased to have Harriet Olson, General Secretary of UMW, lead us in biblical and historical study of the mission of women throughout the years tonight and again tomorrow morning.

And last, but not at all least, is the 180th anniversary of continuous ministry in the northern Illinois area of the UMC and its antecedent bodies. I’ve asked a few people to raise share some of the themes of our identity and work as an annual conference over the years. It’s not a comprehensive history but it’s a thematic history. I hope that these themes will inform us in our conversations and legislation at this annual conference.

(Historical Narration)

Thank you for sharing our story, helping us to go back and fetch a sense of who we’ve been as an annual conference. Studies indicate that if leaders spend time looking back at their history, what made them who they are, they do a better job of looking forward into the future. In fact, looking back allows an organization to look *farther* ahead than if you don’t consider who you’ve been.

As you heard, we have been and are an annual conference who has sought to be more inclusive of others, often ahead of what was happening in the church at large. We have not done all these things perfectly. At times this conference has rushed out there with enthusiasm without a sensitivity to what is needed in a more diverse and inclusive church. We have had to grow in our cultural competence related to others. We have hurt others and been hurt ourselves. Lord, have mercy upon us, but I have to give it to you: at least even in our blunders, we have sought to love kindness, do justice and (most of the time) walk humbly with our God.

This will be yet another critical year in the life of this annual conference and the denomination. The question that we will need to ask over and over again is: Who will we be?

Over the last few months, we have had gatherings where we learned about the outcomes GC19. And then the JCDs through articles, letters, and videos. Even if the JC had declared the whole TP

to be unconstitutional, it would not have just reset us at where we were in 2016. Something significantly shifted when the TP was approved. As I've said before, it wasn't just the affirmation of traditional marriage—i.e. a man and a woman—it was the punitive and untraditional penalties toward those of us who differ with equally deeply-held beliefs based on scripture, reason, tradition, and experience around human sexuality.

The message from GC19 was loudly proclaimed and well-articulated by Bill Lawrence, Professor of American Church History at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology and former member of the Judicial Council. He said in a blog:

What the 2019 General Conference reiterated and reinforced is that homosexual persons are welcome to sit in our pews, serve on our committees, sing in our choirs, share in our sacraments, supply funds for our activities, sup at our church dinners, schmooze with our visitors, and spend time in our mission projects; but they are not welcome to speak in our pulpits, celebrate our sacraments, stand at our altars to be united in Christian marriage, or say that God is calling them into the ordained ministry.

Until now we have as a church lived under one tent, albeit not without tension. But we've been like any family on a camping trip in one tent with some shouting and struggling, but nevertheless when the rain pours and the bears circle, we have always come together as one church in mission and outreach. As I have always said, if you're a conservative church, be a fruitful conservative church. If you're a progressive church, be a fruitful progressive church! We need *more* points of entry into a message and community of Christ's love and grace; not fewer!

At the recent COB meeting, the predominant conversation was about how the UMC under the Traditional Plan (TP) is untenable and unsustainable. Advocates for the TP as well as those who had hoped for other options, like the One Church Plan (OCP) or Simple Plan (SP), agree that we may need an amicable separation to find "a new form of unity." Both/all sides agree that we can no longer afford to continue to do harm to each other in regards to human sexuality.

As you may know, there are all kinds of conversations going on throughout the U.S. and central conferences about developing "a new form of unity" that is based on our roots of Methodism but not linked in polity or at least polity related to human sexuality. There are other conversations about how to stay and resist. Persons from NIC have been a part of those conversations. We have a piece of legislation before us today or tomorrow that will empower us to be appraised and participating in what is developing across the connection so that we can fully participate in a future with hope.

At this point, my vision/hope is that there's a plan for affiliation. For instance, an annual conference would decide if it wanted to affiliate as the UMC under the TP, or for instance, another affiliation like the SP. If an individual local church in an annual conference didn't want to be in the affiliation that its annual conference decided, it could join another annual conference

which affiliated another way. But conversations are only beginning and there are as of now no solid proposals.

As we discern the future together, another question is raised: how will we be with each other? This is of critical importance; how we are with each other says as much about who we are as anything else! Some of us will resist the TP and others will want to insist that it be fully enforced. Since once again it does not yet appear what we shall be, I encourage us to allow everyone to get to the future intact. Let's don't be a police state where colleagues and parishioners grow in distrust of each other; this only serves to diminish our mission. Let's not unduly provoke one another but instead let us do no harm! As it says in Hebrews 10:24: "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds."

So given our history as an annual conference, who will we be? You will find several pieces of legislation that we will address today and tomorrow that will afford some robust conversations about that. Will we seek to live within the UMC under the TP, resist its outcomes, or work with others in finding another way forward? Your conversations and decisions will mark the journey ahead.

In addition to these conversations, we will be determining who we will be in the future by the election of our delegates to GC2020. I urge you to vote for people who have a wide knowledge of how the general church works, not just a single issue. Big decisions will be made at GC2020 and we need to have the very best delegation which will work long and hard, networking and partnering with others since we are a small conference. We need delegates who can influence others and build coalitions for a future with hope.

There is much to do this year as an annual conference. But in the mean time, there are people who need us to be in ministry and mission. Some of them care about our stance on human sexuality but many don't, especially those who are hungry, homeless, flooded or burned out of their homes, or dying from preventable diseases, addiction, or suffering from incarceration, violence, warfare or gun violence. We cannot take our eyes off the goal of caring for our neighbors!

Recently I read a book entitled, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse* by Timothy P. Carney. The journalist/author repeatedly and specifically cites that local churches in communities of all kinds are critical to the social networks that lift everyone economically, emotionally, in terms of health and in other ways. This is not a "religious" or church consultant book; quite the contrary. But he maintains that not enough focus is placed on strengthening local churches and keeping them from closing and instead only focus on strengthening local economies and increasing jobs. He believes that these are closely tied. Churches provide the bulk of volunteers and outreach in a community—both through the church and in other organizations—which impact networks of support. Truly the local church is tied to its community and a community is tied—even dependent—upon the strength of our local churches. We have a mission to fulfill!

One other piece of legislation will be presented today. The Annual Conference Shepherding Team (ACST) has been organized this year and is bringing three strategic goals that it has identified as essential in making vital congregations that can impact vital communities. The first goal that all local churches need to address in some new ways is to grow in discipleship, practicing the spiritual disciplines of our faith. We can't have vital churches that impact vital communities if we don't have vital Christians who are growing in their faith, able to articulate and share their faith, and seek to live as followers of Jesus in these challenging times.

A second strategic goal is to live into the conviction that racism is truly incompatible with Christian teaching. How are we as followers of Jesus repenting for and turning from racism which is called the "original sin" of America? How are we "spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land" as John Wesley commissioned us to do, specifically in the communities where we live? His definition of spreading scriptural holiness was to grow in love of God and our neighbor; no matter who that neighbor is!

And the third strategic goal addresses our capacity and sustainability as local churches and an annual conference. Friends, our financial capacity and sustainability as an annual conference is vulnerable, starting with many of our local churches. All of these strategic goals, if embraced by all local churches with help and resources from the districts and annual conference, will make us strong and vital Christians, with strong and vital congregations, that make us a strong and vital annual conference. There is no magic pill that does this work; it's the work of every United Methodist and local church with the help of the District Shepherding Teams and ACST.

Furthermore, this is not the time to weaken our local churches or the annual conference in our response to GC19. In our strength we will have more options as the denomination itself continues to find a way forward into the future.

We have much to do this year! As all this and more will be going on this year, I encourage you to stay tuned to what is happening through NIC and UMNS reports. I will continue to issue pastoral statements and videos. We will undoubtedly have gatherings to discuss who we want to be, including at our special Annual Conference session in the fall on November 16.

Finally, this year will be transitional in other ways. When Marva Andrews and I are just about finished with our work at the end of the day, one of us will inevitably say, "Well, I've had just about all the fun I can take today!" And we mean that we're packing up and going home.

I want to say that in 2020 I will have 41 years of active ministry, serving in three annual conferences as a pastor, district superintendent or bishop. While I never strayed far from I-90, I've seen many faces of the church in urban, rural and suburban communities. While I've seen some heart-breaking stains upon the witness of Christ in the world, more often than not, I have seen the best of God's people at work in the world. My own world has been expanded by all I

have encountered and had the privilege to serve, including you! Oh, the places I have gone and the people I have met! Thanks be to God!

But as of September 1, 2020, I will have had all the fun I can take and I will be retiring to beautiful, sunny California! I will be here for another annual conference (you're not done with me yet!) and throughout this year, as I've said, we have a lot of work to do...so let's stay focused on who we are with our eyes on the goal where God is beckoning us onward.