



2025 CHURCH CONFERENCE BISHOP'S MESSAGE

*Transcript of the recorded message prepared by Bishop Dan Schwerin for
2025 Church Conferences in Northern Illinois and Wisconsin.*

Let me begin with gratitude.

Thank you for your faithfulness, especially for the ways in which you have offered the peace and presence of Christ in tumultuous days. I would also celebrate the increase in apportionment payments in both annual conferences. Your gift helps us advance vocations into service, develop programs and connections a local church cannot do alone, and help us grant and coach congregational development so that we might innovate and bless our ministries in this space and time.

Several times in the last year I walked into a building and someone said, 'ohh you're the guy from the video I saw that charge conference.' Once someone said, 'you look so much better in person.' That said, I look forward to seeing you in person down the road when that's possible, but for now I want to reach out to you for the charge conference season.

As you begin this time together, let's remember to praise God who is the source of our ministry and for the impact you had this year, and we'll look ahead to the next year with hope.

A charge conference is an opportunity to take stock, stop and see what you have accomplished, and offer a transparent look at who is called to apprentice and lead and serve. A charge conference offers a reminder that budgets are moral documents that proclaim your span of care, and I appreciate the healthy accountability of this transparency.

Let me begin with a scripture: Psalm 130 verse 5, 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope.'

This Psalm is a psalm for the night. Poets and prophets have spoken eloquently about our night prayers or our dark nights of the soul. One of my favorite lines in the scripture is the way powerful resurrection stories are introduced saying, 'while it was still dark.'

I love the fact that God is working while it is still dark and when God's ways are unseen to most of us. When I was born my mother had a word about the night from the doctor. I was born with pneumonia and jaundice, and before the doctor went home for the evening, he told my mother something she would never forget: 'if he gets through the night he may make it.'

We all have those nights where we have prayed fervently for healing or well-being, or we have had some experience of the dark night of the soul or an experience of night that seeks the hand of God.

Maybe this conversation raises for you a recollection of the ways you have found God or reached out in prayer while it was still dark.

This year I have appreciated the ways that the two conferences lived out a year of grace. Even before it is visible to us, we know prevenient grace is at work.

Grace is the unconditional, expansive love of God offered to all people in every moment. We have learned how we are here to grow by grace working in love. Thank you for the ways that you have explored and lived gracefully in your communities. I've been praying about how we might deepen our life together in 2026.

Obviously, we share a common mission, 'to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.' My life is seized by that mission and has been transformed in it. I trust your life has been transformed by this mission. I'm very grateful that the United Methodist Church adopted a new vision statement. I do believe we are here to, 'love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously.' I celebrate this vision for our steps together.

Meantime, what kind of spiritual focus is needed for our leadership in this moment?

It is a time when many are dispirited for a variety of reasons. We have been divided by powerful monied interests who want us to fear each other, and distrust each other so that we can be administered by fear. That has robbed us of our conviction that Christ is more than our opinions, we are building back church unity, local collaboration, functional systems, and relationships at our holiday tables. It must be said that we are being administered by misinformation that takes us toward darkness, but we are people of hope. There is always more God than meets the eye.

I was attending the United Women in Faith weekend that they call Mission u in Northern Illinois when I heard a study entitled, 'practicing hope.' I was so touched and moved by the ways in which they recognized the challenges in this time start with the soul, how we remain grounded and oriented to Christ when political messages threaten people groups.

And in this moment, it feels like a collective night. What spiritual focus is needed for this time?

At Mission U, I enjoyed a morning in which they looked at what it means to be a people, 'practicing hope.' How the nature of our God is hope, how God coming to the flesh is hopeful, how there is always more God than meets the eye, and how our life together is one of practicing hope.

A deaconess named Martha who is a member at the Renewed Hope UMC sat next to me at lunch. She talked about how her congregation came to a moment when practically their whole budget went into keeping a building going, and wasn't God calling them to do more and be more?

So they prayed, grounded themselves in God and discernment and considered what Jesus would have them do with the people they were given to love. They eventually sold the building and decided that their metric was not how to keep up a building, but how they might bring Christian love, faith community into their community to impact the lives of people in their area.

She told me about the powerful ministry they have in the nursing home facility near them. And she said to me, 'I think we are practicing hope in our ministry,' and I wonder Bishop, if what you say is true for almost everyone, that most churches are 35 or less, maybe for the year 2026 we should pray and think about our theme being 'practicing hope?' I feel as if in this dark time we might be stronger if we practiced hope, and I love the idea that we are not alone, we practice hope as a community of faith.

I put down my pea soup and knew God was whispering.

We are practicing hope when we worship together and decide we will not isolate but bear witness with and to each other. We can practice hope as we 'resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves,' to quote the question from our baptismal liturgy. What does it mean to see evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? What brings hope for you?

I feel as if the churches that are trying to decide their futures could make better decisions if they were practicing hope as they discern what God may have for them in the future.

We will still live out our vision, we will still be seized by the same mission, but we can be stronger in this moment when we know our two conferences, our area, is practicing hope together.

I believe we are grounded in the hope of our baptism, where we have joined Christ, where we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

I believe the creativity and freedom of God calls us forward in hope. This is not thin or fake happy talk, or hope on a shelf, but gospel grounded life lived on the foundation of our baptism, the never-ending love that is poured into our hearts and life in Jesus Christ.

Hope allows for newness. Hope allows that God will call us forward. Hope allows us to say yes to whatever call is placed on our lives.

I believe as long as we have a relationship with Jesus Christ, we have a relationship with hope. John Wesley reminded us that we are not defined by our opinions, or agreements, we are defined by the image of God born in us and growing by grace in and through us. All people bear the dignity of the image of God. Our discipleship itself is a stance against racism.

I wonder if we might think about the end of this year as a year as a time to be grounded in grace so that we approach Advent and the new year asking the question how is God calling us to be people who are practicing hope?

I know that our God offers us a hopeful imagination. We are children of an Exodus God, a God who knows how to carry us through exile, a God who knows the path from death to resurrection. How could hope grow in your life and in the life of our church and how might that bring hope to those God has given us to love?

Best of all, God is with us, and God is not finished with us yet.

‘I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope.’

Thanks be to God.