



2026 CHURCH CONFERENCE BISHOP'S MESSAGE

*Transcript of the recorded message prepared by Bishop Dan Schwerin for
2026 Church Conferences in Northern Illinois and Wisconsin.*

Grace and peace to you,

I return to the late theologian Jurgen Moltmann's book, a *Theology of Hope* often. One of the thoughts that stays with me is: 'hope helps us bear the cross of the present.' Thank you, Northern Illinois-Wisconsin Area, for practicing hope in 2026.

This charge conference video is a chance for me to be in touch with congregations, even briefly. I hope you are represented at the annual conference session, both lay and clergy are expected, but for all you who are gathered for this charge conference, this is a chance for me to engage more of you. I am surprised, too, by the number of people who see this video in our 700 churches.

One time I went into a burger and frozen custard place, since I am all about supporting local businesses, and I was surprised and sort of embarrassed when someone said, 'hey, bishop!'

'I thought, oh I hope they like their pastor,' and he said, 'hey I recognize you--how about I buy your custard today?'

So, you can see it is vitally important that we show this video in all our churches for the charge conference season.

Consider with me, Beloveds, that practicing hope is not hoping about our circumstances, or about simple optimism.

The Talmud features a story about a Jewish sage sometimes called Honi, the Circle Maker.

*One day, Honi was walking along a road when he saw a man planting a carob tree.
"How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?" Honi asked. "Seventy years," the man replied.*

Honi was puzzled. "Are you certain you will live another seventy years to enjoy it?"

The man answered, "When I came into this world, I found it filled with carob trees planted by my ancestors. Just as they planted for me, I am planting for my descendants."

*Then the story shifts unexpectedly. Honi sits down to eat, falls into a deep sleep, and a rocky formation grows around him, hiding him from view as he sleeps for seventy years.
When he awakens, he sees someone gathering fruit from the carob tree.*

"Are you the one who planted this tree?" Honi asks.

"No," the man replies. "I am his grandson."

I am seized by this image of a grandfather, a grandparent, or a great ancestor planting a seedling knowing that the one planting will never taste its fruit. So here we are kneeling at the soil of our future. We are kneeling at the soil of the grandchildren.

You know, I've said, most of our churches are 35 or less on a Sunday morning. Increasingly, we discover a small handful of people in settings with very little offerings of their own, and they burn through five and six figures of funds in six months, just to keep their church doors open.

When the superintendent asks about whether we can do better stewardship, I have had United Methodist leaders tell superintendents in both conferences, 'I don't care, I just want the church to stay open long enough to do my funeral.' 'It's our money,' why not?

Which of these two ways is our mission?

Money given to the United Methodist Church is first given to the Lord,...and we are in this together to make disciples of Jesus Christ for our why, for the transformation of the world.

Kneeling at the soil of our future, I want to plant a United Methodist presence capable of touching the heart of the earth's grandchildren, and capable of transforming the world they will be facing.

My question for you in this moment is: 'can we be better ancestors?'

Can we consider what neighbors in your community need the divine embrace of your church? Or what cooperative effort with multiple ministries could kneel at the soil of our future with seeds that will bless the next generations?

You and I are practicing hope, and I have been open with you about my grandchildren. They are afraid to leave their homes because of the color of their skin. They carry their passports in their lunch boxes. Will they be attracted to a church quietly aligned with racial profiling, or a collective life where people are chased down at food pantries or work sites, where people with no criminal history can be disappeared? Will they experience God in churches that are silent about the greatest pain in their lives?

Can we be better ancestors for the grandchildren?

I am preparing these remarks while smoke clings in the air, and while we respond to storms of the kind that created such damage in Menasha. Both conferences have suffered super storms. I am so grateful for our disaster response people, be not weary in well-doing--and can we be better ancestors in our care for the earth?

Christian hope helps us bear the cross of the present. Hope is more than happy talk. Hope does not ignore the harm already done or pretend that every seed will survive.

Hope simply kneels at the soil of our future and puts some potential good into the ground. Hope serves Jesus Christ without demanding that the future rewards us. Hope is from the abundance of God we hear about in Romans 5, the Spirit being poured into our existence with abundant good. Let's carry that hope to bear the crosses of the present. Make hope a verb.

May we be better ancestors. Thank you for your ministry.
