

United Methodists Join Forces to "Turn Worlds Upside Down"

Area One: Leadership

During the first plenary, Bishop Janice Riggle Huie of the Texas Annual Conference illustrated how each of the Four Areas of Focus came into being through intense Bible study and prayer.

"The Four Areas of Focus came from Scripture and from you," she said, referring to the thousands of people who responded to e-mails, online surveys and conversation invitations. "This is where we believe the Holy Spirit is at work in our church and our world today. In the end, we said God is always calling forth new leaders, new places for new people, the need for improving health around the globe, and reaching out to the poor."

Bishop Huie invited the leaders to "move out...of our little boxes" and follow "where we believe the Spirit is calling us." If the church did that, she said, United Methodism would once again become a movement.

"But we have to have three things to make this happen," she said, "desire, capacity and courage."

Bishop Tim Whitaker of the host Florida Conference led participants on a trip down memory lane, noting that a loss of memory may lead to a loss of one's identity.

"If a group begins to lose memory of its origins, it loses its identity," he said. "We need to change, but we must change and do so without losing our identity."

The bishop showed how John and Charles Wesley -- Methodisms' founders -- articulated a clear theological vision, often encapsulated in their hymnody. The Wesleys' strong Trinitarian roots, Whitaker said, forged a theology that said that the living God is acting in history for our sake; that transforming the whole creation starts with transforming the individual; and that a theological vision without a community in which to live it out is no good.

"Early Methodists had a connection with each other," the bishop said, "through the societies, classes and bands...Our congregations need to fall in love with their communities again. If our people will learn how to put together an intentional, holistic system of making disciples of Jesus Christ and let the Holy Spirit give them the energy to fall in love with their communities again, then there will be congregations that turn the world upside down."

Jay Williams, a 27-year old seminarian from New York, offered his thoughts on developing church leaders from the perspective of one who is being developed.

"Some folks just aren't leaders," he said. "Leadership is a gift of the Spirit. If we force people into leadership, the imminent result will be utter disaster."

Williams, who chaired his conference's delegation to the 2008 General Conference, stated three theses on living the United Methodist Way.

"First, death is not always a bad thing," he said. "It's time to let deadly practices die. Some of our churches have been struggling to die for decades.

"Second, our primary task is to be a Christian, not United Methodist," he said. "Too many of us can talk about strategic plans but too few of us can give a witness. Too many of us know the Book of Discipline and the rules of polity, but not the Bible."

And the third thesis, he said, is that in order to lead, one must follow. The church needs to develop a culture of apprentices and followers of leaders, he said.