

[From the Bishop: Graceful Hospitality](#)

Graceful Hospitality – that’s our intention for the North Carolina Conference for 2023. Because of the extravagant grace and welcome God has extended to us, we gratefully extend graceful hospitality, unconditional love, and welcome to everyone we engage.

I will be coming “in person” to each of our eight districts over the next five weeks. [Here is the list of district gatherings and their locations](#). Find the one that works with your geography and schedule, and please make a point to join one of these joyful “in-person” gatherings! And a second opportunity to connect will be Sunday, February 5th, at 5:00. The NC Conference Episcopacy Committee has organized a “virtual” welcome and worship service that will be live-streamed to wherever you are! I am thrilled to be the new Bishop of the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, and God is dreaming big dreams for our shared life.

Let’s celebrate being a big tent church with a clear mission *to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*. We have an opportunity to co-create alongside God’s transforming work in the world as we stand together as disciples of Jesus here in North Carolina and across our global connection.

I dream of a church for all people...ALL people, which includes YOU! A church that lives out three simple rules: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. I dream of a church made up of differing theological perspectives, rooted in scripture, and behaving like Jesus.

I dream of a church reclaiming our Wesleyan theology and polity with all the strands of personal piety and social holiness, head, and heart preaching, and connectional, world-changing generosity.

I dream of a church becoming nimble in her new expressions of worship, communal life, and mission- intentionally living into our five focus areas of healthy churches, effective leaders, Congregations for Children, anti-racism, and unity.

What would keep us from joining God's dreams for this beloved United Methodist Church? Our biggest challenge is overcoming the lack of trust among us. Somewhere along the way, people stopped valuing our big tent of theological diversity! Friends, is there any group in the world who can bear witness to John 3:16-17? Who really believes that "God so loved the world that God gave Jesus, that 'whosoever' believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"? And John goes on to say, "God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Jesus might be saved." Who is "outside" of God's "whosoever"? Let's cling to what is central to our faith. Love God completely and love your neighbor as yourself.

Our Wesleyan understanding of scripture as primary frames our understanding of God and God's relationship with humanity. Our theological framework includes tradition, reason, and experience honoring the tenor of scripture and respecting people with theologically differing scriptural interpretations. I learn so much when I wrestle with scripture alongside disciples who interpret it differently than I. Why are differing scriptural interpretations so threatening? The Bible says many things that are interpreted very differently. None of those curious passages threaten God's love for us, Jesus' divinity and humanity, nor the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and sustain.

Do you remember Jesus' words to the rich young ruler? "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor and come follow me." Some faithful Christians interpret Jesus' words as an admonition to all of us to take a vow of poverty in order to follow Jesus. Have you done that? I haven't. And Jesus talks A WHOLE BUNCH about money. Does the diversity of scriptural interpretation around money, or divorce, or what we eat or drink, or how we dress threaten us? When scripture says women should cover

their heads and men should not cut the hair at the sides of their head or clip off the edges of their beard, do we fight and divide ourselves over how that is interpreted? (My husband would love it if he never shaved another day in his life!) Do we not want to associate with people who interpret scripture differently around tithing? What does it mean to tithe? And what if you don't tithe?

And how do we consider the core law that Moses received in what we've come to know as the Ten Commandments? I'd like for us to consider the eighth commandment of the "Big Ten": "Don't bear false witness against your neighbor." Which means don't tell half-truths or deceptive stories that hurt your neighbor. False narratives to injure or manipulate diminish our witness and our capacity for connection. Should people want to separate because of false witnesses?

How can we be faithful at this juncture? Trust begins by people being trustworthy. How do we rebuild trust? We can't revitalize churches, birth new places for new people, create congregations for children, restructure general agencies, form effective spiritual collaborative lay and clergy servant leaders, heal global diseases, live Trinitarian unity, or dismantle systems perpetuating racism until we deal with the absence of trust among us.

I want to encourage you to do some homework. Research Brené Brown on the internet - she has an acronym for building trust. The acronym is BRAVING. Go google it and learn the very real practices we can engage IF we want to be trustworthy and rebuild trust among us.

Friends, it's God who formed us in God's image and breathed into us the breath of life - each person created in God's image, fully accepted and affirmed by God. When we turned away, and our love failed, God's love remained steadfast. How do we bear witness to God's steadfast love to all who have been harmed, exploited, and excluded from community? Can we humbly live in ways that communicate to those on the edge, "We see you! You belong! You are made in the image of God!"

It's time we have the same mind as Christ, who, as Philippians 2 describes, emptied himself. We are invited to have the same mind as our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who "emptied" himself. No power grab. It's time we collectively empty ourselves of being "right" or "justified"; "empty ourselves" of bearing false witness; "empty ourselves" from spiritual pride and take on the humility of Jesus. Because when we finally get over ourselves, we have an amazing future before us! And I celebrate all of you who understand yourselves as United Methodists even when your church disaffiliates – and I give thanks that your membership is now interwoven in the United Methodist Collective – over 600 of you.

And beautiful United Methodist Churches, I'm so grateful for your understanding of your identity as a welcoming place in our big tent church! We need every church who knows you are United Methodist to tell your District Superintendent that your church wants to be a Lighthouse Church! [Lighthouse Churches](#) are communities who are not engaging in disaffiliation voting processes and are moving forward proudly as United Methodists! Because there are 600 people whose churches have disaffiliated, but the 600 are United Methodists, they need a church home – and they don't want to become a part of another United Methodist church in the middle of power struggles and divisive votes. The churches who disaffiliated in North Carolina in 2022 now create plenty of independent congregations for those of you who do not see yourselves as United Methodists. Do we have to divide more United Methodist churches with votes?

I met with our Conference Committee on Youth Ministries recently. We have youth who are now in the United Methodist Collective because their home churches disaffiliated. They are waiting for Lighthouse Churches, who know they will remain United Methodist, to be their new church home. Is your church willing? If your church wants to exercise your right to vote, then take a vote to become a Lighthouse Congregation to United Methodists!

I long for the day when all United Methodists value our diversity and commit to lives of unity gifted by the Holy Spirit - ever asking if the people who are most marginalized are protected, affirmed, and empowered in our big tent! Will we trust one another's convictions and live as those who do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God?

General Conference is now scheduled for 2024. And our conference will be co-hosting General Conference next year with the Western NC Conference in Charlotte. May the Holy Spirit overwhelm us with a spirit of generosity toward one another so that the world is captivated by the countercultural love we bear. "Our intention for 2023...Graceful Hospitality...it's who we are."