

STATE OF THE CHURCH ADDRESS
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J. B. Phillips, once wrote a book with the title, *Your God Is Too Small*. Whether you agree with his theology or not, his premise is right on target. It doesn't matter how smart you are, how good you are, or how attractive you are. It doesn't matter how much you read the Bible, how much you pray, or how much you give to the church and to charity. It doesn't matter what your culture is, what your gender is, what your skin color is. It doesn't matter who your relatives are or who you know, where you went to school, or where you live. Your God is too small!

That's a challenging thought! Do we really believe that this all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present God we serve, always knows what needs to be done, always has the power to do it, and is always where he needs to be to do whatever needs to be done? If that be true, perhaps the biggest challenge for the Church today is to let God be God! And that's exactly what I believe we have a growing hunger for here in the North Carolina Annual Conference – to let God be God. So our conference, and more and more of our congregations, have been trying to read the signs of what God is up to, connect the God-dots, if you please, then sign up on God's dotted lines and lay down our own will for a God that's bigger than we can imagine, up to more than we can comprehend and loves us more than we can know!

I remind you that this annual conference and its Connectional Table (and the many ministries associated with it), our Board of Ordained Ministry, our Council on Finance and Administration, and our Cabinet have clearly stated that we believe God would have us help local churches become healthier disciple-making centers that are Missional, Relational and Incarnational. And, help our clergy and lay leadership become, both in heart and mind, all that the Lord of the Church needs them to be as they lead forth with excellence, vision, passion and godliness. Our mission statement says it more succinctly when it says: *healthy churches and effective leaders in every place making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.* (Say it with me.)

So, let me give us a quick sweep of what is happening as we try to live out this commitment to God. First, our partnership with the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative continues to gain momentum as we try to help local churches become healthier. This year we are appointing our second Rural Fellow from Duke Divinity School. Leah Scaggs has focused her studies on special curriculum dealing with rural communities and small membership churches. And now, she will have the opportunity to apply what she has learned! Next year we anticipate three additional specialists from this Initiative being assigned to our rural churches and communities. Solid Rock, Cedar Grove and Sandy Plains, three of our Thriving Rural Congregations, continue to offer opportunities for persons to come, experience and learn from what God is doing through them. And, we're very excited about the new teaching ministry of the Bladen Charge, in the Wilmington District, where they host an annual Fan the Flame for smaller membership churches to be inspired and informed. (Have persons stand who have participated)

Our Healthy Church Assessment Tool continues to find wide use among our congregations of all sizes. And, at this conference we will recognize a number of Acts 2 Churches who are making significant progress toward Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Spiritual Formation from the Cradle to the Grave and Risk-taking ministry and mission to the world. Stories are coming from every corner of our conference about churches that are becoming more missional, more relational, and more Incarnational – and we celebrate all these advancements!

At the same time, we know that a significant number of our churches are struggling - especially in these days of economic challenge. At this annual conference alone we will lose fourteen full-time appointments for our elders and local pastors! Fourteen churches that could not longer carry the financial load required for minimum salary, pension, insurance, housing costs as well as general maintenance and ministry costs - let alone their fair share of our connectional mission giving. They will not close, but like thirty other sister congregations in our conference over the last four years, they will need to go to a part-time pastor in order to continue their work. Sisters and brothers, we need every

congregation we have and we must make every effort to strengthen our congregations of every size.

This challenge for some of our congregations has been exacerbated by these economic times. In fact, many of our stronger congregations are being challenged by these economic times. But friends, we must not allow these challenging times to deter us from our mission. We must not develop an attitude of scarcity when we know full well that we are yet in the midst of much abundance. God's work must not slow when it comes to reaching the lost, feeding the hungry, seeking justice for all and growing disciples of the young and old alike. Friends, history indicates that God's people have always been more sacrificial and generous in difficult time so God's work would not suffer. Let it be no different for us! As we reflect and pray together, God will help us accept what we can't afford to do any longer and at the same time He will help us come to a deeper understanding of what we can't afford not to do, one way or the other! We can get more done with less! There are other ways to do what really needs to be done!

But you must hear this! An overwhelming majority of our local churches and thousands of their members who have lost their jobs are looking to this annual conference for sign acts which we can do to indicate to them that we understand the situation and are willing to be in solidarity with all who have been affected by this economic downturn. Believing this deeply and convinced that we should lead the way; our Council of Bishops has approved a roll back of the salaries of the active bishops. What that means is, at the beginning of 2010 our salaries will be rolled back to the 2008 level. Further, we will cut one day out of our scheduled meetings and we have requested that we stay in less expensive hotels. In addition, our SEJ College of Bishops has cut one entire meeting out of our schedule for 2010. But hear me! We are convinced we can do more than ever before for our Lord and His Church! We will just do it a different way! We will be creative in becoming more effective and efficient.

As you will see, our own Council on Finance and Administration and Connectional Table are recommending several sign acts and proposals for doing ministries a different way;

ultimately though you must make the final decision. A word of caution, we must not fall into the trap of trying to do everything more cheaply. But let us accept the challenge of doing things more efficiently and reasonably. Our task will be to make sure vision drives us and not the dollar!

To help lead the way, I will be appointing a Task Force to Study Superintendency in the North Carolina Annual Conference with an eye on efficiency and effectiveness and I will ask that Task Force to report any recommendations it may have to our 2010 Annual Conference. Further, our Conference Planning Committee believes that this Annual Conference can do effective holy conferencing in two and one half days instead of three and one half days and is recommending such for the 2010 Annual Conference.

Let me turn now to effective leaders in every place. I am pleased to tell you that I am greatly encouraged by the growing number of competent and committed clergy we have in this annual conference! We are blessed! And our blessings are increasing every year! Our Board of Ordained Ministry has significantly redesigned its work so that it may better focus on identifying, recruiting and nurturing godly and able leaders for ordained ministry. The Board's question will not be, "Are there reasons for us not recommending this candidate?" but the question will be "What are the reasons why we should recommend this candidate?" And our Academy for Leadership Excellence, who works primarily with clergy already in our Covenant, is finding a "full house" in almost every offering it presents for growth and renewal!

During this conference you will hear a report from the leaders of our Clergy Health Initiative. The survey work of this Initiative is completed and we are moving now to pilot programs. This work will be extremely helpful to both our clergy and our congregations as we gain greater insight into the keys for a physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally healthy leader. One thing we do know for sure, this is a very challenging time to lead a congregation. Reggie McNeal says it well when he says, "These are the best of times to be the church. These are the worst of times to be a church." Meaning, the massive changes that are taking place in the world – from

globalization to the breakdown of Christendom to the emergence of post modernity – are wonderful opportunities for Christianity to reach out to a confused world. BUT these same forces are challenging local churches in profound ways. Meaning, familiar ways of doing church, programs that always worked before and old ideas are no longer working. Churches can no longer fall back on what they've done before and expect anything more than a continual slow death! This is a challenging time! And, we must hear this! There are no silver bullets out there to slay this dragon. But, I'm discovering that many church members expect the pastor to be the silver bullet.

Friends, leadership in a congregation should always be a team effort! Part of the significant role of the pastor today is to ask the right questions and to recruit the right people, so the burden of leadership can be shared. In today's church that is absolutely essential – not just because no one person can know all that needs to be known or do all that needs to be done, but also because it is the Biblical way for all of God's people to have meaningful involvement – and, of course, it builds broad-based commitment and enthusiasm for the ministry of the church.

Our pastors are willingly being reminded of and equipped for this kind of leadership through our Academy for Leadership Excellence, the Reynolds Program for Leadership Excellence, and many other opportunities within and beyond the annual conference. To assist in this effort, for the last year our district superintendents, lay leader, treasurer and others have been meeting one full day a month for the purpose of learning more of what it means to be an effective Christian leader in this day, for the purpose of loving God through intentional formation and for the purpose of being accountable for leading through a Ministry Action Plan.

And now, they have begun their own Incubators (as this effort is called) practicing L3 – Loving God, Learning and Leading – as they meet with their team of laity and clergy for eight hours every month. And in just a few years, hundreds and hundreds of our clergy and laity will experience this exciting and empowering opportunity as this Incubator movement multiplies.

Finally, let me remind you, that according to the U.S. Census Bureau we are the fourth-fastest growing state in the nation! Only Utah, Arizona and Texas are going faster. We are already the 10th largest state in the Union. A recent Gallup pole says that 70% of people in our society are functionally unchurched – meaning they go to church less than six times a year! Add these together and it is easy to see that God has placed us in very fertile ground! And friends, Jesus’ parable of the shepherd who looks for the ONE lost sheep when there are ninety-nine in the fold gives us a clear understanding of what we must be about in this fertile ground.

Just a few weeks ago while in Washington, D.C., Joyce and I were privileged to help launch our new United Methodist Church Communications’ Campaign – RETHINK CHURCH. During this conference you will see a video of this campaign. Listen to some of the words of the campaign: What if church wasn’t just about Sunday, but also about the other days of the week? What if church wasn’t a place we go, but something we do? A menu of adventure. An active verb. Instead of a noun. What if church was the way church was in the beginning? Outbound. Unbound. Active. What if church looked at itself with seekers’ eyes? What if church wasn’t just a building, but thousands of doors? What if church was more of an out-of-church experience? An opportunity to prove what we say we believe, with our lives. Then, perhaps, Sunday could be a day of rest and reflection on all that we had accomplished Monday through Saturday ... What if we rethink church? Not in terms of what it is, but what it could be. And what if we convince the world to do the same?

Let that be our marching orders!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

