Are You Ready for 2015 Annual Conference?

The 2015 North Carolina Annual Conference will be held at the Wilmington Convention Center in Wilmington, North Carolina, June 10-13, 2015. The theme for the quadrennium and focus of the Conference is a powerful image from Psalm 84, “Strength to Strength.” Bishop Hope Morgan Ward will preside over the conference with the assistance of Conference Secretary Rev. Jerry Bryan and Conference Lay Leader Gary Locklear. For more information about the 2015 Annual Conference, visit: http://nccumc.org/secretary/annual-conference/

May 3, 2015
Text: 3 John “Coworkers with the Truth” 

What color should the carpet be in the sanctuary? How can anyone get along with this new preacher the bishop foisted off on us? What are we going to do about the Scots having smack suppers in the parlor? Whose idea was it to have the discussion on same-sex marriage? Why do we have to sing these hymns that nobody knows? Wouldn’t those people be happier in their own kind of church?

The reality is that congregations can get divided over lots of different things. In this week’s study text (the entire book of 3 John), there is a squabble between two different points of view, one represented by Diotrephes (verse 9) and one represented by Demetrius (verse 12). What really seems to upset the writer of this letter is the fact that Diotrephes won’t have anything to do with those whom he disagrees. Look at verse 10: this man wants to kick out of the church those who do not agree with him.

The writer of the letter is not calling for making believing there are no differences; in fact, he says that when he comes to visit, he will point out the things Diotrephes has done wrong (verse 10). This is not a call to sweep differences under the rug; it is a call to show hospitality and welcome.

On this first Sunday of the month, many local churches will celebrate Holy Communion. Perhaps good questions are: “Who is missing from the Lord’s Table? Why are they not here?” Are the empty places at the Table theological? Sociological? Ethnic? Language? Cultural? Generational? How does our congregation express the hospitality of the Table?

Showing hospitality is one way we are “coworkers with the truth” (verse 8). In this verse, the word translated “truth” is made up of two words: one meaning “root” and the other meaning “hidden or concealed.” Truth is openness and welcoming. The very word “coworkers” (King James Version: “false helpers”) gives indication that Truth is a shared experience.

We are in this together—even if the ones with whom we are together are strangers (verse 5).

What Someone Else Has Said: Ralph C. Wood (Literature and Theology, Abingdon Press) has written: “Hospitality thus becomes an earthly analogy to the gospel itself. Just as we were once strangers and enemies whom God has patiently taken into his household (Romans 5:10), so must we be willing to offer hospitality to those who are alien and hostile to us.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Welcoming God, restore Your image in us so that we with joy might welcome the stranger. Equip us with the openness of truth that gives us no place to hide behind status or position or recognition. In Jesus Christ we have seen the fullness of that truth...”

May 10, 2015
Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 “Gifts of the Spirit”

Have you ever been to a T-ball game? It is like a regular baseball game except there is no pitcher. The ball sits atop a tee about eye level. The batter can certainly hit a ball that is just sitting there waiting to be struck. But, it does not always happen that way. Sometimes the batter misses the whole thing.

This T-ball image came to mind as I began looking at this week’s text. How could one miss the ball on a text about spiritual gifts? How could one miss the ball on a text about saying “Jesus is Lord”? How could one miss the ball on a text about life in the Spirit?

The ball is just sitting there and any one of us ought to be able to hit it. On closer look at the text, I see at least two places where I might miss the ball.

One of those places is 1 Corinthians 12:4: “varieties of gifts.” The New Testament word translated “varieties” (or diversities or different) has its root in a word that means “contrast.” God’s gifts to us do not always look alike. Do you remember a perfume ad from years back—the perfume’s name was Charlie—that said this perfume was specifically formulated so it had a different scent for each person—remember? Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit touches each of us, but the gifts certainly hit a ball that is just sitting there waiting to be struck. But, it does not always happen that way. Sometimes the batter misses the whole thing.

This T-ball image came to mind as I began looking at this week’s text. How could one miss the ball on a text about spiritual gifts? How could one miss the ball on a text about saying “Jesus is Lord”? How could one miss the ball on a text about life in the Spirit?

The ball is just sitting there and any one of us ought to be able to hit it. On closer look at the text, I see at least two places where I might miss the ball.

One of those places is 1 Corinthians 12:4: “varieties of gifts.” The New Testament word translated “varieties” (or diversities or different) has its root in a word that means “contrast.” God’s gifts to us do not always look alike. Do you remember a perfume ad from years back—the perfume’s name was Charlie—that said this perfume was specifically formulated so it had a different scent for each person—remember? Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit touches each of us, but the gifts...
vary, even contrast. As John Wesley wrote in his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament: "Divers streams, but all from one fountain."

Another place where I might miss Paul's point is in 1 Corinthians 12:7: "demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good." Is our contemporary world, we tend to measure individualism as a higher value than community. Success is often depicted more as personal success rather than community success. Yet, Paul has challenged us to test the gifts given by the Spirit not so much by what it does for me but rather by "what it does for others."

If I avoid the emphasis Paul is making in these two verses, I might be my over-stuffed ego at work. It is so tempting to think that others are lacking if they do not have the same gifts from God as I might have. It is so tempting to think that religion ought to be judged by how it affects me. Why, how everybody comes the Bible, the Spirit might just want to change you... or me.

What Someone Else Has Said: Leonard Sweet (Me and We: God's New Social Gospel, Abing- don) wrote: "For Thomas Aqui- nas, the summit of the Spirit is simple: Does it draw us closer to- gether into unity?"

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come, Holy Spirit, renew Your gifts and grant us the signs and reality of our unity in You..."

May 24, 2015 Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, 12-13 "Gifts of Languages"

Paul lists examples of "body parts" that have been given by God: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles- worker, healers, helpers, leaders, speakers in tongues, interpreters (1 Corinthians 12:8-29). He offers other lists of such gifts in Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11. I want to take the time wondering whether not doing this might give me a particular gift, I might well fail to use the gift God has given me. If I conclude that God has not given me spiritual gifts, I have denied my baptism which brought me into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Paul gets rather graphic in making sure that all parts of the body get included in what he calls "the body." (1 Corinthians 12:22-23: the need for excrement and sexual reproduc- tion). He is not making a place for the "dis- gusted" church member into a nudist beach; but he is making clear that sometimes the most important gifts in the life of the Church are those gifts not readily seen.

What Someone Else Has Said: In Models of the Church (Doub-leday & Company), Averil Dullea writes: "There is something of a consensus of today that the innermost reality of the Church—the most important constituent of its life—is the divine self—gift...a union or communion of people (of) with one another through the grace of Christ."

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come Holy Spirit, renew Your gifts and grant us the signs and reality of our unity in You..."

May 25, 2015 Text: Acts 2, 16-17, 21-23, 44-49; 1 Corinthians 14:13-14 "Gift of Languages"

Perhaps we should try to find some other theological term to say this, but let my normal way of talking do the job: "Today is a biggest!" It is future, today is a double birthday. On the calendar of the Church, it is Pentecost Sunday. On the calendar of United Methodist Church, it is the day (May 24, 1738) of John Wesley's "strangely-warmed heart" at Aldersgate Street.

Before the events reported in Acts 2, Pentecost was one of the regular festivals of the scattered Jewish community. It celebrated God's goodness in the history of the Jewish people. The people were glad and joyful about this, though the fifty days after Passover (for the Pentecost traditions. That's why there were folks from all over the world in the church. Acts 2:5) who gathered for what they knew nothing about they would be a routine Pentecost celebration.

It was anything but routine. Often I recall the account by Alois Morgen Ward has given of a Pentecost Sunday in a church where she was pastor. There was to be a grand procession, children and youth carrying banners and flags and streamers in the bright red color of Pentecost. The group gathered at the front for its formally and or- derly march. Expectation filled the sanctuary as the opening palm procession began. One child nudged another, who in turn teased another with the banner pole, while yet another yoked socially (7) slapped a parishioner beside the head with a fluttering fabric. Soon, each child was enjoying the chocolate, but totally unexpected, delight of the walk down the aisle. It might not have been orderly, but it was very Pentecostal! God shows up in unexpected places in unexpected ways!

Chaos broke out in this room where the faithful gathered in Jerusalem. It was both a corrupting and saving experience ("wind filled the entire house—Acts 2:2) and a per- vasive liturgy ("the Spirit is speaking—Acts 2:3-4). It is like our own spiritual experience—to be both corporate and personal. The mystery was not that one understood what was being said; the mystery was that everyone did understand what was being said (Acts 2:4-6), each in the language of home.

Perhaps as the Church opens the door to new generations, we shall have to speak in a new language. May the Spirit so equip us!

What Someone Else Has Said: United Methodist campus minister at Duke, Jennifer Copeland, (Femi- ne Register, Casabe Books) has said: "Words create a world and criticizing every conventional use of language offers a starting place to examine the transformative possibilities for the proclama- tion of God's word."

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Blow fresh wind, O Spirit..."

May 31, 2015 Text: 1 Corinthians 13: "The Greatest Gift is Love"

For this text we will be familiar with it. It is sometimes that it rolls off our backs like so much shower water. It warms us up and makes us feel good, it makes us a little happy, but that's true, we will need to shower again. If our grasp of love is so temporary, why does Paul say love never fails?

In fact, I am intrigued by the various translation has rendered that verse (1 Corinthians 13:8a). The Common English Bible says "love never fails." The New Re- vised Standard Version puts it this way: "love never ends." The King James Version says "love never fails." The English Standard Version says: "love will never come to an end." How about The Message, Peterson says "love never dies." J. B. Phillips renders the verse: "love knows no limits to its endurance." Clarence Jordan (Conrad Press Version) says "love never stops." Living Bible has: "love goes on forever." "Santa Biblia has the "love never fails."" Rennes Nouvelles Au- jour'hui gives this: "Love is eternal."

Well, you get the idea. All of us—translations included—sug- gest to find the fullness of meaning what Paul has written. How- ever, don't we see plenty of evi- dence that our best efforts at love have fallen short? Don't we look no further than yesterday (or this morning) to find proof of how love has indeed come to an end?

This thirteenth chapter of 1 Corin- thians is placed here between Paul's caution not to take so serious- ly the concern of his life and the orderly march. Particularly touching in 1 Corinthians, particularly speaking in tongues (14:13), then we might understand the paradoxion to love. John Wesley says it this way: "As Starlight is lost in that of midday sun, so our present knowledge to the light of eternity."

"Love never fails" because in the ultimate scheme of things, God wins and God is love. The best we can do now is get a glimpse in a broken mirror (13:12), but in the coming fullness of God's kingdom, "I will know complete- ly the same way that I have some knowledge now of what I have come to know of love." Jesus said to pray, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." Thanks to God we when a glimpse of a loving glimpse of that unfeathered love.

What Someone Else Has Said: In his book on the theology of Charles Wesley's hymns (Praise of the God of Grace, Abingdon Press), Charles Viridyk, Jr. has written: "While both love and death may level all human distinc- tions, we affirm that love is always stronger than death. We base this conclusion on the tri- umph of God's loving purpose in the resurrection of Jesus."
Navigating the ever changing sea of media production can be a daunting task.

Let us be your guide.

Plant a Legacy through a Planned Gift to Benefit your Church

Spring is the perfect time to plant a legacy garden of “Forget Me Nots.” A planned gift given in memory of a loved one lives on. The seeds of your gifts today will be remembered through the ministries they will fund tomorrow.

Contact your United Methodist Foundation. Let us help you plan your “Forget Me Not” legacy.

Expand or build your church with a loan from UMDF.

We provide first-mortgage loans for building, expanding and renovating United Methodist churches and mission institutions.

- Loans starting at $25,000
- Amortized up to 20 years

Call us at 1-800-862-8633.
www.umdevelopmentfund.org

Every Day Grace magazine

Discover the stories that unite us in our experiences of life, and remind us where there is story, there is grace. Topics we’ll explore include health and healing, rural life, the modern family, urban life, aging, youth and so many more. To receive EDG magazine, email communications: communications@ncumc.org, with your full name and physical address.