

Remarks to the Louisiana Interchurch Conference
Annual Assembly, March 2-3, 2015

Introduction

Paul and Silas were characterized by the people at Thessalonica with the most interesting characterization; it's verse 6 of chapter 17. I want to use it as a backdrop for my remarks. At the end of the verse, the people in determining the characterization of Paul and Silas chose some interesting words.

They said, "These that have turned the world upside down have come here also." Now, that's a very interesting definition for these followers of Jesus: "These that have turned the world upside down."

Now, let me say that that's amazing. It's amazing, just the statement itself, that any man or any men could be men who so affected the world that the people said, "They're turning it upside down." That's tremendous. I mean, there are people who live their whole life and the world doesn't even know they're alive. There are people who have absolutely no effect on anything. Here were two people of whom the world said, "They've turned us upside down."

But if you think that's amazing, get this. They've only been to one other town, Philippi in Europe, and already through the events of a few days in one town; the world is convinced these men are turning it upside down. And the rumor has drifted all the way to Thessalonica, which is over a hundred miles away. When you turn the world upside down in your lifetime, that's great. When the world says, "You're turning it upside down," and you've been around a few weeks, that's outstanding.

Move 1 The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is facing several challenges within its congregations. First, demographic. We find our members who have become middle class no longer live in the communities where the church resides. New cultures and ethnic groups have migrated into the communities located near the church campus, this is most prevalent in the urban settings but also in some rural settings. This makes it difficult for the two demographics to communicate which interferes with ministry development. One has to be able to communicate and identify the needs of the demographic one serves, but since our members have grown economically and migrated from the area, they no

longer know the needs that exist within this new demographic. In many respects, they no longer understand the languages of the new population.

Secondly, we face the challenges of an aging population: security, mobility, and financial ability. Seniors do not respond to services and ministries held in the evenings, especially when crime is rampant and police security inadequate. They do not in most cases drive at night, nor do they travel alone which becomes problematic for services being rendered during times at which most of the new residents are available for outreach ministries. Similarly, seniors have more costly financial obligations, i.e. medical, children and grandchildren support, caregiving expense, home care expenses, among others. This poses a challenge for financing ministries and maintenance of edifices within the denomination.

Third, globalism. The world is no longer black or white, segregated and isolated. With the onset of the internet, international flights, supersonic transportation as well as lax immigration laws, we live in a strange, diverse place. The church has watched it happen. We find that there is the lack of consistent and denominationally lead multi-cultural efforts to build relationships and establish these type of churches which would most definitely reflect an urban setting. Clashes between middle class and low income values systems are also problematic; the notion that everyone can access the American Dream is this a myth although widely disputed by governmental and some religious officials.

Fourth, the generational gap is widening. Youth and young adults are frequently choosing to attend mega-churches or churches with modern technological and innovative methods implemented rather than the old mom and pop church of the 19th and 20th centuries. Young adults with growing families need services and training that older congregations simply can't afford to offer or don't understand how to offer. Therefore, the descendants of CME pillars of the faith are joining other denominations, or nontraditional church environments where they sense a genuine interest in their perceived needs. This naturally results in a declining membership base that in turn effects the viability of the church and the denomination.

Move 2

The response by the CME Church has been varied but consistent. For with any effort to combat such challenges one's heritage, doctrine, and values must always be considered and respected. Our response has been threefold:

First, we have begun an educational and leadership development program for both lay and clergy within our Districts. We have begun a denomination-wide educational program using a trilogy of books concerning personal spiritual growth and church growth. The first book was entitled The Essential Church by Thom Rainer. In Essential Church, Rainer developed the theology which inspired us for four years in an effort to become an essential church by reaching, teaching, training, and sending (RTTS) disciples into the world. The Bishop taught and emphasized each of these processes to help us gain clarity of focus and purpose in our regions. The next book, The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, by Robert Schnase gave us practical ways to develop these disciples into a vibrant congregation enabled them to change their church cultures. Each of these practices were taught and certain practices were implemented in our churches.

In 2015, the 4th Episcopal District CME Church began a District-wide study of the third book in this trilogy, Go Grow Your Church, by James F. Miller. This book is a natural extension of the trilogy assigned by Bishop Thomas L. Brown, Sr. This book is in large measure an extension of Schnase's book, Five Practices of a Fruitful Congregation. It gives our congregations more practical strategies we can implement to go from good to great as essential churches. The vision is clear and now we must focus, come together and act in unison as a community of faith known as Christian Methodist Episcopal determined to overcome any attack of the enemy to stifle the growth of God's kingdom among us.

Our 2015 focus from Go Grow Your Church are chapters 1-4 and 7-9. We are educating our leaders and members on strategies in Evangelism, Administration, Stewardship, Budgeting, Worship, and Personal and Congregational Spiritual Growth. We are accomplishing this on each District by developing Leadership Training Teams who will utilize these tools to certify both

lay and clergy to train this material and assist pastors with its implementation within their churches.

Second, fiscal accountability. Our denomination is shaping budgets which move from maintenance to mission. Each of our Districts have begun targeting various outreach ministries within our denomination to partner with and engage in actual hands-on outreach ministries. We have discovered it is no longer adequate to write a check to a charity. We have to as the Army says “put boots on the ground.” In so doing, we are discovering that the Holy Spirit is renewing congregational life and vitality and causing new energy around the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, church planting. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is finding ways to exploit existing opportunities to either merge declining congregations or begin congregations in areas where the population growth can sustain such an effort. We firmly believe church planting is an integral part of continued church growth and vibrancy within the denomination. This includes establishing multi-cultural and multi-ethnic congregations within our Zion. No longer can we fear those who are different; rather we must engage and embrace them with the saving message of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Our goal is to have at least one church planted in each District of the ten Episcopal Regions housed within the United States of America.

Fourth, leadership development. Our Zion has been engaged in a mentoring and coaching effort which will help us develop leaders from among our youth and young adults that will harness the vitality, energy, and savvy they bring to our denomination. Our charge is to select, train, equip, and empower our successors just as they did in the early New Testament Church. This leadership effort is done among both lay and clergy and has begun showing fruit in several Regions. As John Maxwell writes, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” Without leaders, we have nothing to manage; therefore, we feel that leadership is the key to achieving our goals and meeting the challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

Fifth, redefining the church culture. The members of our churches must change their attitude and approach concerning worship. According to George

Barna, visitors can sense when church members worship on purpose and are filled with passion for the Lord. Visitors felt that members who were on fire for Jesus could add value to their spiritual lives and so they attended and kept on attending eventually becoming members¹. (Barna, 1991) Growing churches, Barna writes, have *high quality* ministries, engaged in developing teaching and preaching based on the felt-needs of the parishioners, and crafted sermons and lessons on applying Christ's perspective to life's struggles. The Laity, Barna adds, were hands-on, active participants in the life of the church. "These active lay people, growing in the knowledge of their gifts, and being sensitized to the opportunities they had to reach a dying world, acted out of a sense of urgency. They hoped to influence others before it was too late, and they perceived time to be of the essence in ministry" (Barna, 1991, p. 108).

Finally, investment in our properties. It's time for us to modernize our campuses. We need the same technology that is offered in that child's school, college, and library located in our churches. Our children should not be taught using the latest technology in school and then come to the church and be taught using 19th century poster boards and green chalkboards. Our children, youth, and young adults find it difficult to step back in time on Sunday and experience a style of education that is foreign to them Monday thru Friday.

This means that our budgets must include line items that identify structural improvements to our churches which finance them to become internet ready and technologically proficient. Yes, it will mean developing innovative and alternative sources of funding as well as sacrifices to overhead and administrative costs. We recognize that our campuses reflect our theology about God. Therefore, we must be cognizant of the appearance of our buildings, their cleanliness, upkeep, and accessibility to the physically challenged. We must be concerned about the facility we bequeath to our children and to our children's children.

However, there is another aspect of fiscal accountability, that of endowments. Should Jesus tarry, we will need to ensure that despite changing environmental and economic circumstances our churches will be adequate to

¹ Barna, George (1991) User Friendly Churches: What Christians Need to Know About The Churches People Love to Go To. Ventura, CA: Regal Books

serve the present age. We are creating endowments based on the freewill gifts of our friends and members who include our church in their estate planning. These endowments will help us ensure the financial solubility of our churches during major generational transitions and economic upheavals.

Conclusion

We are challenged by demographics, an aging population, globalism, and a widening of the generational gap. It has been said that if the church's response to challenges are inadequate, that church will decline. However, if the response to the challenges are adequate, that church will grow. We trust that our response to these challenges via, education, fiscal accountability, church planting, leadership development, redefining our culture, and investing in our properties will be more than adequate to meet these challenges. However, we continue to yield to the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit who knows the will of God concerning us. We continued to confess the words of our Lord Christ, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." We believe that Christ not only meant the body of believers but the institutional church as well.