

Charlotte District E-Pistle

July 15, 2005

Subject: A Connectional, Collegial, and Cooperative Style of Evangelism

If you do not know where you are going, chances are you will arrive at some place you would rather not be. This truth applies to random summer vacation travel, a whimsical vocational choice, or the arbitrary activity of a local church.

Thus, I cannot restrain my enthusiasm for the seven visionary priorities articulated at this year's Annual Conference.

1. We shall intentionally relate unchurched persons to Jesus Christ.
2. We shall teach and learn biblically-based discipleship and leadership.
3. We shall nurture a unity in Christ that values diversity.
4. We shall support a bold, conference-wide mission initiative through Africa University.
5. We shall develop a ministry with the poor and suffering in our local communities.
6. We shall explore and practice the spiritual dimensions of stewardship.
7. We shall initiate efforts, supported by the laity, to shepherd the shepherds.

If we spend much time in our local churches and through the programs of the Charlotte District with matters that do not address any of these seven priorities, we are probably wasting our time and shall surely arrive at a destination we did not intend.

It is not by accident that our *numero uno* priority as an Annual Conference is **evangelism**. Unfortunately, the word has become alien to many United Methodists, especially here in the Charlotte District. And for good reason. We are a contemporary people—far from the milieu of sawdust trails and camp meeting revivals. We certainly want to distance ourselves from the corrupt legacy of Heritage Village, the excesses of the 700 Club, and the pretentious forms of *media evangelism* that have given the word a bad name. But let us reclaim our central focus: proclaiming the good news of the risen Lord. *Evangelion* was the Greek word chosen by the early church to designate the compelling story of the life, death, and triumphant resurrection of the Christ.

I am an advocate for new expressions of evangelism within the United Methodist Church—an evangelism that is connectional, collegial, and cooperative. What do I mean by these delineations?

Connectional: I encourage you to read again Bishop Claude E. Payne's *Reclaiming the Great Commission*. In this book, Claude tells the story of how the churches of his diocese in Houston, Texas, began working together with the gospel imperative of Matthew 28:18-20 and the passage's comparable narrative in the other three gospels. This became the uniting theme of his Episcopal diocese. By sharing their resources and discovering their connectional strength, the various Episcopal churches

within the Houston area set out to transform maintenance congregations into outposts for engaging in passionate mission and effective evangelism.

This is why I shall be conducting charge conferences in clusters this fall. The church ethos in Charlotte is congregational, not connectional. The result has been catastrophic. Large churches have become self-satisfied, especially if they are located in affluent neighborhoods. They have felt no real attachment or faith relationship with small churches in regions of the city that are in decline due to poverty, neglect, or social class chauvinism. In short, United Methodists have abandoned our historic connectional strength and our passion for a mission to the lower economic classes. Thus, some of our churches in the city have become irrelevant to their changing neighborhoods. Independently, these dying churches will only get smaller and disappear by default. But connectionally, we can grow the church in every sector of our district.

Witness what is happening at South Tryon Community Church as a result of its partnership with Myers Park UMC. Witness with equal amazement the revitalization of mission enthusiasm at Myers Park as a result of this partnership with the South Tryon Mission.

Collegial: Some of the clergy who serve churches along the Highway 16 corridor are implementing the concept of “shared resources.” A growing Denver UMC and little Brevard’s Chapel UMC have a joint Disciple Bible program. Other churches in this regional cluster are making sure that all segments of the Disciple series are offered each church through a cooperative parish implementation. Each pastor will take a part in the leadership of these small groups that integrate participation of laity from a variety of churches.

Richard Randolph, pastor of St. Stephen and former pastor at Spencer Memorial, is leading his congregation toward a mentoring relationship with his former parish. He was inspired by the vision of his colleague Emmanuel Morris, a local pastor with a passion for making Spencer Memorial an outpost for doing evangelism among the dispossessed of the neighborhood. When pastors view evangelism from a collegial perspective, competition evaporates and Kingdom-building becomes their priority.

Cooperative: This word brings me back to the rationale for doing cluster charge conferences. I am a firm believer in the notion that, if we keep on doing things the way we have always done them, we shall get the same results. Each year the DS arrives at your church in order to conduct some necessary business that is the result of several months’ labor: we accept the slate of officers for lay leadership, respond to apportionment askings, and receive verbal reports from key committees. We then listen to the anticipated level of wisdom that can come from the voice of the superintendent when he speaks following the presentation of reports that were actually made at the last session of the Church Council.

Well, you get the picture. It is *dejavue* all over again. And what are the results? In calendar year 2004, we had 19 churches in our Charlotte District reporting NO NEW

PROFESSIONS OF FAITH! Five additional ones reported only one or two. Many others had no new adult professions of faith—only youth confirmation classes. This does not sound like the progress report from a fellowship of believers who have placed the Great Commission as our first visionary priority.

Laboring individually, we shall get these same results every year. Cooperatively, we can become the authentic and dynamic body of Christ!

Therefore, we shall begin each Charge Conference this fall in a fellowship room with tables. At each table, we shall have persons from a variety of churches. In that context, we shall talk together about that which is primary by asking these sorts of questions: What is our church doing intentionally to relate the unchurched to Jesus Christ? What can we do collectively to assist your church in this endeavor?

Yes, we shall conduct business. How long does it take to order to record what every Church Council has already prepared through hours of preparation? Five minutes, max! Let's get on with some conversation that might change the way we shall do church in the future.

Each Charge Conference will conclude with a time of worship in the sanctuary after a productive time of envisioning our collective future. We shall devote time for celebrating the Spirit of encouragement that God so freely offers his faithful church.

I shall be asking the host church pastor of each of the ten clusters to convene a meeting in late fall or early 2006. I want represented at this follow-up session one pastor and a designated lay person (perhaps the lay leader where appropriate) from each church. Thus, in a cluster of seven churches, 14 persons will come together no later than the first of the New Year to decide upon some strategies for cooperative ministry.

Note this: the suggested procedure here is not a delegated program from top down. Neither I nor Bishop McCleskey are dictating some prefabricated program. To the contrary: we have no intention of determining what (if anything) a cluster of churches may decide to do together.

Can we reach outside our Charge Conference cluster arrangements? Sure. But be innovative, bold, and unconventional—as long as you collectively address the seven visionary priorities endorsed by our Annual Conference.

Dr. Robert Blackburn, our gifted colleague from Central, Asheville, articulated the theology of this departure from the norm when he preached at Annual Conference in June. Rob creatively described the biblical image of Christ feeding the multitude. On a hillside in Galilee, Jesus discerned **abundance** when others only saw **scarcity** among a broken, subjugated mass of peasants.

Colleagues and friends, I look upon the potential of the Charlotte District and view abundance within even the smallest of our congregations. As we unite hand and

heart, the sum will always exceed the addition of all our visible parts. This happens when we multiply the loaves and fish among a people who are connectional, collegial, cooperative, and Christ-centered.

Grace and peace,

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