

Pensacola District Conference Address

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We have the capacity to create conversations through our ability to influence and lead others. Each day in the Pensacola District we have the chance to affect our communities and shape the lives of people through our witness. How we live and how we serve can impact people in such a positive way that they are compelled to share this with others. When people talk about us, our churches begin to move from the periphery to the center. We then have a greater prominence – and a greater opportunity – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our world.

I am pleased to share today that we, the people called Methodists, here in the Pensacola District are indeed an essential part of the landscape of northwest Florida. We are 50 congregations in mission and ministry. We number 34,352 strong and growing. We are engaged in creative, vital, vibrant and fruitful ministry, serving a diverse number of contexts across Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa County, Florida, and eastern Baldwin County, Alabama. Over the past year we baptized 544 persons and welcomed 629 brothers and sisters into the life of the church by profession of faith. Even as many congregations have audited their rolls and removed hundreds of persons over the past three years, we have continued to see membership growth as a district. On a given Sunday, over 15,000 of us will be in worship

in a variety of settings and worship styles. We are charitable, continuing to increase our support of the ministry of The United Methodist Church and sharing our resources with a number of other entities in our local communities and beyond. We are resilient as well, sustained by a faith in Jesus Christ that has enabled us to preserve despite a number of obstacles that have adversely hindered ministry. The devastation caused by Hurricane Ivan, the subsequent loss of a number of residents who relocated, the compounding effect of a real estate bubble only exacerbated by a global economic recession, the horror of an oil spill in the beautiful Gulf of Mexico and the consequences of this evidenced in the dearth of tourists to our area created tremendous headwinds for our area. We still have residual impacts from this perfect storm affecting our congregations and communities. When we pause and consider that, in spite of all these things, we are as fruitful, vibrant, and as vital as we are, our response can only be “Thanks be to God!”

Creative clergy and laity have partnered together to identify the resources available in local congregations, determine the needs of your communities and bring those two together in order that ministry can take place. We have seen tremendous fruit from these efforts across our churches, regardless of the location or the size of these congregations. In our breakout sessions that will follow our conference, you will have opportunity to share your congregation’s story and hear some of the things taking place across the district in a variety of ministry areas. These conversations are designed in order that we might share “best practices” with each other, in the hopes that we can glean information from our being together that we can utilize when we return to our home churches.

My prayer is that all of our churches would be Vital Congregations. When I came to be with you all I asked a question in a variety of settings: “If your congregation ceased to exist today, would your community miss you?” In nearly every case across the Pensacola District, the answer is an unequivocal “Yes!”

Over the past two years, a team of clergy and laity from our district has been conducting an assessment of our 50 congregations to try to determine their potential for future ministry. Where leading indicators, such as worship attendance, membership, financial strength, small group and mission participation, have been in decline, this group has met with leaders from these churches to ascertain what opportunities might be available to redirect resources and reshape ministry to better meet the needs of the community. This process has been used with 4 congregations and will be used with 8 more in the upcoming years. We want all of our churches to thrive and fulfill their role in the Kingdom of God.

We have made mention of two resources we are encouraging all of our churches to utilize in an effort to remain vital. Bishop Robert Schnase’s *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* and Bishop Scott Jones’ *The Wesleyan Way* are commended to you. I hope you will utilize them in small group studies, as they have the capacity to positively impact the ministry of your church. Please see Ken Summerlin after this event and he will be more than happy to help you acquire these resources for your congregation. Additionally, the session on Spiritual Formation will give a brief overview of these materials.

A hallmark of our Methodist tradition is the belief we can do far more together than we ever could alone. Twelve miles from here, at the Soundside Campus of Gulf Breeze United

Methodist Church, we are witnessing this as over 500 young people from across our district are participating in FUSED. In its fourth year, FUSED is a collaborative work of our youth directors and volunteers, under the direction of Wayne Walker, our CORE Team Youth Ministry Representative. Today, Reverend Patrick Quinn, a product of our Pensacola District out of First UMC, Crestview, is speaking and Shake the City is leading them in a high energy worship experience. FUSED was birthed out of an information conversation in 2010 as we considered how we might have a distinctly Pensacola District event, connect our youth with one another, and in the course of an afternoon offer a preview of the Meltdown experience for those who might not otherwise make the trip to Panama City Beach.

Of course, we are a global church as well, and there is a team that will be meeting to develop a strategy for our district as we join with our brothers and sisters across the denomination on an initiative called "Imagine No Malaria." You may recall the "Nothing But Nets" campaign from several years ago, where for \$10 a protective net could be purchased that would be given to a family on the African continent that would be placed over the bedding to protect persons from mosquitoes that transmitted the deadly malaria disease. In the new year, we will renew our efforts to save lives on the African continent, and I hope that we lead the way for our Annual Conference here in the Pensacola District to make a life-saving difference for others through this campaign.

Also in January 2014, the Pensacola District will host the Southeastern Jurisdiction College of Bishops. The College of Bishops will gather, along with the Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy, and the Jurisdictional Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders. This is the

first time our conference has hosted the College of Bishops since 2005, when they gathered in Mobile. This is a rare opportunity for us. In an effort to provide radical hospitality to our guests, you will be receiving a letter requesting financial contributions from our congregations to offset some of the expenses associated with their visit. These gifts will be used to provide a meal, on behalf of the district, for the bishops, their spouses, the members of the committee on episcopacy, their spouses, and the lay leaders and their spouses during part of their time with us. There will be a need for help with transportation and perhaps some volunteers as well. I will be communicating with our pastors and congregations, particularly in the Pensacola area, on ways they can help during the bishop's visit.

Looking into 2014, I want us to continue to explore ways we can establish new faith communities. As I shared in our clergy meeting in August, while it would be great if all of our churches could reproduce themselves and establish an additional 50 congregations, the feasibility of such is not likely. However, all of our congregations can find ways to be in mission and establish new faith communities – places outside of our church walls – where we engage our context and find ways to establish small group ministry and outreach to segments of our society that are not currently involved in the life of the church. These new faith communities might emerge from existing institutional structures, such as a service to a nursing home, assisted living facility, children's home, or other type of setting. This might involve outreach to a sector of public servants, such as a fire or police department. It might be found through sponsoring a youth league team or countless other ways you and your leaders could envision.

What I would hope is that all of us are intentional about identifying a place where we extend the ministry of our church into the community in 2014.

Also in 2014, we will continue to emphasize the different practices of fruitful congregations in our district programming. In 2011 we focused on radical hospitality. In 2012 we focused on extravagant generosity. In 2013 we have focused on risk-taking mission and service. In 2014 we will focus on passionate worship. Our continuing education events will be geared toward our celebration of worship and will be announced soon. Additionally, we will ask our churches to take seriously a call to not only provide excellent worship experiences, but to teach our congregations about what it means to worship God, focusing not only the “how to’s” of worship, but the “whys” as well.

God is doing great things here in the Pensacola District. I am grateful for each one of you and for the ways you seek to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ as you lead your congregations to serve the communities of our area. I anticipate 2014 being an even better year for us. As always, we have the opportunity to create the conversations or we can be content to respond to what others are doing. I want us to create the conversations that cause those in our communities, those in this annual conference, those in this denomination, and those throughout the church universal to ask, “What is it that the United Methodist Churches in the Pensacola District are doing that we might also do to make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform this world?” We have the capacity.

Jesus said in John’s Gospel, “He who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these.” Greater things are yet to come! To God be the glory!