

Laity Address
2022 Virginia Annual Conference Session

Bishop Lewis, members of the Annual Conference, and guests:

Take a deep breath.

We have just worshiped together in-person for the first time in three years. And what a three years it has been – not just in the life of the United Methodist Church, but for each of us personally, for our families and our communities. We bring our collective grief, our exhaustion, our questions and yet, our thanksgiving for seeing one another and being the Body of Christ in this place. “*And Are We Yet Alive*” has special meaning today, doesn’t it?

Take another deep breath.

Here we are in the middle of establishing order for this Annual Conference session. I’m not going to tell you about the work of the Board of Laity; I hope you read those details on pages 81-82 of the ***Book of Reports*** before you arrived in Hampton. I’m going to share a story with you.

It was December of 1977 or ‘78 in the sanctuary of Ridgeway United Methodist Church. By my guess, Ridgeway is the southern most United Methodist Church in the Danville District, sitting about 4 miles from the Virginia/North Carolina state lines. A quiet teenager was asked to sing a solo as part of a special Advent worship series. The song came before the sermon offered by the preacher from her home church. This teenager, a few years older than Parson Lutz (Loots) – also a child of the Danville District who is filling the Lay Leader’s seat for this address, had never heard the song she was asked to sing. She practiced for weeks – trying to learn the precise notes and rhythms, to become familiar with the words of this old Advent hymn. This was a special worship service and the song had to be perfect.

Once the music began, nervousness and insecurity set in. What was sung didn’t sound anything like what had been practiced. The teenager lost her VOICE, but as she moved to sit down, totally shaken and embarrassed, she was met with words of appreciation that she knew were not deserved and a hug from her pastor that seemed to last forever. That cringeworthy moment was suddenly no longer troubling. In the days that followed, the conversation always started with “The next time you sing...” or “When you do this again....” There was never a question that there would be a next time, a new invitation, a new opportunity – hope for a better future.

To this day, the first notes of “*Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming*” cause the old teenager’s knees to tremble and her stomach to move into her throat. But the feel of that hug.... No matter what is happening in the church, no matter what tensions and anxieties are building...that hug and those words of hope that there would be a different future strengthen her for the journey ahead.

Despite personal challenges and struggles with “church,” it was the music of the church that laid the foundation of faith for this aging teenager, that offered a way for her to pray most deeply, grow spiritually, and express her faith most authentically.

But following the 2012 General Conference, the then 50-something year old lost her VOICE again. She struggled more than ever before to sing words of assurance when she had experienced a level of brokenness in her beloved church that she could never have imagined.

The hymns of joy and praise that were part of her DNA began to make her feel more sad than hope-filled, more lost than centered in her faith. Songs telling of God's vision for the church and Jesus' example of unconditional love no longer felt true.

She struggled to find a VOICE to sing. In the spring of 2014, it was silenced – by choice – until she felt that she could once again sing the songs of the church with her heart and soul, not just going through the rote motions of “being church.” Can you hear the ancient words of scripture here from Psalm 137?

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

But the feel of that hug from so many years before...No matter what was happening in the church at that moment, no matter what tensions and anxieties were building...that hug and those words of hope were still there to strengthen her for the journey ahead.

Last September, the now 60-something went back to choir practice for the first time in a different church – not just a new faith community for her personally, but a worldwide church that had gone through a global pandemic, a denomination still waiting for a General Conference gathering to answer difficult questions, a church trying to make a difference in individual lives and in communities that are hurting and divided on many fronts, a church that has changed drastically and struggles with distractions that move us away from a focus on our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The song stirring in her heart had to speak to new realities of being the Body of Christ in a world that is in a state of constant change, sometimes what seems to be a state of constant chaos.

In November while visiting a church in the Harrisonburg District, the invitation came to join in choir practice and sing during worship with a group of totally unfamiliar voices. If you could fly straight across the mountains, you'd be about 4 miles from the West Virginia/Virginia state lines.

It wasn't until this past March that she shared with a couple of fellow music ministers that her VOICE had been silent for so long and why: that struggle with not feeling that she could sing the songs of the church if they did not speak what was in her heart and soul. The next Sunday, she ended up singing a solo. The words this time came before the song and from one who had heard the pain of the struggle. The words were something like “It's God's gift, not yours. You must use it.”

The VOICE was different. To her ears, it sounded like someone else's voice. In her heart, it felt just like that of a nervous, insecure teenager standing in the front of Ridgeway United Methodist Church.

When she moved to sit down, totally shaken that this had actually happened, the one who had shared the words of affirmation reached over, gently took her hand, and held on for what seemed like forever. It wasn't a hug, but the touch of a hand – a new reality in the time of COVID - with words of hope and assurance giving strength for the journey ahead.

In conversations with the District Lay Leaders and Associates this year as part of the work of the Bishop's Work Group on Racial Reconciliation and Justice, we've shared a video of "Old Church Basement", a song written by Steven Furtick, Dante Bowe, Brandon Lake, and Chandler Moore and recorded by Elevation Worship and Maverick City in 2021. The video was used to spark conversation about how our local churches may or may not be responding to the changes in the communities around us. You may know the song. The refrain goes like this:

"So I remember when I was in that old church basement singing.
Hallelujah is all I need
When I think of your goodness and your love for me
Oh the joy of my salvation
Is coming back to me
It's just an old hallelujah with a new melody."

An old hallelujah with a new melody.

That "old hallelujah." - Our doctrinal standards are unchanged. The essentials of our faith as United Methodists are firm. The Great Commission and Greatest Commandment still guide us. And God's grace continues to cover us, even when we don't deserve it.

But oh, how we need "a new melody" if we are to be true disciples of Jesus Christ who live and extend the words of assurance that the church has to offer to today's world. As we were reminded in the Laity Session this morning: we are called to revive the movement of the Holy Spirit that unleashes each person to fulfill God's intentions.

Philosopher and theologian Howard Thurman originally published the poem, *I Will Sing a New Song*, in 1973 in the midst of ongoing national and global strife. In his work, ***Meditations of the Heart***, Thurman shared a reflection on the poem:

"I will sing a new song. As difficult as it is, I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth of my life, my mind and my spirit. I must prepare for new melodies that have never been mine before, that all that is within me may lift my voice unto God. How I love the old familiarity of the wearied melody-- how I shrink from the harsh discords of the new untried harmonies. Teach me, my Father, that I might learn with the abandonment and enthusiasm of Jesus, the fresh new accent, the untried melody, to meet the need of the untried morrow." (***Meditations of the Heart***, pps. 206-207.)

The “untried morrow” is before us. It is here and now - with all “the harsh discords of the new untried melody.” We must sing a new song! We have new invitations, new opportunities before us, but they will not be met by returning to our comfortable ways of “being church,” of singing the same song – or with fear of using our voices. The new song demands that each of us lift our voices to live as authentic followers of Jesus in this current reality in which we find ourselves. It is an old story put to verse in a new song that we have never sung before, born out of our experience and growth, born out of our questions and out of our struggles.

And we must be willing to take the hand of the one beside us, even if we disagree, even if we may not continue to walk side-by-side as we move into the future, because our journey as Christians living in this broken, harsh, but beautiful world of God’s creation requires that we commit – together - to change the world.

VOICE is my word of intention for 2022.... And yes, if you don’t know by now that old teenager is standing before you doing her best to sing a new song. One thing she knows for certain: though we don’t all sing the same notes or move to the same rhythm, though we don’t look the same or experience life the same way, though we may not see eye-to-eye on any variety subjects – we are capable of so much more together than we are when we are divided. Whether it is in a small church on the farthest boundary of the Virginia Conference or gathered together for the first time in three years, we are called to use all that is within each of us to lift our voices unto God “with a fresh new accent” to “meet the need of the untried morrow.”

Sometimes that means we have to shake off the cringe, give honor to the past but step out in faith, trusting that the Holy Spirit is equipping us for the work ahead.

(Gerald Ricks and House Band to lead a small group in “Lo, How a Rose...”)

Martha Stokes
Virginia Conference Lay Leader