

Bishop Taylor, lay and clergy members, guests, and friends of Holston Annual Conference:

I am grateful for this opportunity to address you this morning to share good news about lay ministry across Holston and to offer a word of challenge for the days that are ahead of us as a denomination. You can find the written report of the Conference Board of Lay Ministry on page 156 of the Book of Reports.

I am proud to report that the ministry of the laity in Holston Conference is strong and vibrant. Whether we are building and restoring homes, hosting Vacation Bible Schools and Camp in the Community, feeding and clothing our neighbors, caring for the poor and those living on the margins, or worshipping, studying, and growing together in congregations large and small, laypersons and our clergy sisters and brothers are constantly looking for new ways to share the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in our communities. The displays we will visit in Harrell Center this week, the reports we will hear from our mission and ministry teams during business sessions and worship services, and the testimony we will hear of some whose lives have been impacted by our efforts, bear witness to how God is at work in our midst and inviting us to join in spreading the Gospel around the world! Thanks be to God for your faithful response to the call to ministry experienced through your baptism!

I think I tell you every year that these few minutes I have to share with you are my favorite part of serving as Conference Lay Leader. Maybe, it's because I love to talk and rarely receive the gift of eight minutes, uninterrupted.

Each week when I teach Sunday School, I try to give my classes homework for the week – something to meditate on, pray about, or work through that makes Sunday's lesson applicable to life every other day of the week. I have an assignment – a challenge, really – for you; it's an invitation to join me in action for at least the next few months.

For the past couple of years, it seems like everywhere I have gone in the United Methodist Church – whether it is being with my congregation in Knoxville, or attending a gathering in another district, or traveling to a meeting in some far away place – eventually, someone asks something like, “What is going to happen to The United Methodist Church at the called General Conference in 2019?” Now, be sure that I have my thoughts, and hopes, even a few “well-if-I-

were-in-charge-here's-what-I'd-do" ideas, but here is my honest answer to that burning question. Are you ready for it? ***I don't know.***

But that is really only the first part of my answer. My PawPaw Holley used to sing an old Southern Gospel song that said, "Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand, but I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand." So, my whole answer would be: I don't know, ***but God does.***

A couple of months ago, I was at a meeting at the Conference office in Alcoa, and the conversation finally turned to the question-of-the-quadrrennium – What will happen in St. Louis next February? As it frequently does, the discussion became a mathematics exercise – if we do this, we'll lose this many – we all know how these debates play out. During a lull in our exchange, however, one of the people at the table asked a remarkable question: "What if we quit talking about how many we are likely to lose, and prayed that God would let us keep them all?" I wrote my version of the question on a sticky note at the end of that meeting: "What if all United Methodists across the connection prayed that we would not lose one person?" I have been carrying that note with me for the past two months.

I started thinking – if I don't know what will happen in 2019, but God does, is it possible that God has a plan for The United Methodist Church that does not result in division or destruction, but leads to preservation and growth? Is it possible that God is saying to The United Methodist Church, the same way he did to the exiled Jews in Jeremiah's time, "I know the plans I have for you. . .plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I started praying – every day, sometimes multiple times a day, fervently – that God will show The United Methodist Church a way forward that we will not lose a single person. I pray that God will show us God's way forward for the church. I believe that the task before us as a denomination is not to develop **A** way forward, or **MY** way forward, or even **OUR** way forward. I believe the work ahead of us is an act of spiritual discipline – to allow God to show us God's way forward, and for us to follow where God is leading.

Your homework is to join me in prayer. My challenge to you is to pray boldly, fervently, unceasingly, that God will show us a way forward that we will not lose a single person.

Understandably, some of you are skeptical – it is part of our Methodist DNA to ask questions.

Some people might say this is a ridiculous prayer, and it is foolish to pray for such a thing. To those, I respond: “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (*1 Corinthians 1:25*)

Some people might say this is an impossible prayer; there cannot possibly be a way forward that keeps us all, every single one, together. To those, I respond: “What is impossible with man is possible with God,” (*Luke 18:27*) and “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!” (*Philippians 4:13*)

Some people might say that it’s OK for a few people to leave; there are some who would be better off gone. But I remember when Jesus was teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of God, the image he used was of the shepherd leaving behind ninety-nine to go and search for the one who was separated from the flock, and the great rejoicing of all who saw that one returned to the fold.

So, I’m going to keep praying this prayer, because I am persuaded that it is God’s will that no one should be abandoned, cast away, or left behind.

My wife’s aunt and uncle are retired missionaries. After Uncle John heard me talking about my prayer for the church and its future, he sent me an e-mail to share with me a similar prayer he has been praying. In that message, he said, “Our hope is that we will all show the love of Christ for each other and reach a conclusion that will be a testimony to our faith and love for each other and the world.” I appreciated his reminder that how we treat one another is an important part of this process. The secular world watching our struggle may not ultimately care about our decisions for the future of the church, but it will certainly notice whether, in the process, we treat one another with mutual love and respect or cut each other to ribbons. As a result of Uncle John’s words, I have added a third petition to my prayer: that as we seek God’s way forward, we will show each other and the world the love of Christ.

Will you join me? Can we agree together to set aside our own plans and agendas and seek God’s way forward? Can we speak and act toward one another in ways that exhibit Christ’s sacrificial love for all the world? Can we honestly pray that God’s will be done?

I am committed to keeping up this prayer. And I believe if we will surrender this process to God's control, we will witness God's power and ability to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine.

And now to Almighty God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be all glory and honor in the church and throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen!*