

AREA EPISCOPAL ADDRESS - 2009

Southwest Texas and Rio Grande Annual Conference

Introduction

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I want to express again to you all the deep sense of gratitude Barbara and I feel as we experience together our new reality as Bishop and spouse of the San Antonio Area. Your warm reception, ready smiles, keen awareness of the presence of the risen Christ in our midst, and your overall radical hospitality confirms something we already knew: should I be elected a Bishop of the church, we hoped and prayed we would be assigned to the San Antonio Area. Barbara and I are also deeply grateful and indebted to Bishop Joel and Mrs. Raquel Martínez. Their outstanding leadership, deep love of this Area and their welcoming spirit will forever be appreciated by us both.

We feel at home, at peace, and excited to be among you. Clearly, God has called us to a season of ministry with and for you. We seek your continuing prayers, as you have ours, for our journey together. May God grant us wisdom, insight, strength, and courage. I firmly believe that our journey together will be faithful, fun, forward-looking, challenging, and productive. Almighty God has brought us to this time and place. I know that Almighty God will continue on the important journey before us.

Where we are: In need of creating a Culture of Growth

As I have moved through the Area visiting with pastors, lay leaders, and local churches, I have often used this term: a Culture of Growth. I have begun the process of asking us to think somewhat differently about what we're doing and how we're doing it. On many occasions, I've said, "I pray that we will create a Culture of Growth in the San Antonio Area."

Our Area culture reflects a shared set of values, attitudes, goals, and practices which characterizes our life together. It is my belief that our Lord Jesus Christ reflected a way of life which was dependent upon the notion that the creative work of God was not, and is not, concluded. Therefore, it is our calling as followers of Jesus to continually find ways to participate with the Holy Spirit in this ongoing creative process. Thus by the Spirit we seek to make disciples. Disciples are those who do what God calls them to do. Go where God calls them to go.

I don't believe that God is done with me, even though I sometimes wish we could rest a while. I also don't believe God is done with any one of you, regardless of your position of church leadership, length of leadership, or competence of leadership. Further, it is not conceivable to me that God is finished with either the Southwest Texas Conference or Río Grande Conference or any of our local churches or places of extension ministry.

When God is done with us, I believe we will know it quite clearly. I have yet to receive such a message. In the absence of such finality, it would seem that God can create something more out of us tomorrow than we may be today.

When the preachers were first appointed to circuits in the newly-formed Río Grande Missionary Conference (which has become the Southwest Texas Annual Conference) 150 years ago, surely they came with great expectations. Surely, when Benigno Cárdenas, a former Roman Catholic priest, defied the Catholic Bishop in Santa Fe, held public Protestant worship in the plaza, and committed himself to the Methodist Episcopal Church back in 1853...he had great expectations. Indeed, through his willingness to look forward, and similar acts of the Holy Spirit in Texas, what has become the Río Grande Conference was born.

Does our Area culture reflect values, attitudes, goals, and practices which characterize a clear commitment to submit ourselves to this continually new creation? If not, why not? By the power of the Holy Spirit, we shall be changed and renewed. If this be so, do our actions match God's ongoing work? Further, do our actions demonstrate to the world that the current reality is the only reality which exists? Or, is there more, much more out there before us?

If new leaders, younger leaders, both clergy and lay are to join us with conviction, I believe we must demonstrate to them in this Area that we are moving, growing in grace. I don't think younger leaders will want to come sit in a rocking chair on the porch and swap stories with us about the good 'ole days. I think new folks want to know where we're going, not just where we've been.

What then does the new Bishop mean when he talks about a Culture of Growth? I mean that we all re-commit ourselves to the reality that in Christ every day is a new day, that no one is forever left as they are in the ways of this world, that the church of Jesus Christ expresses this belief in all that it does and that the leaders of the church step—out, first. To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is to invite anyone and everyone to join us on a journey in faith which we do not control and which does not end with us. It is a journey of growth in grace, sanctification if you will. This journey is one we share with Christ, each other, and touches each of us and every place of ministry. It's growth. It's who we are and what we do...by God's great mercy and at God's hand.

What does it mean to be a part of a Culture of Growth? It means we acknowledge our calling, the action of the Spirit, trust that God's hand holds the future, and always, always look for the ways the Spirit is calling us and our churches to the new!

Does this mean the Bishop will demand a set percentage of growth for each of our churches in worship, membership and money? Probably not – at least not demand. But I say to you my brothers and sisters, I have yet to see a growing pastor, growing lay leader, allowing themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, which wasn't a part of a growing community of faith...growing in every way. This is what we do. It's our culture. Christ died and rose again to let us participate with Him in the newness that is ever before us.

What we do will be framed by our commitment to creating a Culture of Growth in our Area. And what about our Area? People often ask, "Well Bishop, you've been around the Area a bit now. What do you think?"

I have, frankly, been surprised by the vitality of many of our congregations and the conferences. God is doing a mighty work in many parts of the Area. From the north to the south, from the east to the west, large to small, English only and Spanish only, and everything in between there are many places where a Culture of Growth already exists. Many pastors and lay leaders are genuine disciples following the movement of the Spirit. They are preaching the good news of the Gospel. There is newness of life and churches are flourishing. Growth is occurring, both personal and corporate growth.

At the same time, I experience churches and persons who seem to believe that discipleship is a static calling whose purpose is to keep us forever the same. There are pastors, lay leaders, and churches which are not growing in any way. One can look at the statistics and begin to get an idea of our problem. Our culture in the Area is yet to be a Culture of Growth.

The good news is that God has placed us in the middle of one of the richest areas for harvest in the United States, if not the world. What a privilege. What a joy we share.

I need not dwell on the demographics. You will hear more about that later. However, just let me say that if God ever placed a people in a place for “just such a time as this,” it is us.

Our population will continue to grow for the foreseeable future. Will we? Our Area is in one of the most culturally-diverse regions of America. Are we? God has placed us in one of the most diverse socio-economic parts of the country. Are we?

Oh my friends...God has given us such room to reach out and grow! This is another time ripe for new creation, new life, and new work. Thanks be to God for placing us here! There is a distinct possibility that in the San Antonio Area, God can grow us into the church Christ sought to establish. “What a joy divine.”

A way forward: Bishop’s Commission on Area Cooperation Ministries

At a personal, local church, and extension-ministry level, we must continually examine our practices to determine their consistency with the development of a Culture of Growth. The Four Areas of Focus can help us with this task. You will hear more about them later in the conference.

What can be done at the Area level to help facilitate a Culture of Growth? Obviously, several options are before us. In addition to continuing to grow in my own personal journey, let me share with you what I intend to do to immediately begin our journey toward a Culture of Growth.

Across the Area, I regularly hear the question, “Bishop, what can we do to work better together as the body of Christ?” I think this is a relevant question relating to local churches and annual conferences. It has been my observation that we are one Area with two conferences. But we seldom act like one Area. Surely an important area of growth for us is to begin acting like one Episcopal Area. Therefore, I am:

- asking Beverly Silas, Chair of the Southwest Texas Conference Council on Ministries, and Rubén Saenz, Chair of the Common Table of the Río Grande Annual Conference to plan at least one joint meeting of their leadership groups in each of the next two years. I believe that with their strong leadership, the two bodies will become familiar with current plans, processes, and short-term goals. Thus, I believe we can begin to grow in an understanding of possible programmatic commonalities. In short, are there programs and emphases we are doing separately which could be more effective if done together?
- scheduling several joint meetings of the Río Grande Conference and Southwest Texas Conference Cabinets. The agenda will include sharing common concerns, searching for solutions to common challenges, and sharing in conversation regarding various appointive issues.
- creating the Bishop’s Commission on Area Cooperative Ministries.

The reason for this Commission is to take seriously our common purpose to make disciples as we exist as one Episcopal Area with two Annual Conferences. How can we create a common Culture of Growth, led by the Spirit, and most efficiently utilize the resources God has entrusted to us?

This Commission will begin meeting this summer and have at least four specific agenda items.

1. **Missional ministries.** With the wonderful missional work being done by some local churches and others in both conferences, can we be more effective by doing some of this work cooperatively? Are there new missional opportunities before us we could undertake together?

2. **Local church cooperation.** In the many communities in which churches from both conferences are located, are there positive models for cooperative ministries? Can we do more? Should we do more?
3. **Leadership development.** Can we facilitate growth among existing leaders and identify potential new leaders (both lay and clergy) more effectively by working together?
4. **Conference staffing.** Are there new configurations of conference staff utilization which can make both conferences more effective?

Of course other agenda items might emerge. Everything is before us as it relates to the work of the Spirit and our common desire to grow. This Commission will have a two-year life span. It will make an interim report to next year's annual conference sessions with a final report and any recommendations to the 2011 Annual Conference sessions.

In a clear recognition of our mutuality, half the Commission will be persons from the Río Grande Conference and half from Southwest Texas Conference. There will be a significant representation of current lay and clergy leaders from both conferences. There will also be significant lay and clergy representation – I hope as many as one half – from among our new and younger leadership.

Members of this Commission should be persons who:

- are open to what God is calling the church to do and be in the future
- understand the value of open deliberations
- are actively supportive of the United Methodist Church and earnestly desire to let the Spirit work through it in the future
- are listened to when they speak
- are willing to put some time and energy, work and prayer into the Commission
- are comfortable discussing ideas and excited about the possibilities of growth and newness through the church

I encourage your input regarding persons to serve on this Commission. It will be large enough to ensure adequate representation and diversity. It will be small enough to effectively be engaged in dialogue and decision-making. I intend to participate fully, but the Commission will be co-chaired by persons from each conference.

Of course, I'm aware that only 60% of the Río Grande Conference churches are located within the bounds of the San Antonio Area. Nonetheless, our calling requires us to begin the creation of a culture of growth in Christ somewhere...and that's here, for now. I've already begun conversations with the Bishops of other areas. More will follow. The insights we receive from the Spirit will flow over into others. I believe the work of this Commission, bathed in our prayers and empowered by the Holy Spirit, can set a growth agenda for us all which will lead us faithfully into God's future.

Conclusion

My friends, make no mistake. I am calling you, me, and all our places of ministry to look forward, through the eyes of Christ. Too often we get concerned about saving the church, or a church, rather than saving souls. A soul saved by the amazing grace of God in Christ Jesus is the beginning of true discipleship and the journey of sanctification. I expect all our practices, our culture, to lead us in this direction.

Dr. Leonard Sweet has written an intriguing new book entitled So Beautiful. His contention is that the 21st century calls for what he describes as an MRI church. Missional, Relational and Incarnational. He calls us to be Missionaries, Disciples, and World-changers rather than who we currently seem to be: Members, Believers, and Consumers. He calls his MRI program the original operating system of the Christian faith. Missional, Relational, Incarnational.

Sweet's book is intriguing because I like it. I agree with a great deal of it. I'll tell you why. Listen to this shaping of our calling from Part I of his book:

"If there were 'just one word' the church needs to hear today, it is the one you will hear in a variety of ways throughout this book: MISSION. God is a God of motion, of movement, of mission. Or, as is it is popular nowadays to say, 'two-thirds of the word GOD is GO.'

Mission is not an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. Jesus is a missionary Messiah, and the Spirit is a missionary Spirit. Missions is the family business. God has made you for a mission and has a design whereby you can accomplish who you were born to be.. God doesn't just have an agenda for you to do; God has a mission for you to live."

Brothers and sisters, now is the time to talk openly, honestly, clearly, and often about the "M" word. The "M" word before us all and our annual conferences is not "Merger," but "Mission." Only God knows where we are headed in our shared ministry. Everything is always on the table. Where the Spirit leads us is up to the Spirit. We do know our mission, and we must never be distracted from it. Our mission is to offer Christ, personally and corporately. Our purpose then is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

As the San Antonio Area we are, indeed, one family with two distinct expressions. Now is the time to call ourselves, our churches and our conferences in a commitment to the commonness of our task. God has placed us here to share together in the family business. The world around us is waiting. People are physically and spiritually dying to see what we shall do. There is no doubt in my mind that God will grow us into what God needs, if we are but open and available. What glorious possibilities are before us as we serve the present age.

Pope John XXIII was fond of saying, "We are not here on earth as museum keepers but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life." May we share in the growth God has for us. It is my highest honor and deepest privilege to join you on the way. Let's get started. AMEN.