

Report of Dean of the Cabinet
Rev. William Haggard
Michigan Annual Conference ~ June 3, 2018
Jeremiah 32:1-10

Bishop, colleague superintendents, clergy and laity of the Michigan Annual Conference, guests; I am grateful today for this opportunity to share with you. I have been incredibly blessed to serve these past six years with two wonderful Bishops and to work alongside incredibly talented and grace filled superintendents. I have been honored to work with the clergy and laity of the Grand Rapids and Heartland Districts and to be a part of the incredible ministry that is happening all across our state. I am genuinely thankful for these six years.

I want to begin this morning by taking you back about 30 years to a warm fall afternoon. I was flying home to Michigan from an event in Texas and I had a several hour layover in Cincinnati. My sister lived there at the time and she came to the airport so we could have an hour or two to visit before my flight home. My sister worked as a level 5 Administrative Assistant for General Motors in those days, and as we caught up on family and other issues, our conversation shifted to her work. She began talking about the struggles GM was facing with the influx of foreign competition from Honda and Toyota and as we talked I had something of an epiphany. It struck me, as I listened to my sister describe the current business situation in her company, that **the auto industry and the church had done exactly the same thing.** Both of us had made the same significant miscalculation. Both GM and the Church had looked at the realities of the 1950s and 1960s and assumed throughout the 1970s and then into the 1980s that the same realities that had been present then would simply continue into the future. GM, it seemed to me, had taken the attitude, “where else are they going to buy cars?” so it allowed, in too many cases quality and innovation to slide.

The church, often ignoring what was happening in the culture around us, assumed that people would just keep coming as they always had whether we paid attention or sought to be relevant or not. And year by year we continued these patterns and both the church and the car companies saw a consistent and continual decline. We of the church in many places, behaved in ways that exacerbated our situation in the years following. We fought vehemently the changes that, had we made them back then, could have created a difference situation today. For decades we fought worship wars and resisted the multitude of prophets who wrote books telling us to get out beyond our enclaves and make a difference in world. We continued to delude ourselves into believing that the old pattern of United Methodist's moving from Lansing to Detroit finding a United Methodist church there and serving on three committees, would not change even as Brand loyalty continued to be a thing of the past. And so we have, over every one of the 38 years I have been in ordained ministry, watched as our churches and our Annual Conferences have declined. We've watched as the average age of United Methodist's has risen year by year. We've watched as young people have looked on with amazement and disbelief at both the things that we were willing to die for and the things we didn't seem to care about at all. And they have drifted away. And as we sit here this morning we are awaiting with significant levels of anxiety and uncertainty the special General Conference meeting next February to try to find a "Way Forward" as we deal with our 46 year old struggle over human sexuality.

These friends, are challenging days!

They are times perhaps not so much dissimilar, to the days Judah faced in the Scripture that was read just a few moments ago. While we don't have time to delve deeply into this text, let me remind us basically what's going on. Judah is under siege. Babylon is just about to finish off the southern kingdom and take the best and the brightest into captivity. Jerimiah who clearly sees what's coming is being pressured by a relative to follow the custom and the law and buy from him a piece of land that within

a very short time will be property of the Babylonians. My image for this scene is a guy trying to unload his beach front property just before the tsunami hits! If we had been Jeremiah we probably would have said, “nice try” but get lost. But that’s not what Jeremiah does. Instead he takes great pains to be sure the sale is recorded properly and the deed kept safe. Why? Because Jeremiah has faith. Jeremiah believes that just because the Babylonians are at the door doesn’t mean it’s over. Just because they have made mistakes and it feels like God is far away doesn’t mean that God is. Jeremiah looked forward, beyond the challenges of the present moment, and he did so with hope and aspiration. I like that.

And as I thought about it, **I think it’s maybe a little bit like starting a new Annual Conference when you have been in decline for decades and you don’t have any idea what’s going to happen come next February.** It’s a step of faith. It’s a step of faith that says we’re moving forward. We’re engaging the mission anyway, because we know, as so many have said this week, we have work to do! We’re going to create a new Conference who’s vision and mission is the creation Christ Centered Mission and Ministries, Bold Effective Leaders, and Vibrant Congregations because we know that’s what’s needed and we believe it’s what God is calling us to be and to do. We’re not going to wait and see, we’re going to engage our faith and move into the future with a confidence that whatever is decided at General Conference, whatever struggles we may continue to face there’s a place for all of us in our calling to embrace the task of loving our neighbors and building the Kingdom of God on earth even as it is in heaven.

The car companies came back. A new normal settled in to be sure. Things were not the same. Market share shifted, and partnerships were formed. But they adapted, and they have products that are competitive and even superior because they chose to move beyond old patterns, beyond the assumptions, even beyond the mistakes of the past in order to reach forward into a positive new reality.

And friend we are moving in that same direction as the church. In order to get there, we'll have to do some things and we'll need to let go of some things. After serving six years as a Superintendent I am convinced that one thing we will have to do is let go our addiction to our buildings. You know one of the lessons the Jewish exiles learned in captivity was that God wasn't in the Temple. They discovered, much to their surprise, that they could find God wherever they were, IF they sought and served God. We need a similar revelation in our day as well.

We'll have to welcome change. We'll have to imagine things we've never imagined before. We'll have to allow ourselves to dream and allow God to show us what the church might be, could look like, as we seek to follow God into our communities in this constantly shifting culture we live in.

But here's what I believe....we can do it! We really can. And we know how to do it! We have been talking about it all week. We have heard at least a hundred ideas this week about how to do. The question is, as Naomi put it to us yesterday are we willing? It's not a knowledge issue is it? It's a heart issue.

Yes, we are in a challenging place. But we have been here before and we have been led through to good places of hope and life.

So here's what I propose: Let's purchase and register that land. Let's engage this new Annual Conference and all the new possibilities God puts before us with hope and faith. Though it may feel sometimes like the Babylonians are at the door, let us defiantly proclaim that there is a future for us. A future filled with mission and meaning. And may we enter that future with faith, with energy, with everything we've got, as Bishop and Cabinet, as the Directors Table, as 9 Districts and 880 Churches, as Laity and Clergy, as sisters and brothers in Christ; as the Michigan Annual Conference. Thanks be to God.
Amen.