

2020 Postponed General Conference Laity Address

Thursday, April 25, 2024

8:45 am – 9:30 am (30 minutes)

Introduction: Introduction of AACLL Executive Committee (2 minutes)

LaToya Thompson:

Hello. My name is LaToya Redd Thompson, and I am proud to be the President of the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders, the AACLL we call it. I am also the Conference Lay Leader of the Mississippi Annual Conference. I would like to acknowledge the rest of our AACLL executive committee.

[[slide of executive committee names, titles and conference/agency]]

Micheal Pope is the Vice President of the AACLL and the Conference Lay Leader of the California-Nevada Annual Conference.

Jennifer Swann is the AACLL Secretary and Conference Lay Leader for the Louisiana Annual Conference.

John Hall is the AACLL Treasurer and Conference Lay Leader of the North Carolina Annual Conference.

Mele Maka is an AACLL Executive committee member-at-large and Conference Lay Leader for the California-Pacific Annual Conference.

Rich Huguen is also an at-large member for the AACLL Executive committee and serves as Conference Lay Leader for the New England Annual Conference.

Margaret Borgen is the the AACLL Nominations Committee Chair and Conference Lay Leader for the Iowa Annual Conference.

Nancy Tam Davis is the Past President of the AACLL and Conference Lay Leader for the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference.

Dr. Herman Totten is the President of the Conference Directors of Lay Servant Ministries and former Lay Servant Ministries Director for the North Texas Annual Conference.

David Teel is the Director of Laity and Leadership and staff liaison with Discipleship Ministries for the AACLL and the executive committee.

Introduction: Paragraph 127 (1 minute)

The central purpose of the AACLL is to enable and equip lay ministry. Accordingly, the Ministry of the Laity is the lens from which the AACLL makes decisions and plans

programming. Paragraph 127 of the 2016 United Methodist Book of Discipline, titled *the Ministry of the Laity*, states:

John Hall:

The ministry of the laity flows from a commitment to Christ's outreaching love. Lay members of The United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Jennifer Swann:

Every layperson is called to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20); every layperson is called to be missional.

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Mele Maka:

The witness of the laity, their Christ-like examples of everyday living as well as the sharing of their own faith experiences of the gospel, is the primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Christ and The United Methodist Church will fulfill its mission.

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Introduction: Ephesians 3:14-21 and Intro to Jack Corn (2 minutes)

Micheal Pope:

The Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders focuses its efforts to amplify this witness based on a quadrennial theme. For the 2025-2028 quadrennium, we felt led as a body to guide ourselves under the theme of *Together By Grace*. The scripture for that theme is Ephesians 3:14 – 21 (NRSVUE or CEB)

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This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

These passages coupled – paragraph 127 of the *Book of Discipline* and Ephesians 3:14 – 21 – are our guiding posts for the next quadrennium of the AACLL. The passages led us to ask ourselves three questions: How do we start together by grace? How are we remaining together by grace? How do we go forward together by grace? [[SLIDE]]

Jack Corn, a Methodist lay person and retired photojournalist for the Tennessean lived his witness through the lens of a camera. Listen to how he became a witness to grace and a disciple in the marketplace.

[VIDEO: Jack Corn (8:41)]

Jack Corn reminds us that we “the people called Methodists” can begin to answer our “how” questions by becoming active witnesses: *Being there* to witness the stories of our siblings; *Seeing there* by embracing the spirit of Jesus when we observe and shed light on the stories; and we live into our faith by *Gathering others* to bring care to every place that needs it. We answer the questions by revisiting our start.

[add this SLIDE quote from the video. No one speaks it, it's just on the screen]]

My work is a witness and it's a witness of what you see – and then what you did about it.
-photojournalist, Jack Corn

Question 1: How did we start together by Grace?

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LaToya Thompson:

How did we start together by grace? At our Fall 2023 AACLL gathering, the General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History Dr. Ashley Boggan spoke to our AACLL membership about lay ministry in our Wesleyan History.

Secretary Boggan describes Susanna Wesley, John Wesley’s mother, as rebellious, skeptical, strong-willed and influential on her 19 children, including John and Charles. When John was 8 or 9 years old, his mother, Susanna held home services where she preached after Sunday worship while her husband Samuel was out of town fulfilling his priestly duties in the Church of England. Her audience grew to over 200 in her kitchen (and outside leaning in) each Sunday as many preferred her teaching and exhortation to official parish services.

John Wesley learned from his mother and her active lay witness that being where the people are, seeing the people, and gathering the people can require unconventional and even unsanctioned actions. Susanna embodied the open minds, open hearts, open doors slogan. She also taught John to focus on spreading God’s love to those who need it by being open-minded, spirit-led, and need-led over being acceptable, standard, and the ‘typical’ church of the time.

John Wesley’s younger brother, Charles, was also profoundly impacted by their mother as well as by another lay witness. Charles converted from High Church to Evangelical Christianity on May 21, 1738, when a lay woman called Mrs. Turner stood outside a gravely ill Charles Wesley’s door and said “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.” **[SLIDE “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.” -Mrs Turner]]**

Charles believed and was healed. Mrs. Turner was **tuned-in to** the Spirit's call – and because she was, a 30 year-old cleric, poet, and musician, Charles Wesley, was **healed** and **freed**.

On the one-year anniversary of Charles Wesley's conversion, May 21, 1739, he wrote an 18-stanza poem that became the first song in almost every Methodist hymnal for 250 years. It was called "**On the Occasion of My Conversion**." Today we know it as "**Oh for a thousand tongues**" – from the first words of the 7th stanza.

Charles Wesley said to himself, "Oh that Christ would ... speak thus to me." He decided to trust that this lay woman's voice was the very voice of God. And he was healed and believed, rising up with confidence in God's love and pardon.

Mrs. Turner was **tuned-in to** the Spirit's call – and because she was, a 30 year-old cleric, poet, and musician, Charles Wesley, was **healed** and **freed**.

How did we start together by grace? We started as a movement spurred by two men inspired by two lay women (and many more). Those two lay witnesses were active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of them, we, 'the people called Methodists,' started as a radical, and maybe even rebellious, answer to God's call to fulfill the Great Commission, a call that the Wesley brothers recognized is issued to lay and clergy alike.

Question 2: How are we remaining together by Grace?

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Micheal Pope:

How are we remaining together by Grace? Since we last met as a General Conference, we have been living through a time of transition and transformation. COVID eased into our consciousness and became a pandemic that closed the doors of churches and halted our traditional ministries. The pandemic required laity and clergy to learn and embrace Zoom! Don't we all wish we had invested in Zoom stock today. Some of us we were not allowed to witness the loss of family, friends, and neighbors. COVID prevented this, causing greater isolation that has developed into a mental health crisis. The economy, homelessness, wars, gun violence, and other things remind us that the world needs the love of Christ more than ever.

As 'the people called Methodists,' we braced ourselves for the disaffiliations that have taken place to date. Many of us witnessed the departure of our siblings who we once worshipped with and performed ministry with. We mourn lost connectional life while we anticipate an outcome for our time together here in Charlotte that allows all of us to become like Jack Corn, disciples in the marketplace, revived by our witness to beautiful, diverse lives. Together by grace means our decisions as the people called Methodist will impact our current reality, creating a legacy that embraces our youth and young adults while also joyfully caring for those of us that are aging.

“How do we remain together by Grace?”...In the California-Nevada conference we have seen laity and clergy working together to share the love of Christ through ministries that are reaching out to the brokenness in the lives of so many people living in the Northern California and Nevada context.

We’ve seen a Certified Lay Ministry and LSM program grow, filled with laity that long to partner with clergy as together they witness the power the Holy Spirit, when all live into the freedom that grace provides.

Our ethnic ministries have contributed to the translation of the Lay Servant courses being offered through Discipleship Ministries. The partnership between the Lay Leadership Development Board, Conference staff, laity and clergy has created an environment of love that is not perfect but is fueling love.

The Cal/Nevada conference is one the most diverse conferences in the U.S., with 200 diverse languages being spoken, creating an opportunity to embrace anew the kingdom of God. A big shout out to our Tongan siblings who stepped up by translating the Lay Speaker and Certified Lay Minister curriculum into Tongan. When we work together the impossible becomes possible, and we begin to see the “kingdom” manifested in every neighborhood, whether urban or rural. We remain together by truly seeing each other as siblings and shedding light on each other’s lives. We remain together by sharing our stories. We remain together by living into a future that witnesses something new.

Question 2: How are we remaining together by Grace?

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LaToya Thompson:

We remain together by fortifying our witness. The Mississippi Annual Conference, like many, has experienced great loss over this quadrennium. In one quadrennium, the number of local churches decreased by almost half. COVID-19, a growing cultural apathy and disinterest concerning traditional religion, and of course, the dreaded d-word, disaffiliation, are just a few of the things that we, ‘the people called Methodists,’ have faced.

I struggled at times, along with my husband, a local pastor, as part of a small crew doing live streamed worship services for well over a year in 2020 and 2021, missing the interaction with and feedback from the congregants alongside whom we had grown so accustomed to worshipping with in person.

We also lost 6 members of our Board of Laity over the last quadrennium as they left with their churches. The church where I had my membership for over ten years left December 31, 2023. The grief from affirming the separation of each church at annual conference session as well as saying good-bye to my own church in person was unfathomable.

But there is something quite resilient about ‘the people called Methodists.’ One of my board of laity members, a district lay leader whose church chose to disaffiliate, asked Bishop Sharma Lewis, on a board of laity call, “Bishop, my church has left, but I’m staying. What are you going to do for people like me, Bishop?”

Bishop Lewis, never one to shy away from a challenge, responded, “Sarah, I think we have something for you.” She explained the concept of lighthouse churches and how the Mississippi Conference was creating and supporting ministries for persons who choose to stay United Methodist.

Dr. Sarah Sanders, the district lay leader who asked Bishop Lewis the question, not only *found* a lighthouse church, she *founded* a lighthouse church as well. Starting with a nucleus group of 7, like a Wesleyan Band, they began meeting and having worship services in the Spring of 2023. As Methodists, grateful to God for providing a way for them to remain together by grace, they decided to name their new church “Grace United Methodist Church.” They acquired a regular meeting space and more than doubled their weekly attendance, with more people joining their numbers, people looking for fresh ways to remain together with grace.

To date, the Mississippi Conference has trained and certified 14 lighthouse churches for those who want to remain United Methodist. Five of these churches are new church plants started by displaced church members.

In Mississippi, these are just a couple of examples of how we continue to fortify our witness, ‘together by grace.’

Question 3: How do we go forward together by Grace?

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Micheal Pope:

How do we go forward together by Grace? This is a hard question, but we can do hard things. We answer it best when we engage in holy conferencing and decision making that allows us to bring our faith to the brokenness of the world. We do this by forgiving ourselves and forgiving those around us. We ‘the people called Methodists’ are being guided into a future where we see each other as a valuable creation. The Holy Spirit is moving us to live from the inside out! We do that by asking “how can I/we walk alongside my/our siblings”? How do I/we honor the multiple thoughts which enrich our spiritual journey together? We let go siblings of our guilt and judgement by being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19). Together as laity and clergy we are asked to build the bridges! WE do this by remaining grounded in our faith by sharing the LOVE of Christ in every circle where we show up.

One my favorite movies is “Finding Nemo”. In this animated movie a fish named Nemo gets caught in a net with other fish. All the fish are scared and frantically swimming in different

directions, making it easier for them to be part of the catch. Nemo recognizes that the must work together to save their lives. He shouts to them to swim in the same direction, which they do. The weight of them swimming together breaks the crane holding the net and they are set free. Siblings, ‘together by grace’ we swim together in hope and love to create the spiritual freedom that promotes curiosity, imagination, forgiveness, and love. May God’s will be done as we build a new church that is filled with transformative ministries that bring the Love of Jesus to the brokenness of the world.

Question 3: How do we go forward together by grace?

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LaToya Thompson:

‘Together by grace,’ we swim to freedom and to a new transformative church, my sister said. ‘Together by grace,’ even if smaller than before, we are victorious. In Judges 7, the story of Gideon’s army, we learn that **we serve a God who delights in showing his power by doing much with little.** Gideon’s army went from tens of thousands down to 10,000 down to 300 against countless Midianites and Amalekites. God used a remnant to battle the enemies of a faithful people in radical and even unorthodox ways. God used a few to make a fantastic impact. And God will do the same with ‘the people called Methodists.’

‘Together by grace,’ we remember that **nothing is impossible for God.** In Genesis 18:14 (NIV), God’s word to Abraham and Sarah about having a baby at 90, was “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” In Luke 1:37, God told Mary that he would give her a child as a virgin and give her cousin Elizabeth a baby in her old age. I believe God will bring new birth from the difficult and seemingly ‘dying’ circumstances with which we wrestle. And God is always working to use us to bring forth the fruit he promises us.

Not only is nothing impossible for God, but ‘together by grace,’ with faith, nothing is impossible for US. In Matthew 17:20, a boy with a demon came to the disciples for healing, but they could not cure him. Jesus told the disciples, his witnesses, if you have the faith, nothing will be impossible for YOU. As disciples of Jesus Christ, Jesus wants us to receive His resurrection power and use it! He expects us, his disciples, to perform miracles because we can!

Finally, together by grace, let us hear God’s call to be lay witnesses and believe it. To be there and shed light on life – and gather others to see and care, too. Paragraph 127 of the Book of Discipline says lay persons by history and calling are to be **active advocates of Jesus Christ.** To the ‘Ephesians 3:20-21 God’ who can do more than we can ask or imagine, may we pray our wildest dreams, dreams of loving one another, loving the communities we serve, loving God, leading the whole world to having their hearts strangely warmed, and let us watch him, ‘together by grace,’ help us to make disciples of Jesus Christ all over this world, disciples who will transform our culture and our society to be one on fire for God.

How do we go forward **together by grace?**

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Time	Section	Speaker
2 min	Introduction of AACLL Executive Committee	LaToya Thompson
1 min	Introduction: BOD Paragraph 127	LaToya Thompson John Hall Jennifer Swann Mele Maka
2 min	Introduction: Ephesians 3:14-21 and Intro to Jack Corn	Micheal Pope
7 min	Jack Corn video and commentary	Micheal Pope
3 min	How did we start together by grace?	LaToya Thompson
3 min	How are we remaining together by grace?	Micheal Pope
3 min	How are we remaining together by grace?	LaToya Thompson
3 min	How do we go forward together by grace?	Micheal Pope
3 min	How do we go forward together by grace?	LaToya Thompson
27 min	Total Time	