

## **Offer Them Hope**

Psalm 62:1-8

Romans 15:13

The Rev. Dr. Sudarshana Devadhar, Resident Bishop of the Boston Area

Friends, I greet you in the precious name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is a joy and a privilege for me to address you for the third time as your Episcopal leader. My wife, Prema, joins me in celebrating all of you: your faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, your constancy, your independence and your generosity in our "Imagine No Malaria" campaign. We are indeed grateful to each and every one of you for your participation in this journey and for saving over 8,500 lives thus far. It is my hope that we can save another 6,500 lives by the 2016 Annual Conference. May I request that you go back to your local churches with a challenge to everyone to dedicate leftover change from their pockets throughout the year to a special Pentecost offering next spring for Imagine No Malaria? Bring your checks for the total change collected to the 2016 Annual Conference earmarked for the campaign. Let us strive for the finish line with hope and enthusiasm.

Now, permit me to share with you the first eight verses of Psalm 62, one of two Scripture passages on which this address is based:

For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.

<sup>2</sup> He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

<sup>3</sup> How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

<sup>4</sup> Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.  
They take pleasure in falsehood;  
they bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse.

<sup>5</sup> For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from him.

<sup>6</sup> He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup> On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup> Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us.

Tonight, I want to share with you some challenging data that comes to us through the research of the Barna Group, an evangelical Christian polling firm. I want to counter Barna's "bad news," though, with the good news we find in Jesus Christ. I want to invite you to consider suggestions for a way forward for those of us engaged in ministry in New England despite the picture the Barna Group paints as we lift up the Circle of Hope of which we are all a part and the *hope* we offer the world through our faith in Jesus Christ.

You have all heard “good news/bad news” jokes. I am not a good joke-teller, so bear with me.

Here is one for Pastors: The Good News is that the UMW voted to send you a “Get Well Card.” The bad news? The vote was 15-14!

The Good news: Your Board of Trustees finally voted to add more church parking. The bad news: they are going to pave the front lawn of the parsonage!

The good news: This year’s Episcopal Address is 20 minutes shorter than last year’s. The bad news: I forgot my watch!

### *An Increasingly Churchless environment*

I begin with this version of “good news/bad news” in light of my reading of George Barna’s and David Kinnaman’s book, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*.<sup>1</sup> I highly recommend that every church in our Conference read this important book. They paint a challenging picture of the reality of the Church in the United States and offer new approaches to help us face this reality.

The good news is that 4 out of 10 young adults, a group Barna calls *nomads*, still refer to themselves as Christian. The bad news is that they are disengaged from the Church. They are trying out a variety of pathways in life with an emphasis on “experiences and relationships rather than on truth and restraint.”<sup>2</sup>

The good news is many young adults, a group Barna calls *exiles*, are not anti-Christian or even anti-Church. The bad news is that *exiles* “feel lost between church culture and the wider culture.”<sup>3</sup> They perceive that they do not fit into the typical patterns that churches expect or support.

The good news is that one out of nine young adults did accept Christianity at one time. The bad news is that this group, whom Barna calls *prodigals*, has dropped out of the church altogether because they no longer accept Christianity. Barna’s research indicates that a small minority of these prodigals may return to the church at some time, but not for many years.<sup>4</sup>

The upshot of all this research is that the normal thing among young people is to be churchless. In fact, 70% of young people are churchless.

The good news is that our New England United Methodist culture and identity doesn’t fit with all of the generalized caricature of the Church that Barna describes. They are writing about the Christian Church in general. Even better news is that Methodists have the highest favorability rating from young people amongst all mainline denominations. The bad news is that we get painted with the same brush as other churches and that *some* of what Barna reports is as true for

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna and David Kinnaman, General editors. *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Barna, an Imprint of Tyndale Momentum, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.93

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

us as it is for other churches.

Again, I encourage you to read this book in small groups in your church and discern what rings true for you. I also encourage our churches to read three other books this year as we move forward together as an Annual Conference: *Forty Days with the Holy Spirit* by Jack Levison (Paraclete Press, 2015); *Celebrating God's Love: Living into Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships* by Don Messer (Abingdon, 2015); and *Foundations: An Introduction to Christian Practices* by Phil Maynard (EMC3 Coaching, 2014).

We need to know about the challenging context of the Church in today's world - especially as we relate to younger people. We also need to discover a way forward that fits our context and identity as people called United Methodists in New England.

If the thesis of Barna's latest book is that the U.S. is fast becoming "churchless," then our antithesis to this notion must be that we have a relevant message and the means to offer people Jesus in new and exciting ways in order to give people hope. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13 NSRV). We are called to be people who abound in hope powered by the Holy Spirit.

The relevant question for us now is, "How do we offer hope to the people of New England today?"

I invite you to consider with me some suggested ways forward.

1. We offer hope *by offering Jesus in new and compelling ways.*

The good news is that the findings of the Barna Group are not all bad news. In fact, we live in an extraordinary time of great possibilities when we can fulfill the vision of John and Charles Wesley to bring real Christianity. Regardless of what the Barna Group says, according to the 2014 statistics of the New England Conference, 25% of our churches are growing! This is indeed good news.

In order to build upon that good news, we want to ensure that all our churches are equipped with deeply spiritual and gifted leaders who can continue to steer us into a vital future filled with hope. I am grateful to the General Council on Finance and Administration for auditing our fiscal, property, program, and administrative services last fall. This is a great example of our mission shares at work - to have their expertise in advising our Conference leadership. Among their findings was that we have duplication of programs with too many silos and groups doing the same things. We need to address this and make sure we are all moving together for the glory of God.

We need to respond to the challenge of bringing inclusive and gifted leadership into the next quadrennium. I have approached the General Secretary of the Commission on Religion and Race to train us as a Conference, so our Nominating Committee is fully equipped in *appreciative inquiry*, bringing the best of our people from all around the Conference to assure the gifts and graces of our clergy and parishioners are fully utilized.

In moving forward in this arena, friends, I promise you as your Episcopal leader that I am not interested in power control, but rather, am fully vested in bringing the best into our leadership at the Conference level to lead us into a new day of ministry and mission.

I am also concerned that our spiritual leaders be supported in their work. I was deeply saddened this year to learn of a pastor serving in this Conference who had to apply for food stamps to feed his family. While this is an extreme, I am concerned there may be other pastors and lay employees in similar situations and hope we can care for them as they live out their call.

Studies have found that one of the top contributing factors leading to the poor health of clergy in this country is financial stress due to debt, low income, and little savings. Good financial health is a Wesleyan value (as we heard in the historical questions to our new ordinands this afternoon, concerning whether or not they are in debt). Consequently, I encourage us to ensure that we adequately support our clergy families. Just as most laity can expect an annual review and assessment of annual salary, including adjustments for cost of living and merit increases, it is important for our congregations to do the same for their pastors and staff. In addition to a fair wage, pastors and staff should expect to have the costs of their ministry properly reimbursed, including support for continuing education. If housing is provided, careful attention to the conditions of the parsonage should ensure that the pastor and family are living in safe and comfortable accommodations. As the costs of our health care co-pays continue to rise, the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by our pastors mean a decrease in their take-home pay. Spiritual leaders are often reluctant to address compensation matters, including the condition of their parsonages, so it is very important for the SPRC to serve as their advocates in these matters.

Of course, it is equally important for us to expect our pastors to be faithful to their call and show fruitfulness in ministry. Accountability for this is the responsibility of the SPRC, the District Superintendent, the Bishop, and the Board of Ordained Ministry, in partnership. Our Conference Commission on Equitable Compensation develops guidelines each year for minimum salaries, and I encourage you to use these as a starting point to build upon when establishing the compensation package for your pastor.

When we have gifted, empowered, and supported leadership, we will be better able to discover and act upon new and creative ways to introduce Jesus to a churchless culture.

Friends, as a servant of Jesus Christ in ministry with you, I am not anxious by all the “churchless culture” conversations. I firmly believe that God is calling us to do a new thing. This new thing is not about how to save the institutional Church, but about boldly inviting our brothers and sisters to participate in the extension work of the Reign of God, Realm of God, or Kingdom of God in our communities, nation, and world. It is fascinating, stimulating, and challenging to hear these transformational stories about extending the Reign of God and inviting others to take part in it. It is already happening in many places across our Conference. May I share a couple of them with you tonight?

Several youth members of one of our churches were on a state leadership convention trip. At the end of the day, as they were relaxing from their activities with a late night pizza, one of the team members, also an active youth in this church, found the Gideon Bible in the room and invited

friends to join in a Bible study in the hotel room as they ate their pizza. Afterward they placed the following post on Facebook:

*"Nothing like a pizza bible study in our hotel room at 11PM led by our team member."*

While all of the other students were out "cutting-up" at this state leadership convention, our youth were finding peace, fellowship, and refreshment in His Word.

The rest is history...two of the boys who joined this Bible study started coming to this church.

In another place, a part-time pastor, appointed to a particular church a few years ago, doubled the worship attendance. While I was visiting this church, the pastor encouraged me to visit with the principal of the school and pray with him because of a couple of recent student deaths. Exiting the office after the pastor and I had prayed with the principal, we encountered a police detective who greeted the pastor with a hug. The pastor's witness in the community was very evident.

Elsewhere, in yet another one of our churches, a high school student decided to serve as a guitarist to the worship service. When I asked this teenage girl why she would do this, her answer to me was something like this, "I was raised in a Christian family, but we have not been participants in any church. My teacher invited me to come to the worship service here. I was touched by the ministry of the church to the homeless, so I decided to offer my services to the church through my music."

Friends, God is doing a new thing in our churches. Yes, we may live in a "de-churched area," but the Lord is offering us plenty of opportunities to invite others to partake in the extension work of the Reign of God. When we do that, God will indeed bless us.

You will be hearing more of the good things happening in New England in the District Superintendents' report on Saturday morning. That report will lift up several illustrations in which our Conference is already providing new and compelling ways to be the Church.

Spiritual pilgrimages are ancient practices that still have relevancy for today's young people and others seeking meaning beyond what they see and know of the institutional Church. Therefore, I ask the Conference to continue to support and encourage the following:

- Spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land with new ordinands, local pastors who have finished their course of study, other clergy who have never been to the Holy Land, and laity who are interested. This is not merely tourism, but an opportunity to experience the power of the Gospel and constantly ask the question, "What does this experience mean to us in our ministry and mission back home?" It is also a call for us to understand the cause of Palestinians and to become the interpreters and preachers of the holistic gospel. A tourist takes pictures of interest, whereas a pilgrim internalizes sights and sounds while asking questions about what God is saying through the experience.
- The spiritual pilgrimage to Taizé with youth and young adults enables one to journey with them and learn from them. It also provides us a vision of what it looks like and feels

like to live communally with thousands of others and experience the multitude of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that make up the cultures of other people of God. It allows us to explore together what it looks like taking part in the extension of the Reign of God without denominational barriers.

- Part of my continued Episcopal initiative, as mentioned during the Episcopal evening at last year's annual conference, is the exploration of a sister relationship with the Samnam Conference of the Korean Methodist Church to provide our laity and pastors with more exchange programs and an opportunity to learn more about Korean spirituality and hospitality. It is my hope that the laity and clergy of the Samnam Conference may experience the things they want to experience with us! Though the Korean bishop and I have signed a document to work on this venture, I have been very clear that this initiative has to be ratified by the leaders of our Annual Conference. It is my hope and prayer that the newly formed Connectional Table will ratify this document on behalf of our Annual Conference and both Conferences will be blessed by this new experience!
- I give thanks to my coffee/tea/prayer partners who took a step of faith and pledged financial support for new initiatives this past year. Their commitment enabled 16 pastors to go to the preaching academy at Princeton. My hope is we continue to offer these kinds of possibilities for our clergy and laity. Thanks for those who faithfully joined in this venture. If you are able to continue or would like to join me in this ministry, please contact my office.

Presenting Jesus in new and compelling ways is only one way we offer others hope. Another way is:

2. We offer hope *by showing God's grace*.

The Wesley brothers started a movement that spoke directly to the hearts of everyday people, especially the poor. These poor assumed they were outside of God's grace because of their standing in life. Wesley assured them that God loves them, has always loved them, and only waits for their response. This gave those everyday people hope. The message of the early Methodists needs to be heard again: there is value in all people, regardless of their economic situation or the sins they have committed, their ethnicity or their sexual orientation. God loves all people and wants to be in relationship with each and every person. God wants people - all people - to know life and life in abundance.

Friends, this is the essence of Christianity. That is "raison d'être" to be the Church. The purpose of the Church is not to be in competition with other churches, not to try to extend one denominational church by extinguishing another denominational church. The purpose of the Church is to follow the orders of the One who preached the world's best sermon called "The Sermon on the Mount," and challenged us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33 NIV). The purpose of the Church is to live the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." It is only when we do that work, the work of the Kingdom of God, that people will recognize us and embrace us, whether we live in a "de-churched culture" or in the

Bible Belt.

We have seen this again and again. One of my favorite hobbies, if I may say so, is to immediately ask a cab driver his name and whether he has a faith community. Recently on my journey to Rome, I asked cab drivers what they think of Pope Francis. Invariably, their answers included, "He is the people's Pope" and "He is a Pope for the Poor."

I still remember asking a San Francisco cab driver in 2001 if he had a faith community. He answered that he was supposed to be a Catholic but didn't go to church. Then he asked why I would ask such a question, so I explained that I was just wondering if he knew about the ministries of Glide Memorial United Methodist Church. His eyes immediately lit up, and I will never forget his response. "He said, 'Oh, you are talking about Brother Cecil Williams' church. I know them. They are the spokespersons for the poor in the city!' What a testimony about a United Methodist Church! What a witness for the ministry and mission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!"<sup>5</sup> Friends, it was clear from his statement that if he were to decide to go to church, he would choose a church which is truly interested in extending the Reign of God in our communities and the world. I believe that is true for most people today.

If I may share one more story: Last year I was at an interfaith wedding in New York. During the reception, I met a Hindu businessman from the Middle East. He explained that he was a faithful supporter of Sisters of Charity (Mother Teresa's order) because he truly appreciated what they were doing for the poor and the marginalized.

Friends, people are smart, and that includes our youth and young adults. They are not interested in sharing their resources for bricks and mortar. They want to make a difference in the lives of others so that everyone can have life in abundance.

As you may know, Prema is my chauffeur most of the time. One big joke between us is that I often ask her to stop at a gas station or Dunkin' Donuts. Most of the time her answer is, "We have gas," or "We don't need more donuts." I tell her, "I know that, but I want to know where the United Methodist Church is." She usually answers back, "Don't we already have directions?" to which I say, "Yes, Prema, but I need to do my mission." So in I go to ask the gas attendant or the server at the local donut shop where the United Methodist Church is. Sometimes they tell me they do not know - even if the Church is just a few yards from there, but sometimes they brag about the church by saying, "Oh, yes, that is a great church! They do so many things for others." Sometimes they even comment on their covered dish suppers! Friends, may I challenge each and every one of us to check how well we are known and for what we are known in our local communities? May God enable us to look at what we discover prayerfully, so we can make a difference in our communities, nation, and world.

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<sup>5</sup> Devadhar, Sudarshana, From the District Superintendent by the Rev. Dr. Suda Devadhar, Connections: The Monthly Newspaper of the North Central New York Conference, November 2001.

We offer hope to our communities by announcing God's grace and showing God's grace through radical hospitality. How can we be instruments of God's grace and show people through our sincerity and authenticity that we love them and want to be in their circle of friends, their community, where they can grow into the people that God wants them to be?

The real challenge to those of us who are part of the Church is to live our lives as a witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. The Barna Group indicated that for many of the churchless people in our midst, we Christians look more like the Pharisees than we do Jesus. If we were to live more by the example of Jesus and less by the example of those who judge others, then churchless people would be more inclined to listen and more inclined to engage in relationships and take us seriously.

3. We offer hope *by trusting God and allowing the Spirit to empower our way forward.*

Sometimes we live in this anxious space where we behave as if the results of our ministry depend entirely on us. We beat ourselves up because we are not meeting the goals we have set for church growth. If we believe that our God is a powerful God - creator of the universe - then we are invited to surrender our anxiety to Him. Make no mistake. We have to do our part. We must continue to offer hospitality, serve our neighbor, share the hope of abundant life, advocate for justice - especially for the poor – and do all these things in humility and love. Because we deposit our faith and trust in God, though, we leave the results to God.

C. S. Lewis was right when he said, "If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."<sup>6</sup>

Or as former Bishop James Armstrong said, "Being faithful to the Gospel involves risk and misunderstanding: it will also be seen by some as 'political.'<sup>7</sup>

In moments like this, we may feel vulnerable and be tempted to withdraw. In moments like this, friends, let us not forget the One who promised to be "with [us] always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 NSRV). John Wesley also reminds us, "The best of all is, God is with us." As much as we know this, we still become anxious. I have been there, friends. I, too, went to my DS and asked him to "Get me out of here!" But I tell you, our God who called us into this ministry is a faithful God. I can tell you from my own personal stories, some of which I recently shared at a retreat with our ordinands and commissioners.

In 1983, I had just started serving my first parish, a three-point charge. As some of you may recall, that year a national television program and popular magazine really created serious doubts in the hearts and minds of faithful church members by asking the question, "Do you know where your dollars are going?" One of their allegations was that the mainline churches were doing

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, C.S. "Answers to Questions on Christianity," *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans: 1970) 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> Aim Report, "CBS Hits the Councils of Churches", [http://www.aim.org/publications/aim\\_report/1983/02b.html](http://www.aim.org/publications/aim_report/1983/02b.html), February, 1983.



many harmful and political things around the world, supporting communists or helping people buy guns as a part of the WCC campaign of "Combat Racism," a program to challenge the apartheid movement in South Africa. I remember xeroxing pages and pages of articles from the church leaders to tell our parishioners why these allegations were not true. Despite all the efforts, many faithful Christians left their churches or stopped supporting World Service dollars. It was distressing and painful, but almost 16 years later, Nelson Mandela declared at the Harare Assembly of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the World Council of Churches, "'If it was not for the Church, I would not be with you here today. The government of the day had no interest in educating Africans, Coloured and Indians.' He termed the WCC's anniversary as '50 years of achievement in activating the conscience of the world for peace on behalf of the poor, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed.'"<sup>8</sup>

Friends, it is very true that many a time when we are struggling, we may not get an answer immediately. Our colleagues who have worked with us for years, who have shared meals with us, who have socialized with us, may criticize us or even abandon us. In moments like this, let us go to our own Gardens of Gethsemane and struggle with prayer to God as our Savior did. Answers will come, but it may take some time. After all, it took 16 years for the world to know the real truth! Like Job, let us affirm, "My Redeemer lives." (Job 19:25 NSRV)

In my personal journey, I have felt the power of God countless numbers of times. I wish I had time to describe them all, but I do not want to give you another long Episcopal address which could put you to sleep. How about just one?

On May 22, 2015 at 11:30 at night, I found the need to contact a colleague overseas to request an extension of a few days for an article he had requested from me. I was feeling overwhelmed with a workload I found almost impossible to accomplish. Prema lovingly reminded me, "You knew you had to finish your Episcopal address, prepare your sermons for the next few Sundays, and prepare your Bible Study for another Conference." My reply to her was, "Yes, you are right, but I simply could not say no to a colleague." Anyhow, that night I went to bed asking God to give me some thoughts for this article. Guess what? At 5:09 am the next morning as I was working on something, an email popped up on my iPad. In this email another colleague shared with me something which gave me some ideas for the article I had to write. Hallelujah! If this was not from God, then what was it? I saw it as heaven-sent, an answer to a desperate prayer! Thank you, Lord! Kindly do not misunderstand me. I am not saying prayer is a magical pill for all our problems, but just as Jesus taught us, every prayer has to be offered in the context of the will of God. I believe that was what I was experiencing and I thanked Him!

Simultaneously, let me shout from the rooftop, "Let us trust in God and God alone!"

Friends, I have news for you and for the Barna Group. The good news far outweighs the bad. We offer hope *by offering Jesus in new and compelling ways*. We offer hope *by showing God's*

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<sup>8</sup> WCC Press Report from the Harare Assembly as mentioned in District Superintendent's Letter, Connections: The Monthly Newspaper of the North Central New York Conference, Volume 3, Number 1, January 1999, P19.

*grace. We offer hope by trusting God and allowing the Spirit to empower our way forward.*  
When we come together as brothers and sisters in the faith, we become the circle of hope that God is counting on to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

God loves you and so do I.  
Amen.