

# Changing the Wind

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An address by Sandra K. Lackore, General Secretary and Treasurer of the General Council on Finance and Administration at the Annual Meeting November 28, 2006

An address to the Council has not been a regular part of our annual meeting agenda. In fact in eleven years as the General Secretary of GCFA this is only the second time it has happened! However, I believe our Council and our Church are at a crucial moment in our history. It is critical for all of us as Church leaders to take notice of our surroundings, to name what we see and feel, and fully engage in what I believe is a pivotal point for our denomination. I do believe that God is doing a new thing within our denomination. Like the wind of hope over the earth in the creation story, the spirit of God is hovering over us and creating a wind of change.

Jim Wallis in his book, God's Politics, describes our politicians as those with their fingers in the air determining the direction of the political wind and then following. He goes on to say, "The great practitioners of real social change, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, understood something very important. They clearly understood that you don't change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by changing the wind. Change the wind, transform the debate, recast the discussion, alter the context with which political decisions are being made and you will change the outcomes. Move the conversation around a crucial issue to a whole new place, and you will open up possibilities for changes never dreamed of before. You will be surprised at how fast the politicians adjust to the change in the wind."

Wallis' overall challenge to us is to change the wind. As general church leaders—Council members, Bishops, and staff—we are the practitioners of change within the church; and, as Wallis says, if we are able to change the wind, we can lead others to adjust and thrive in the new direction the wind takes us as a Church.

In 1 Kings 19, verses 3 through 17, we are told of God speaking to Elijah in a gentle quiet whisper. Recall that Elijah runs from Beersheba into the desert. Under a lone bush Elijah seeks shade and a place to die. He awakens to find an angel directing him to eat. Elijah, after some prodding, arises, eats, and journeys to a mountain cave. There, he enters and sleeps.

Peterson's *The Message* takes up the story at verse 9:

Then the word of GOD came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?" I've been working my heart out for the GOD-of the-Angel-Armies," said Elijah.

"The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."

Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by."

A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.

God found Elijah and gave direction to him in a quiet whisper; an ordinary soft breeze became a compelling moment for Elijah and his ministry. God pursued Elijah and called him to action. We, the leaders of The United Methodist Church, are being pursued by God, pursued to be changers of the wind; to work with God to change ourselves and thus change the world.

In some ways we have been behaving like Elijah, mired in how things have always been, complaining about what others are not doing, and running from the potential of what might be. Like Elijah in the desert, God has provided us with great abundance—givers that consistently give more each year; a growing, vibrant, and inspired global church; and a denomination in a time of declining offering plate giving that gives in unprecedented ways in response to major tragedies.

What have we done in the past with this great abundance? Like Elijah we have crawled into our secure cave of perspective whether as a General Church leader, a Council member, a General Conference delegate, or Bishop. We have taken our own piece of the pie and safely crawled back into our cave.

I know this is a great generalization, but I make it to emphasize the need for us to crawl out of our individual caves, or as we are known to describe them "our silos", and work collaboratively with God and with each other to change the wind, to change the direction of our denomination.

We, as a Council, we as a Church, are poised to respond to God's urging. We together are creating a forceful wind of change; and the General Council on Finance and administration is in the center of this windstorm.

The Council is shedding its image of the *Disciplinary* enforcer and taking on the call of the ministry of administration. Rather than telling others what they are doing wrong, we are working collaboratively to find efficiencies and new ways of working. Our strategic vision of servant ministry sets the course for the way we work and is lived out daily through you, as Council members, and through our staff and their work with other agencies and annual conferences. This is an exciting time, and it is because of your leadership that the Council is a full partner in the winds of change taking place throughout the Church.

Wallis sets out three actions that will help us to change the wind—transform the debate, recast the discussion, and alter the context. I will use these action steps to describe where we are as a Council and a Church in opening up the possibilities for changes never dreamed before.

### **Transform the Debate**

Wallis' first action for us to change the wind is to transform the debate. We are in the very midst of transforming the debate. Instead of debating how the funding pie will be split and, therefore, what program will need to be cut, we are working together to form a perspective of abundance to fund the priority outcomes that move the Church and its work forward.

Patrick Lencioni, in his book, Silos, Politics and Turf Wars: A Leadership Fable, says that in order for real change to occur in an established organization—in essence, for people to be shaken out of their silos—a crisis must occur and a rallying cry from management must engage resources in a focused effort.

While one could debate what the crisis is within The United Methodist Church, it is clear that we are feeling an urgency to change and our leadership has given us a rallying cry. The Council of Bishops has created a strategic direction for annual conferences and the general Church through the seven vision pathways. A recently developed call to action by the Bishops places these pathways into active ministry concepts. The leadership of the general boards and commissions through the Connectional Table has responded to this call to action by proposing four program foci that provide strategic direction for general Church resources. These four program proposals: leadership development, global health, elimination of poverty, and church development will be highlighted in this afternoon's presentation. They offer a unique opportunity to create a strong, strategic ministry emphasis for The United Methodist Church.

In addition, GCFA's work with the Connectional Table around the development of the 2009-2012 budget has evolved along with the ministry and programmatic directions. As we began work on the budget we started talking about various funds and splits; all based on former budget development concepts. We are now talking about pairing financial resources with specific programmatic ministry outcomes. This afternoon you will be hearing more about this ground-breaking program and budget development approach.

The rallying cry to focus and coordinate efforts has drawn all of us out of our silos, and has transformed our efforts into an integrated approach on behalf of the whole Church. Yes, we are transforming the debate. Together we are creating program and budget for the denomination based on an expectation of abundance.

## **Recast the Discussion**

The second action Wallis offers to change the wind is to recast the discussion. By proposing program priorities and shaping the budget around these strategic endeavors, we will recast the discussion from one that can become mired in bureaucracy and ideology into a coordinated missional effort.

Our Church has become embroiled in Disciplinary and ideological debates that have little to do with our call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We have spent too much time worrying about how to divide scarce resources and not enough time rejoicing in God's abundance. While we cannot make these divisive discussions go away, our future is with the plentiful gifts God has given us.

I do believe that the work being done now within the Council of Bishops, the realization of the Bishops' call to action through the Connectional Table, and the collaboration happening within the program agencies can recast this discussion.

The recent Connectional Table meeting lived out this very concept. The Table has been intentional in developing future-thinking ideas—provocative propositions. Various exciting and creative ideas have been generated. However, even in this setting amidst the processing of all these wonderful ideas, old tensions developed. The balance between continuing to do things the way we've always done them and wanting to focus on doing less, but doing it exceedingly well in ways that will have the greatest impact on the world's needs. All this is done to realistically balance the focus of Church resources. The Table is recasting their discussion and moving forward with a focused plan for the Church, a plan that can inspire, create enthusiasm, and most importantly make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world.

## **Alter the Context**

Wallis' final challenge to alter the context becomes preeminent as we move toward General Conference. I have begun to envision a path to General Conference that sustains our collaborative work.

What if—as is being planned—General Conference begins with a coordinated message of hope from the Council of Bishops, with the input of the Connectional Table, GCFA and the program agencies? What if, the message we take to annual conference delegations is coordinated as well? What if, General Conference is built around the Bishop's call to action and the four initiatives? What if, like the Connectional Table, General Conference refuses to become mired in too many good ideas and instead focuses its efforts on a coordinated path?

The General Conference theme—A Future with Hope—takes on new meaning for me as I envision us working together to alter the context of our General Conference discussions. A future with hope brings possibilities of new enthusiasm for the work of the general Church; a resurrection of world-wide mission and ministry that is articulated by local

church members; a restoration of trust and collaboration; a new Jerusalem of sorts. This is a future that holds promise and hope for our denomination as it continues to transform ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> century while honoring our Wesleyan heritage.

I would like to go back to Wallis' discussion of changing the wind, but put it in a United Methodist context. Change the wind, transform the debate, recast the discussion, alter the context with which United Methodist decisions are being made, and we will change the outcomes.

When we move the conversation around a crucial set of ministries to a whole new place, we will open up possibilities for change never dreamed of before and we will be surprised at how fast we all adjust to the change in the wind.

As I developed this address, I was reminded of the story where Jesus walks on the water. Recall from Matthew 14, verse 22 to 32:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified.

"It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

Peter had faith enough to step out from the boat to meet Jesus. He stepped on to the water and in that moment had faith enough to know in his heart that he would not sink. But then the wind changed, and he began to sink. He began to doubt his underlying beliefs. Jesus saved him. Yes, even in doubt Jesus saved him.

On my recent trip to Mozambique, this text came to life in a new and forceful way. After the Council of Bishops meeting, Cecil and I joined several others and visited South Africa. We visited Sowetto, the apartheid museum, and with the assistance of a great young tour director made an unplanned visit to Robben Island. Robben Island lies about 15 miles south of Cape Town and is most famous for having been the isolated prison of former South African President, Nelson Mandela. This trip was significant and powerful, especially since we had just been in the presence of Nelson Mandela when he spoke to the Council of Bishops in Mozambique.

The late afternoon boat trip to the island was a bit choppy, but fairly uneventful. The return trip, two plus hours later, in the dark, was another story. The sea had become much more turbulent and the wind was howling. Peter may have seen the wind, I heard and felt its power.

As we continued our trip back to Cape Town, the waves were relentless. I felt out of control, and if you know me, out of control is not a place I like to be! What calmed and sustained me was my faith that God would see us through. I asked myself, why would God bring me all the way out here to see and understand the hope and faith of a great leader like Nelson Mandela, just to take my life in the rough sea? The wind was a forceful power, but the presence of God's son was my assurance.

Thank God for Jesus, who even in the midst of our doubt and despair can save us. Thank God for Jesus, who gives us the assurance to step out from our secure place, and with hope, withstand and even work with the winds of change.

My friends, let us not stay in the boat, nor continue to dwell in our caves and silos, as we begin the important work of recommending the 2009-2012 budget to the General Conference, let us work together. Let us work together with the winds of change that God is causing to blow within our denomination. May we transform our debates, recast our discussions and alter the context of our conversations. May we covenant together to walk faithfully across the deep waters and into the wind of change as one body called by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.