

**Park Hill UMC, January, 11, 2009**  
**Jeremiah 29: 4-14**  
**District Superintendent Rev. Youngsook Kang**  
*A Future with Hope*

I bring Greetings to you in the name of Jesus Christ on behalf of Bishop Elaine Stanovsky and The cabinet of the Rocky Mountain Conference. It is great to worship with you at Park Hill United Methodist Church on this Church Conference Sunday.

As we begin a new year, it is only fitting that we think about our future not only as an individual but as a church that we deeply love. It is always exciting to think of a future with hope. After all we are a people of hope called Christians.

If I could invite a preacher to preach on Hope today, I would invite Jeremiah. In today's text, Jeremiah as a prophet preached hope to a mostly unlike audience in a most unlikely situation in a most unlikely time. The Israelites were in exile in Babylon, with not much hope for their lives. Imagine the world in which the Israelites lived in exile. Their worry was not about an economic downturn but the loss of their country, their home, and their family. They were living in a strange land. Listen to their cry as in Psalm 137. They mourned, "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept at the memory of Zion. How can we sing a song in a strange land?"

Then, listen to what Jeremiah says to them about their future in this seemingly hopeless situation; "Build houses, settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and have sons and daughters."

I don't think this message was received very well by the Israelites. Even we would have a hard time hearing a message to buy a house in this economic downturn. These people in exile felt like they were dying their slow deaths. Their lives felt pretty hopeless. What would they have thought when Jeremiah told them to build houses. Jeremiah said further, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, - plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." I can hear the Israelites protesting, "What plans? What hope? What future? We are only dying here."

Hopelessness comes from fear. Fear is a major threat to hope. When I visited Korea this past October, I found my mother in a depressed mood. She seemed to have lost hope in her life, fearing her aging process and thinking her death may be near. She couldn't find a purpose to her life. She just couldn't seem to handle living alone ever since my father passed away four years ago. Seeing my mom, who is a woman of faith, living the moment of loss and hopelessness made me fear my own mortality.

So, here is my own story. Soon after I returned from visiting my Mom, which was about a couple of months ago, I developed a serious soreness in my upper arm. While the pain was going away, it had left a big blue bruise on my upper arm. Then, slowly over the next month the same pattern of soreness and a bruise traveled down my entire arm. I researched on the internet only to reach a series of horrific self-diagnosis. I am not going

to name them here. Then, when I went to see my doctor, she shrugged it off and said, “You’ve got a popped blood vessel. It will go away by itself!” She decided that it came from lifting weights improperly. I protested “I use just a three pound weight.” She protested back, “You are not in your 20s any more.” Growing old is a huge change, which brings fear. .

It involves fears such as “My body will change, I may lose my job, I may be forced to retire, see my nearest and dearest die, I’ll be babied in a nursing home, I’ll endure a long-drawn out and painful illness.” Certainly changes create fear in us. Our world is changing. This nation is changing. Many scholars and analysts say, “The United States is less innovative, less wealthy, less respected and less powerful.” The economic downturn is a subject of discussion wherever we turn. So, there are a myriad of claims for the president elect Barack Obama: from re-building our economy to gasoline tax to universal health care to immigration reform to early childhood education to a new chance for Darfur,

Changes are not only occurring in our individual lives and society but in our church as well. A few statistics about the United Methodist Church.

- We are an aging community, the average United Methodist is 57 years old;
- In some countries, notably the United States, we are not effectively reaching youth and young adults; United Methodists under age 18 account for 4.6% of church membership;
- The number of ordained and commissioned elders under age 35 is a mere 850 in the United States; (Of 12,000)

These statistics do not sound very encouraging. So, you may ask, “Does our church have a future that we can dream with hope?” That is exactly why “A future with Hope” was the theme of the 2008 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, held in last May in Texas. Well, indeed, the General Conference declared that we as a church have a future with hope. We explored how people receive and give hope, and are transformed by encounters with Jesus Christ. For instance, we felt hopeful when we learned that United Methodist church members raised \$3 million to restore churches damaged by Hurricane Katrina. More than \$60 million was given through the United Methodist Committee on Relief for humanitarian aid in the Gulf Coast. That is hope.

Claiming that we have hope, the General Conference also asked self-examining questions. What does our future hold for the United Methodist Church? As part of the response, the General Conference proposed the four areas of focus that will guide the future work of the denomination. So, let me share them with you. For the next four years the entire United Methodist Church is called to focus our energy and resources onto the following four areas.

The four areas of focus are:

- 1) Engaging in ministry with the poor;
- 2) Improving global health, especially attacking the killer diseases of poverty.
- 3) Creating new places for new people and renewing existing congregations; and

#### 4) Developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world.

Poverty is a serious issue. You and I know that 80% of the world population subsists on less than \$2 a day. What is worse is that many are killed because of poverty-related disease such as Malaria, Tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. Every 30 seconds a child dies of malaria, and which translates to 3,000 children a day. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, considered health and wholeness to be a matter of spiritual concern, and the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive, United Methodist Communications, pointed out that “reversing the pain and physical suffering experienced by the world's poor is a powerful, tangible method of serving as God's witness.” The other two focus areas of developing leadership and growing churches are equally important.

Friends at Park Hill, I see that Park Hill is already engaged in all of these four areas of ministry. You are doing amazing things with eyes on the prize of hope. God is doing amazing things through you. You are engaged in many mission projects. You are reaching out to the community. You do ministry with the poor. You raise leadership—both clergy and lay. You are a blessing not only to the church but to the community.

And yet sometimes we are worried while we move onto future with hope. Especially in this time of economic downturn, we may feel stingy. Now, hear the new president of the Council of Bishops—Bishop Gregory Palmer who told delegates at the closing worship of the 2008 General Conference. “United Methodists must live with a spirit of abundance and not scarcity as they go into the world.” He went on saying, it is “incumbent on you and me as people of Christian faith that we not become stingy with the blessings—stingy with what we have received from God.”

“Naked we came into this world,” he said. “We brought nothing with us, and we will take nothing with us. Everything we have—every good and perfect gift, comes from God. Listen to Bishop Palmer again. He said, “I am more hopeful for the church now than I have ever been because I am more vulnerable than I have ever been, and I need to depend more on the Holy Ghost than I have ever depended on the Holy Ghost.”

Jeremiah was most hopeful for his country and his people when they were most vulnerable in exile. He told them to build houses and dream a future with hope. Zechariah also urged people to dream and called them prisoners of hope. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I have a dream.” Apostle Paul said that we who believe in Christ are a people of resurrection.

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner talks about resurrection and hope. “We have hope that God exists because from time to time over the years we believe we have been touched by God. We believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life because at a few precious moments that is what we have found him to be in our own small deaths and resurrections.” (The Living Pulpit, Hope, 1992, p.5)

Friends, what is your hope for Park Hill United Methodist Church? What is your vision? Do you feel limited by concerns about resources in implementing your vision and

mission? Robert E. Quinn said, “Acting on a vision that exceeds our resources is a test of our vision, faith, and integrity.”

I invite you to depend upon the Holy Ghost. I invite you to discern your future- a Future with Hope. Here are some questions to ponder. .

- What does a future with hope look like in your church?
- What prevents your congregation from moving into a future with hope?
- Where are you discerning the Holy Spirit in the life of your congregation?
- What do you hope for from this year’s church conference?

Take plenty of time to think about and answering these question; listen to how God is leading you into. Through Jeremiah, the Lord tells us, “*The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won’t be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.*”

Friends, the Lord will make a brand-new covenant with you and your congregation for your future. It is not even a repeat of the covenant that God made with your ancestors. It is a brand-new covenant just for you. Amen.

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Let us remember that the Babylonian Captivity and the subsequent return to Israel were seen as a transformative period for Israel. For example, the current [Hebrew script](#) was adopted during this period, replacing the traditional Israelite script. This period saw the emergence of the central role of the [Torah](#) in Jewish life and saw the beginning of the [canonization of the Bible](#), which provided a central text for Jews.