

## **LIVING INTO BELOVED COMMUNITY**

It is such a delight to begin to dig into the work God would have us do together. In the past few weeks, I have loved not only reading about but visiting with churches and talking with clergy and laity about the important ministries that are occurring throughout the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference, of the ways you have been and are committed to continuing to being God's hands in the world, extending God's love and healing through your efforts and being agents of justice, reconciliation and hope.

It is my prayer that we might continue that work together. That we will lean in together, to hear the whispers of the Holy Spirit and follow where it leads. That we will be emboldened to take a stand, be courageous as we dare to try new things, and in all things, remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As I have been praying about our theme for the next quadrennial, and as I have been in conversation with Youngsook and others, it became clear to what God is calling us: "Living Into Beloved Community."

Beloved community is something every Christian is called to participate in. God invites us to co-create the realm of God. Beloved community is the tangible, visible, here and now experience of God's realm. My hope is that we in the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference will live into Beloved Community so boldly that every church will be a beacon of love and justice, whether that community is in Blue Cliff, Eagle Valley, Lakewood, Salt Lake City or Denver. That no matter what language we may speak in our churches, no matter where on the theological scale we may fall, no matter what our demographics, every church will bear the love of Christ into their communities in ways that utterly transform the neighborhood.

Living into Beloved Community is not some "pie in the sky" day dream. It is not a nice safe feel good saying. It is a radical reorientation of our life, of how we structure our community, how we

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Leadership Summit 2016  
Quadrennial Vision for 2016-2020

prioritize the use of our time and resources. It is practicing radical kindness and compassion in our day just as Jesus did in his. It is costly. But discipleship always is.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke a great deal of beloved community. His words remind us that *Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.*

In an era when walking while black or brown is a crime punishable by death, it is time we lived into beloved community and worked for racial reconciliation and justice.

In an age when there are more talks of building walls instead of bridges, we are to put our very bodies down as bridges between all that divides the human family.

At a time when drugs are running rampant in our communities, threatening the very fabric of our rural communities as well as inner cities, we are called to participate in the work of recovery.

When one out of every 200 children worldwide are refugees, we need to remind one another of who are brothers and sisters are.

When gun violence has reached epic proportions across our country, we need to push back violence by taking a stand for love.

GK Chesterton discussed Christianity, and what he said could apply to Beloved Community as well. “[it] **has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.**”

My sisters and brothers, it is time for you and I to do the hard work of following Jesus and live into Beloved Community. I believe that by you and I and all our churches making a commitment to do this, we can create a love revolution that will not only transform our churches, cities, country and world. You and I will be changed as well.

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I believe Beloved Community is not only possible, it is a Gospel imperative for we who follow Jesus. And I know it is possible, because I have experienced it, and I am sure many of you have as well. I have seen what happens when we follow Jesus so fully that human structures and status are turned upside down so that every child is beloved and cared for.

One time I experienced beloved community was when I was a program director at a NYAC summer camp. It was a Jr. High Hiking Camp through the Catskill Mountains. We had a rule that the fastest hiker could never hike so far ahead that he or she couldn't see the last hiker. The problem was that our slowest hiker was a really slow hiker. I mean, snail's pace. This caused the fast hikers to grow impatient as they waited for Cliff to catch up. It didn't take too many miles before they began to make comments under their breath about Cliff. It was clear it was going to get worse, not better, as we continued our hike. And we had 5 days of hiking ahead of us.

When we stopped for our lunch break, Cliff took off his old, worn sneakers — he was the only one in the group not to have hiking boots. All during the hike I could tell they didn't fit him right, but it was only when he took off his shoes that I realized why. Cliff had a club foot. On top of that, both feet were badly blistered already by the poorly fitted sneakers. It was then that I realized the only way to remedy the situation was to implement a saying of Jesus, "The last shall be first."

After lunch, I announced that Cliff would be the leader of the hike. No one was allowed to pass him. And what happened? The entire group adapted to his pace. Kids who would have otherwise been strung out along the path walking on their own were now walking, shoulder to shoulder, talking with each other. Songs were sung. Jokes were told. And when we reached the end of the trail, every single camper cheered Cliff's achievement.

But his achievement was more than crossing a finish line. He helped the entire camp become a community.

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*MLK said: Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies*  
—Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

When was a time you experienced Beloved Community? What changed in the community? What changed in you? (15 minutes)

So our task for the next four years will be to live into Beloved Community.

And we will break down the quadrennium into four mission emphases based on Matthew 25:  
*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

Each year we will place our prayers, energies, resources and visions to responding to one of these as we live into Beloved Community.

**2016-2017: For I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink**

What are issues related to hunger and access to clean water in our neighborhoods, states, region, and world, and how can we order our lives and ministries to respond with the hands of Jesus?

**2017-2018: I was naked and you gave me clothing**

In what ways are people stripped naked: whether homeless, stripped of a safe sanctuary, stripped of dignity and respect, what are ways we can seek to clothe people, work for affordable housing, safety, civil rights, justice?

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**2018-2019: I was sick and you took care of me:**

How are we dealing with the epidemic of drugs in our region? What are we doing about addictions? I came from a community that said, “We are all in recovery from something”—how are we creating pathways to recovery? How are we dealing with health issues in our region?

**2019-2020: I was in prison and you visited me.**

When there is a cradle to prison pipeline for black and brown men, what are we doing to address systemic racism? How are we offering liberation to those placed in social and economic prisons? How do we unlearn the -isms that shackle the souls of so many?

Throughout the quadrennium, we will undergird our work to welcome the stranger through acts of generous hospitality. This is an imperative to creating Beloved Community. Every community needs to consider, who is not here? Who is in our city, our village, our town, and why aren't they in our pews? How can we welcome the stranger as an honored guest, knowing that when we do, we may be entertaining angels unaware?

**For I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink**

Jesus gives us the mandate. John Wesley and our United Methodist heritage give us the means.

One thing I love about John Wesley is his can-do spirit. He went to where people were struggling. He went to the overlooked. He went to the poor and illiterate. He went to the sick. And he did something about the conditions of those he met: he created schools, he made sure people were fed, he sought to meet health needs. And that is what we need to do.

Going through Wyoming, I was struck by how many of our churches are serving the hungry through free weekly meals. I am also enjoying learning of the ways churches throughout the region are responding to hunger. But there are so many more who need not only a meal but they need the love of a community, for one thing poverty does is isolate us. The communities our churches are in are filled with people who are lost, but waiting to be found by our churches.

**Share with your partner a tender memory involving food, whether it was a family meal, a time of sharing food, or an instance when food arrived at just the right moment.**

Food security is “a condition related to the supply of food, and individuals' access to it.” Food insecurity is “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”

**Think of a time when someone brought food to you when you urgently needed it, or you provided food to someone when they urgently needed it. Perhaps one of your children forgot their lunch, or you were sick in bed, and someone brought you a meal.**

- 1 in 8 people in the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference struggle with food insecurity, facing times when there is not enough money to buy food.
- 1 in 5 children may not know when or where they will get their next meal
- 1 in 7 seniors struggle with having enough food, sometimes forced to make choices between purchasing groceries or needed medication.
- In the US, 48.1 million Americans live in food insecure households, that includes 15.3 million children

These are our neighbors, our families, our brothers and sisters

**Imagine that your next door neighbors do not know where their next meal is coming from. Now imagine that in every fourth house on your street, there is a family who does not know where their next meal would come from.**

For I was thirsty and you gave me drink. Toxic chemicals are contaminating drinking water for 80,000 people south of Colorado Springs.

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Water sources on Native American reservations are contaminated. Safe drinking water and sanitary sewage disposal are unavailable in 13 percent of Native American homes on reservations.

Nearly 2 billion people worldwide drink unsafe water. More than 5 per cent of all child deaths can be prevented with safe water and sanitation.

For I was thirsty and you gave me drink...

And here is the crucial thing: I don't believe in "If you build it they will come." As we create Beloved Community, it requires us to go where people are, to listen to their longings and needs, and to tell them we want to work with them to meet their needs and challenge systems that have created their longings, needs, marginalization.

How can we work together, pooling our resources and imaginations, to feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty, knowing that when we do, we are providing to those in need, we are not only providing it to Jesus, we are embodying the love of Christ so fully that others encounter Jesus.

Come, my precious brothers and sisters, let us join together to create the Beloved Community  
where the human rights of all people are respected.

Where all people are treated with dignity and respect regardless of their

race

ethnicity

nationality

religion

gender

age

economic status

mental and physical condition

immigration status

criminal history

sexual orientation

Where all women are treated as equals in society.

Where no one goes hungry or lacks adequate shelter and clothing or health care or any other essential human need.

Where all children grow up in

caring

loving

nourishing

families and communities

where they are never abused, neglected or exploited and

where they can develop their creative skills and

receive a high quality education so they can reach their full potential.

Where the environment and all of creation are

respected

protected

nourished.

Where differences are resolved nonviolently recognizing

our shared needs

our common humanity

our brotherhood and sisterhood.

Where militarism, war and all forms of violence no longer exist.

Come, let us join together to create the Beloved Community!

— Dave Atwood