

## **GNW Closing - Episcopal Address – Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth**

*Note: This is a transcript of a sermon preached at Mason UMC in Tacoma, Washington, on June 15, 2023. It has been edited to address automatic transcription errors and to clarify for an audience not 'in the room.'*

Well, here we are at this thing that's titled 'The Episcopal address.' I have to say, I've never done one of these before. So, we'll see where it goes. I can tell you that what's on the page looks a lot like a sermon to me. But I don't know.

I am grateful to be at the closing session of the Greater Northwest Area Conference; grateful because that means we have journeyed together. We've journeyed from Juneau to Fairbanks, to Meridian, to Tacoma. And we connected with siblings in many places around our area and beyond. And in this time, I've been able to preach in each of the opening sessions. And I've tried to communicate this framework for some direction for others. This hope, maybe, in the Greater Northwest opening, I shared an overview of this thing called the MILE, the M.I.L.E., and talked about how this theme of 'Go and do likewise,' will serve as our guide, not just for the annual conference season, but throughout the year.

And for the opening at the Alaska Conference, I started talking about the 'M' of the M.I.L.E. And that M is ministry that matters. We moved on to the Oregon-Idaho Conference in Meridian. I talked about the 'I' in the M.I.L.E., iteration and location. Then I landed in Tacoma for the Pacific Northwest Conference opening and talked about lay ministry enhancement. That's the 'M,' 'I,' and the 'L.' That means now we talk about the 'E', the elimination of racism. Let me start by saying the 'E' is not last because it's the least important. The EA is last because that's how you spell M.I.L.E. But the 'E,' the elimination of racism, is critical for the 'M,' the 'I' and the 'L' and even for its own sake.

So, I invite you to join me and others. I've been encouraged throughout this annual conference season with the hallway conversations, the emails and text messages and Facebook messages from people who have heard the word and have said I have found my window work. That's been exciting to me. Because this journey is about spreading love and being neighbors, one to another for a M.I.L.E. And this passage from Luke 10 has caught on. It's recaptured my imagination and inspired hope in me and in others. So, I've heard.

It's important for you to know that as we live with this, this guide, this theme, our superintendents are already working on ways to incorporate the mild the M.I.L.E. into pastoral conversations, one on ones, check-ins, those things. Also, they are looking at ways of providing congregational connections as we move into our charge conference season into the fall. The mile will be in your charge conference conversations. It's not going anywhere. You might as well let it catch hold of you now; it is not leaving. We will also make sure that you have access to the sermons and other materials needed so that you can understand and you can share them with those in your sphere of influence. When you start talking about the M.I.L.E., we want you to be able to point them to resources so that they can understand that you're not totally crazy. You're just sold out for the cause.

And we're committed to examining how we do more together without threats, fears, or notions of merger looming over us. Why would I drop that right there? Because I've heard it. Many among us have sort of just been on pause, or heels dug in, our eyes glazed over, like what's going to happen to us? Are we all merging into one annual conference? Is that where this is all headed? Not right now, and no time soon.

I have some good energy to give. And the good energy that I have to give, I want to give to us doing ministry in the world. I want to give that energy to us, focusing on those in our context, who have forgotten who they are, or never knew they were a beloved child of God. I don't want to spend my good energy on administrative things that just help us just kind of rearrange the chairs in the room. I don't want to do that. If you want to do that, then you have the wrong person right here, right now.

So that's why I put that right there. Just want to say it up front. Plus, I said it in all of the laity sessions; those were recorded, and those are online. So, the clergy hadn't heard it as clearly. So now you all have it; it's there.

And we are committed to doing our absolute best to be true to the best of who we can be, without regard for what General Conference does or does not do. I'm not waiting for us to go to Charlotte to find out what our marching orders are. I'm not waiting for us to get to our jurisdictional conference next summer to find out what we will be focusing on. I have some good energy to give. I've experienced good energy in your midst. So, I know you have good energy to give. So let us give it to ministry.

Now, we will still work collaboratively across our area and probably more collaboratively than we ever have. Because we need to. And we gain strength from one another when we engage collaboratively. I have gone to all three conferences. I've been looking, and I've been listening. And I have it on good authority that each conference has immense talents and gifts that can bless the other two greatly. And I want us to share that so that we can all rise up. And I know we have relational and healing work to do, and we will do it.

And I say that because I've been going around, I figured out that the connections across the area are not what I thought they were. I may have gotten it wrong, but it's one man's opinion. I'm on the mic, I'm sharing. Now I don't think it's a bad thing. It's just a reality as I see it. And because I see it that way. All that means to me is that there is work to do. Not frightened by it, I won't run from it, and I won't deny it. It just means there's work to do.

I can see that within each conference, there are varieties of cultures and levels of trust that factor into almost every decision and assumption. Regionalism is a big thing here. I had no idea. Your regionalism within each conference is astounding. But I'm not afraid of it. I even see that as a gift that could bless us because that just means there are more opportunities for more people to share the gospel. And to be caught up in this M.I.L.E. across our region.

That's why this passage about the Samaritan speaks to us from so many angles. Because there's so much going on in this text, just like there's so much going on in our annual conferences and throughout our area. And that's why I invite you to get ready to come along for this journey. It's only a mile. It's only an M.I.L.E. There's so much to see, to become and to do on this mile.

So, to recap this for you, of course, you can go to our conference website, and you can see the full sermons that spell it out. They're all great. They're all wonderful. I tell myself that every day. So it's all there. But you can go there, and you can see them, and we will be working on a resource to make it even easier for you. But if you can't wait, they are there.

But in this 'M' in this ministry that matters, we zero in on issues around housing and health and in housing. We're talking about affordability, access, and security. Some of you've heard me talk about repurposing underutilized assets and partnering with a variety of nonprofits, government agencies, or even developers to help us repurpose some of our underutilized property assets. Because we can make more and better use of our non-producing assets, non-producing assets are those assets that are not helping you right now. Or that you're not using them to their full capacity. We get to decide along this mile, we get to decide if stained glass is sufficient for the call of this present age. Is that a window that will allow us to see who and what we need to see? Is it the window that will help us be who we need to be?

So, we'll plan and host a housing symposium that will bring together the ministry leaders who are considering or already engaged in issues around housing. If you're interested in being on the planning team for the symposium, we already have, I think, 10 or 12 people already signed up and ready to go. But if you're interested in being on the planning team for the housing symposium, you can be in contact with your director of connectional ministry and let them know because we're going to move on this very quickly. I was overjoyed at the Oregon-Idaho Conference as congregation after congregation came forward and shared what they were already doing or imagining doing in the area of housing in their conference. That was exciting. And I know that in Pacific Northwest, there are already some projects that are underway. In fact, even this sanctuary we're sitting in right now is part of a future development plan. So, it's happening all around us. When I was in Alaska, we talked about the housing crisis. Yes, even in Alaska. And someone said, especially in Alaska.

And so, because of that, we have to put on hold notions of selling closed churches until we have a plan and workable strategy for how funds or properties may be best used for ministry that matters. Because sometimes you can have too much money. Because you can lose your mind when you get too much money. Have you ever seen those lottery winners shows when those people just suddenly come into all that money and then, Oh, y'all don't watch those? Okay, all right. I've seen them, you know, I mean, I'm willing to see if I lose my mind or not, but you know, y'all come get me the bishop has lost it. He got his millions, and now he lost it, you know, so you can come rescue me.

And on the issue of health, we're talking about preparedness, prevention, and equity. Health is a broad, broad, broad area. We're talking about mental health, physical health, public health, climate care, the health of the earth in our environment. We're talking about lessening our carbon footprint through daily and consistent acts in our homes and in our churches. Grateful for the conversations in the Pacific Northwest and the legislation that was passed around climate justice, and how it called for us not to just challenge organizations and institutions to do better but challenged us individually and challenged our churches to do better.

And also, along this effort, this came up in each of the laity sessions, the question was usually phrased something like, "What can we do to get young people back engaged in our church?" And what I said to them

was, the reality is, young people have spirituality or longing for it. They're finding and making community in ways that make sense for them. And it looks nothing like what works for us or what we offer to them. They are out and about in the world, participating in service and mission in a variety of ways. They are a part of organizations and movements that are out churching the church. And so, the role of the church is not to stay in this posture of "y'all come, we have all the answers, and we have everything that y'all need" because they are not coming. They don't trust you; they don't understand you; they don't like you. Because you feel the same way about them. Or at least your policies and your practices communicate that you feel the same way about them.

So instead of the church being in this, y'all come to our church and do what we will allow you to do if we allow you to do anything. And we may allow you to do something if you are just like us. So instead of doing this, I think the posture for the church is now this. And what I mean by that is we have to go outside of ourselves outside of those windows. And partner with and support those missional efforts, those nonprofits, those movements, those groups that are making a difference in the world; that's where our children are. And they're wondering why we're not there.

The church has lost too much credibility to claim the first position. Our position is second or third, making sure those efforts can grow and flourish. Oh, what a witness. Just imagine all the things that we could help go if we stopped doing this and did more of this. Because then we are where the people are, that we say we want to be where we are.

And so, the 'I' then is itineration and location. And again, you've heard some of this, but some of you haven't heard anything. So let me make sure it's just a little commercial, just a little teaser to get you to go get the whole thing. This itineration and location, it's about getting pastoral leaders where they can thrive. Not just where they can get by, where they can thrive. It's about ensuring our congregations will receive and support the pastoral leader that they need, not the one they want. Not the one that satisfies who you were 50 years ago in your heyday, but the one that will satisfy you today, tomorrow, and in the days to come because they are reflecting the best of who you can be, not who you were.

You've heard me say that open itinerancy is a fallacy. It's a thing of the past. Go ahead, write your charges, and send them in. But prove me wrong. Churches and communities need to be served, but in our area, there are churches and communities that are unsafe for some to be sent to them. That's just a reality. I didn't make that up. It's reality. And as long as that's true, we cannot have open itinerancy. And as long as we have salary structures the way that we have them now, we've already priced out many of our congregations from having a pastoral leader. When I say a pastoral leader, we've priced ourselves out of having a trained, clearly Wesleyan pastoral leader.

So, if we really had equitable compensation, then we wouldn't have to hear someone say, "I will take a financial hit if I go there." Or the cabinet says, "Wait a minute, this will be a reduction in salary for this person if we move them from this church to that church." If we had equitable compensation, that conversation would be off the table. But instead, we call equitable compensation a little hand-me-down to make up the gap between what the church has to get it to the minimum, which means we're keeping people at the minimum, and we call it equitable.

In the case of itineration and location, it's also about determining how we retool laity and clergy to serve in these emerging contexts of ministry, where the needs of the contexts are a higher priority than the needs of the congregation. Because there are some congregations that get in the way of us being in ministry in particular contexts. And that's all I'm gonna say about that right there.

This is also about creating more cooperative and team ministry opportunities for our pastoral leaders and for our congregations and incentivizing them to do so. Because some of us don't play well with others. And I mean that for pastoral leaders and for the congregation. Some of us just, we just won't, we don't. But guess what? You will be asked to do so, and you will be trained to do so. And then you'll have some other decisions to make. Because we have to get on with the get on. Amen.

So, the 'L,' we talked about that at Pacific Northwest Conference, lay ministry enhancement, and let me tell you, the laity were all excited to be included, as they should be. Because I firmly believe that everyone is called to serve. And not everyone is called to licensed, certified or ordained ministry, but everyone is called to serve. And I want us to celebrate every calling, to strengthen our lay leadership, development and support systems. And I named this challenge that I want every ministry setting to identify at least one person, at least one person that those in your ministry setting will pray with. We're just praying that they will hear God speak and reveal what their purpose is. And this is not about licensed or ordained ministry; if that's where it ends up. Great.

We heard the video from Claremont with Gerri. I almost ran around this sanctuary as I saw Gerri come on that screen because I was at the Claremont graduation a few weeks ago. And Gerri came up to me, and she says, "Oh, Pastor, oh, I mean bishop." She says, "Look at me. I was SPRC chair, and now I'm graduating seminary!" Because when I was Los Angeles District Superintendent. And I went to West LA UMC to introduce Gary and Janet, Gary Oba, which those of you from Oregon-Idaho would know, and Janet Cromwell. When I went to introduce them, Gerri was the SPRC Chair. And she says, "I don't know how this works; you'll have to help me." I said, "No problem. No problem." Now she called me every two or three days like now what do I do now? What do I do next? And now what do we do?

But Gary and Janet went there and had a very fruitful ministry and under their pastoral leadership, help Gerri discern a call to go to seminary. I don't know what's after that for her. But that's the that's just the path she was on. I would have been equally as excited. If Gerri would have come up to me at that graduation and said, "I'm an usher. I was SPRC chair now and look at me, I'm an usher. Or I was SPRC. Chair. And now I'm preparing to go on a mission trip. Or I was SPRC. Chair. And now I'm volunteering three days a week as a crossing guard just so I can ensure that our children can get to and from school safely." All of it needs to be celebrated all of it.

And then that brings us to the 'E' elimination of racism. And again, it's at the end because we have to spell the word, M.I.L.E. And in this work of eliminating racism, the work here is about examining our policies, our structures and our behaviors that perpetuate racism so that we can make the changes and reparations necessary to move us toward a just and equitable space, and a reality where all are truly included in the neighbor enterprise. And I know that there's work already underway in many of our places of ministry. The issue is you didn't hear me say work is already underway in all of our ministries.

But here's the thing, this work must go beyond our congregations. For sure, but we cannot sit in our racist and oppressive systems that we perpetuate and protect so that we can secure our paychecks and bang on the gates of schools, government buildings and other entities, yelling about how much they need to change.

I recognize that all of us are in different places. And I believe we can all move in the same direction, even if we're at different places. And that direction must be as anti-racist as we can within a larger cultural and political context that is based on capitalistic and democratic principles that thrive on racism. And yes, we replicate many of those within The United Methodist Church.

Since we are all at different places, we need a variety of ways for every pastoral leader, every layperson and every ministry setting to get in the flow of things. So, we're going to provide resources for you. We're going to provide resources for book studies, provide ways for you to access speakers, and guides for you to have courageous and candid conversations. Well, you need training for those. So you're going to need more than a guide for that, but we're going to make sure you have that and access to congregational coaches, ways to have community engagement around topics that relate to or are centered around what it means to be anti-racist. We want to create some and encourage cross-cultural experiences for our leaders and also for our groups and our congregations. Some crosstown immersions can happen, and we want to keep doing our work and intercultural competency always because, at a macro level, we need a cultural shift.

We must bridge the gap between being woke and being real. Between being progressive and advancing, and being conservative and missing because we need everybody in the conversation and in the work. There is room and work for all of us to do. To that end, we've already contracted with Beth Zemsky to work with us over the next 12 to 18 months to do some of this deep reflection and intentional engagement around our policies and our structures. The consultant won't do the work for us, the consultant will guide us in doing our work. And we'll do this in cohorts. And we believe that by engaging cohorts of ministry and congregational leaders, we will unearth much of what has buried our sensibilities and sensitivities to how accustomed we are to behaving in unneighborly and inhospitable ways among ourselves and with our neighbors.

Our work with the consultant will begin in the September-October timeframe. And this will lead us to expose what we will do to move ahead with a greater sense of how our culture can change as we make different choices about what we assume and how we choose to engage. By September, we will have phase one of options for you to choose from. As you determine where you are on the journey to becoming anti-racist. We want you to get started. Or we want you to continue or intensify the work that you are already doing. Again, we're all in different places.

Now you may hear this, you may chuckle, you may try to dismiss it. You may say I'm not a racist. That may be true. However, as long as you are a member of any institution with its roots in these United States of America, you have anti-racism work to do. So, you can claim I'm not racist, but you still have anti-racism work to do.

You should also note that we will not require or expect our congregations and leaders of color to take the lead on this work. Nor will we give a pass that they are excused from doing the work. It will look different in every

committee, congregation and community. But we'll do it if we're committed to eliminating racism. This is not a spectator sport. This is one reason we will have to find our way to health, healing and wholeness in our IV (Innovation Vitality) work. See, it's back already.

Because we have someone who is respected and called upon from all around the country to do intercultural competency work in the person of Kristina Gonzalez. And we need her engaged in this work here. Now, not just in title and not just listed somewhere down in her portfolio. But we need her engaged in it. But we can't get her back to that while we're still turning tables from the past and looking for whatever it is we're looking for. And hear me say that I am willing to work with you to find a healthy, collaborative, and nimble way forward. And I'm not willing to fight a fight that has no end, that has a moving target or no clear talking points. I understand because I've been listening. I understand there were some issues of inequity, racism, and perceived lack of transparency, and those need to be addressed, and some of them already have been addressed. It's sort of like, I feel like I walked into a room, and my parents were having an argument or having a discussion. And they won't tell me what it's about, yet I feel responsible for whatever it is. And that doesn't help me lead among you.

So, let's have the tough conversations. Let's challenge ourselves to do more and be better than ever. I believe in you. Those four words that Derek Nakano shared in a devotional that the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference, "I believe in you."

Let's ensure we have people of color represented in all our processes and our structures. Let's be sure when we say persons of color that we don't define POC as some and not all. Let's also be aware that we have a limited number of people of color, or persons of color, in our churches and even in our area. So, let's be realistic and sensitive to the reality that we may be asking the conference structures to work with folks you have yet to invite into your churches or your communities. Might we also be aware that economics is a demographic indicator and most of what we require and expect is truly UMC, upper middle class?

Let's also do a new thing. Let's do what we must to move safely and timely away from the mirror. There is a need for vital ministry in every place where we are, where we have disaffiliations and places and people we have dismissed or abandoned, we have need of ministry.

Who's willing to stay on this side of the road and journey? This M.I.L.E. Who's willing to give the Samaritans in your life in your congregation and your town a chance? Who's willing to go do some window work? That's the question. We'll find the answer together. Thanks be to God.