

# Episcopal Address by Bishop Héctor A. Burgos

05/31/2024, UNY Annual Conference, Syracuse, New York

Good morning Upper New York!

I hope everyone had a restful night and you're ready and looking forward to our second day of Holy Conferencing.

This morning, I want to reflect on our shared ministry over the past year, highlighting the progress we've made, the challenges and opportunities we face, and the next steps I envision us taking together in this new season of ministry.

Last year, during my episcopal address, I clarified that doing ministry during this extended liminal times requires

constantly **prioritizing** what's most important, **celebrating** the things that are working, **acknowledging** the places where doing business as usual is no longer an option, and **shifting** in ways that will allow us to continue being witnesses of Christ's love in our communities.

As we move forward, this principle will continue guiding us. Of course, always leaving room for timely adaptation to unexpected things that might come our way.

Over the past year and moving forward, we will

continue **prioritizing relationships** over everything else, recognizing the crucial role each one of you plays in this.

For the past twelve months, through *Together in Prayer*, we prioritized our relationship with Christ, going deeper through prayer and corporate reflections and seeking to renew our connection with God and one another.

Two hundred and thirty-two churches in UNY are participating in this journey, which will continue until the end of 2024.

There is still time to

join in *Together in Prayer*. On the conference website, you can find a collection of short video reflections by a diverse group of leaders from Upper New York and me, alongside breath prayer queues that can be used during personal or communal experiences, like worship and small groups, and that you can share on social media.

Like John Wesley, I believe prayer is the most powerful to connect with God and build a community of solidarity.

Another way we are prioritizing relationships is by offering our clergy and

leaders *Together in Worship* - a monthly worship experience in which the cabinet and clergy staff rotate in leading a devotional time from our mission center in Liverpool that is live-streamed through different platforms.

Slowly but steadily, we are seeing increased participation in person and online.

Through *Together in Worship*, we desire to connect us beyond the day-to-day work and offer clergy a space to worship and nurture their faith without the pressure of planning and leading.

Over the past year, I toured the conference twice (I only missed two spots, due to illness),

connecting with over four hundred clergy and many more laity during the *Bishop's Day at the District* events. Both clergy and laity were invited to join me for a time of worship, learning, conversation, and fellowship.

Moving forward, I will continue to offer days of connection in different formats, including online gatherings.

We are also prioritizing building relationships with our ecumenical and interfaith partners. We reestablished an active relationship with the New York Council of Churches and several county-wide councils or fellowships of churches.

We are nurturing a relationship with Interfaith Works – a non-profit that brings together people of faith from different traditions to collaborate on common issues and areas of interest related to justice.

We are also ready to launch into a new season of partnership with Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University, engaging young people and offering leadership development opportunities for pastors and laity.

Friends, we will continue prioritizing relationships as we move forward, claiming God's future with joy and hope. Why? Some may ask -

because God is love, and love is a relationship. Love does not exist outside of relationships. I strongly encourage congregations and clergy to be in relationship with other churches and organizations close to you – especially, other United Methodists congregations. We don't have to do ministry alone, or in silos – we are stronger together!

**Celebrating** what's going well will also continue to be a priority.

Over the past year, our communications team highlighted over twenty-five Upper New York congregations and ministries through video stories.

Over three hundred positive stories were shared in our weekly Digest and on social media about how our congregations are making the love of God visible and tangible in our communities.

Recently, a pastor, commenting on Facebook on one of these stories, wrote, "I am going to be honest; I did not know that so many good things are happening throughout our conference and in our congregations."

Friends, we are not sharing these stories to brag or create competition between congregations. We share them to celebrate the countless ways God is working through our congregation's witness and ministries and to inspire and encourage one another in our shared journey. We have a beautiful and POWERFUL story to share with the world. We will continue celebrating our leaders and congregations, rejoicing in what we accomplish, and giving God all the glory.

Last year, we **acknowledged** that, given the new realities presented by membership trends, COVID-19, and projected disaffiliations, **we could not continue doing business as usual.**

That we needed to begin making some significant shifts at all levels for the sake of the mission. The most visible shift this past year was the reduction to six District Superintendents, each now overseeing two districts, the closing of our physical district offices, and the change from twelve to six superintendency assistants who now work remotely.

This was not an easy transition, but today, I can share that thanks to the adaptive leadership of our district superintendents and superintendency assistants, we have completed the initial implementation of this new model, and it is going well!

District Superintendents are now shifting their resourcing strategies to align them with our new framework for Missional Excellence to ensure we are equipping our leaders and congregations for impactful ministry.

You will hear more about our missional excellence framework during the leadership address tomorrow.

Speaking of not doing business as usual, several other missional initiatives are being developed that will be available soon to congregations as we continue moving forward.

One available in the fall through the Office of Missional Excellence, is intended to help congregations who want to explore collaborative ministry with other United Methodist congregations move forward together using different healthy models.

This resource is part of a two-fold strategy: first, we want to equip and support congregations where this work is happening organically to maximize their probability of success.

Also, over the summer, the cabinet will take a deep dive to identify possible areas where collaborative ministry could be the next right answer and begin inviting clusters of churches to this journey of exploration.

Let me be clear: || No one will be forced into these conversations. || We will work with congregations who are willing and ready to let go of business as usual to ensure that healthy and impactful United Methodist witness and ministry continue in their communities for many years.

Moving forward, we will also work together to **rebuild a culture of calling and strengthen our leadership pipeline.**

Rebuilding a culture of calling requires that we shift in healthy ways from a passive model of discipleship in which people are consumers of programs and recipients of services to an ethos in which disciples are empowered to grow in their faith, discover and develop their spiritual gifts, leverage their natural and acquired skills, and put them in action at the service of the mission and God's vision for the community.

Passive discipleship creates unrealistic expectations of the clergy, seeing them as the doers of ministry and disciples as the recipients.

An empowered disciple partners with clergy through their spiritual gifts and skills to move the mission forward. Our conference lay leader, Jessica White, refers to this when she speaks of "claity." Clergy and laity, working together, out of their giftedness.

This shift also allows clergy to shift from being doers of ministry to becoming pastoral leaders who enable, equip, empower, and encourage the laity to live their discipleship in the church and the community.

This vision of clergy leadership is more aligned with the biblical witness of clergy as shepherds (servant leaders) and equippers.

I look forward to partnering closely with our Board of Laity to imagine the next steps in living out the vision of claity ministry.

Another challenge we will address head-on is our **current deficit of pastoral leaders available for appointments.**

This is a matter of utmost concern to me and the cabinet. Put plainly – not enough people in our congregations sense and respond to a call to pastoral leadership.

For several years now, the cabinet began every appointment season with a new deficit of clergy available.

This year, the deficit was up to eleven—that means we started the appointment season with 11 open full-time appointments for which we had no clergy either in the pool or pipeline.

This challenge is even more significant for part-time churches. Currently, more than forty part-time churches still do not have a pastor or pastoral leader assigned to them.

We need to rebuild a culture of calling in Upper New York.

In addition to what I have already outlined, in the months and years to come, we will rebuild relationships with regional seminaries to introduce future pastors to the possibility of ministry in Upper New York.

We will more intentionally educate and promote the route of Licensed Local Pastors, which is usually an option for second-career clergy or folks who discern their calling later in life. We will also strengthen our resourcing for Lay Speakers and certified lay ministers.

Yes, these are real challenges that seriously impact the mission. Yet, I see a future filled with joy and hope as we work on them with faith and determination.

Moving forward, we will also work together in our **Financial Stewardship**.

Over the past four years, we have seen a growing number of congregations not participating 100% in our Shared Giving.

We are grateful for the sacrificial generosity of all who are fully participating, and making progress, our contributing at different levels.

However, outside of the challenges we know many congregations are facing that impact their giving, and which we are seeking to address through some of the initiatives I have mentioned, we are noticing a concerning trend of more churches reporting an increased amount of money going out to non-United Methodist causes at the expense of not supporting our Shared Giving program.

Last year alone, more than nine hundred thousand dollars went to non-Methodist ministries and initiatives from churches that did not participate 100% in our shared giving. That's almost 20% of our missional budget or almost 75% of last year's budget deficit.

We can and have to do better in this area. Shared Giving is our first mile of connectional giving as United Methodists. Is foundational to our ethos of Stewardship.

God is providing sufficient resources to achieve all that God is inviting us to do as United Methodists in Upper New York and worldwide through the connection – to make it happen, though, we need to be willing partners with God and align our resources to move forward with the mission and vision of our congregations and the United Methodist Church.

We will continue educating our clergy, leaders, and congregations about our Shared Giving and how they make an impact in the world. This is important - through our shared giving, we make possible what would be impossible individually.

With the changes made by the General Conference regarding ministry with and by LGBTQ persons, and mindful that United Methodists in Upper New York are not of one voice on this matter, we have some important work ahead of us.

I don't know about you, but I want the fighting and harm to end, so we need to collaborate and covenant to love each other and our neighbors in healthier ways.

Over the summer, I intend to convene a small theologically diverse team of clergy and laity to create a resource and process to guide congregations that want to engage in deep and courageous conversations, not to debate or seek alignment, but to (re)build relationships, listen to learn, and discern how they move forward as a theologically diverse connectional faith community.

Over the summer, we will also produce a resource to assist congregations that want to create a contextual covenant about ministry with and by LGBTQ persons so they can formalize it at their church conferences this fall.

As we move forward, the cabinet and I will continue,

- Seeing and welcoming all people and inviting them to experience the love of Christ in their lives.
- Shepherding all congregations celebrating and recognizing our diversity of culture, ethnicity, and belief as sacred gifts from God.
- Promoting a vision of missional unity that is Christ-centered and that transcends our disagreements, and
- Resourcing leaders and congregations to thrive in ministry.

Friends, I am convinced that, at this crossroads, we have a unique generational opportunity to model the love of Jesus Christ as a diverse faith community to a world that's plagued with divisions and polarizations that are destroying all sense of community.

We need to witness a countercultural vision of hope in a time when a spirit of individualism and intolerance is destroying the testimony of the church and the fiber of our society.

We have been called for such times as these.

WE ARE THE GENERATION that will show the world that the church, as a community, is still a place where joy and hope are real and can be experienced through the healing love of Jesus Christ, incarnated in through us.

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Last, but certainly not least, as I have already communicated in other spaces, we are moving forward, **intentionally investing in our young people**, fully embracing them as part of our present and as the bridge to our future and legacy.

Through the Engage Fund, we will raise funds and strengthen our connectional infrastructures so that more young people can participate in spiritual, cultural, and leadership development experiences and discern their vocational calling.

The Engage fund will also provide seed funding so that we can equip leaders and congregations willing and ready to serve as a bridge to new generations of disciples through impactful children, youth, and young adult ministries.

The Engage Fund is not just another fundraising campaign. It is an investment in our present and future. Suppose we all faithfully pledge and fulfill our promises. In that case, the Engage Fund will provide a permanent source of income to enable, equip, encourage, and empower the next generations of world-changing leaders.

We can do this. We must do this for the present and the future of the church, and the world.

To conclude this time, I am going to be quiet (I think I have talked enough) and give the platform to another young disciple from one of our congregations, Destiny Hoerbelt, who will share some of her reflections about faith, life, and how we can move forward with joy and hope.

Please give Destiny a warm welcome.

**United Methodists of Upper New York, we are moving forward together, claiming God's future with joy and hope—all for God's glory. Thank you for listening.**