

April 23, 2010

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” John 20:21b

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20

“The great Christian revolutions came not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They happen when someone takes radically something that was always there.”

H. Richard Niebuhr

On September 22-24, lay and clergy leaders of the Conference will gather at Christ UMC in Mobile for our first annual Catapult Conference. This is a phenomenal opportunity to learn from some of the most influential leaders in the Church today. Keynote speakers include Mike Slaughter, Alan Hirsch, Deb Hirsch, Reggie McNeal and Dr. Brian Russell of Asbury Seminary. In addition, numerous break out sessions will focus on action and implementation, one of which will be led by Lance Ford of shapevine.com.

This training is a response to the dramatic changes that have re-shaped our culture, and a recognition that our churches are not in a healthy position to effectively reach today's non-Christians. The United Methodist Church in the U.S. loses 1,500 members every week and the rate of decline is increasing! While we might bemoan our losses, the real tragedy is the huge and growing number of people with no experience of the life-transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Our love for Christ and our neighbor compels us to change. Our understanding and practice of the Christian faith have to be re-calibrated to the incarnational example of Jesus, emulated so well by the practices of the early Church and our own John Wesley. We must recognize that no matter the quality of our worship services, we can no longer rely on attracting people into the church. We have to take church to people where they are. Mission has to become more than a committee or a trip, it must become the organizing principle of the church. To make disciples of all nations, we have to “go.” It is imperative we re-embrace our identity as a “sent people.”

The Catapult Conference is a key part of a new initiative that will shape our life together for the coming years as the Alabama-West Florida Conference. This initiative will further our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ by keeping us focused on the basic priorities of the Church: Seeking, Engaging, Nurturing, and Deploying (S.E.N.D.). Our goal is not to prescribe a top-down, one-size-fits-all process, but to require every congregation to prayerfully discern how God is calling you to fulfill these priorities as you join in God's work in your own unique communities. Based on that discernment, each congregation will develop its own “Missional Action Plan.” This plan will then be submitted to your respective District Superintendent and will become part of how we evaluate our effectiveness as leaders and local churches. Tools to aid you in this process are being developed now and will be provided in the coming months.

While the changing culture presents many challenges to the Church, this is a time filled with new opportunities to follow the example of Christ and Wesley as we truly become missionaries to our own communities. To be clear, the road ahead will not be easy. The old institution-centered forms of church have held sway for many centuries, and for decades attraction-based forms of church growth have captured our imaginations. While these forms and methods will persist to some degree, it is critical we shift toward a more missional form of church and more incarnational forms of ministry. I am confident that if we make this shift, the best days of Methodism lie ahead of us, not behind us. That is my prayer and my commitment, and I invite you to make it yours as well. Let us join together in the adventure of God's mission, entering the surrounding mission field ripe for harvest. What an exciting time to be the people of God!

Your partner in the gospel,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Paul Leeland", followed by a horizontal line.

Bishop Paul L. Leeland

Register for the Catapult Conference now at www.catapultconference.com, and encourage your fellow leaders to do so as well!