

SERMON TITLE: "Annual Conference Report: Give Me Your Hand"

SERMON TEXTS: Acts 15:36-41; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 13-15; and Acts 8:1b-2, 4-5, 26-29, 34-38

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: July 9, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I'm very glad that Peggy and Richard Carr were able to attend the June 22th-25th Mountain Sky Annual Conference in person in Colorado Springs. I had hoped and planned to be there myself, but then needed to stay here in Ogden due to family health concerns. Fortunately, though, nearly the entire conference was streamed online, so I was able to be present digitally from start to finish. Besides showing who was up in the front, the camera often panned the congregation, and I was able to feel like I was there with my clergy colleagues and laity friends as we sang and worshiped, heard reports, were inspired by preaching, prayed and grieved, hoped and dreamed, and cast our votes. Our Mountain Sky Conference covers the four states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah—plus one town in Idaho. When it was time to lay hands of blessing on those who were being appointed to ministries throughout our conference, I was able to put my finger on my computer screen to touch your former pastor, Rev. Alane Currier-Griggs, whose appointment continues in Grand Junction, as well as our new UTWCO District Superintendent, Rev. Lou Ward.

SCRIPTURES AND ANNUAL CONFERENCE

In case you didn't figure out why today's worship service includes the three scriptures that Victoria read for us, I want to explain. I chose these three passages because of how they help describe what happened at Annual Conference.

As you've heard from Peggy and Richard, an important part of this year's Annual Conference was processing the 38 churches which had chosen to disaffiliate from the United Methodist denomination. Like Paul and Barnabas, disagreements between those congregations and current United Methodist practices had come to the breaking point. This isn't just here in the Mountain Sky Conference, of course.

This is a denomination-wide occurrence. Most annual conferences in the United States met in June, so there have been a lot of developments in just the past few weeks. An Associated Press article that has been running in the news indicated that 20% of United Methodist congregations in the U.S. have voted to leave. In our Mountain Sky Conference, the percentage was more like 10%, and here in Utah, it was actually zero.

Most of those departing were very small congregations. But, still, there was much sadness at the thought of these churches leaving the fold. As a people, we had worshiped in their buildings. We had friends and relatives in those congregations. We had volunteered alongside them in district meetings and mission projects. As pastors, we had dedicated years of our lives in service to them. As each District Superintendent took their turn speaking about the departing churches in their district, it was obvious how deeply they felt the sorrow and loss. As we worked our way through the list, we had a liturgical call and response: *"In our separation and grief, there is both despair and relief. Merciful God, we cry to you."*

But, like the **Acts 15** separation of Paul and Barnabas, the church as a whole was not left without hope. Instead, we spoke and sang and prayed many words of kindness, compassion, and grace—lots and lots of grace! We spoke words of hope that, by setting out in new directions, the spread of the gospel might be enhanced for all and that new people would be reached through our diverging ministries.

In **Acts 8**, we read of how the early Christians were scattered throughout the Mediterranean region due to persecution. What started out as a painful situation became the stimulus of sharing the gospel with a variety of people. Acts 8 tells how Philip took the gospel of Jesus to the Samaritans and then to an Ethiopian eunuch. A eunuch was someone whose sexual identity and gender issues would have excluded him from God's people in times past. But, in the new times and opportunities of Christian faith, even he could be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

The division within our denomination has caused pain, for sure, but also has presented us with the opportunity to reach out to many new people. The same can be said for the COVID pandemic. While it was certainly a terrible strain on all of us, the pandemic forced us to become resourceful and inventive in ministry. Now, besides UM camps on top of mountains and alongside lakes and streams, there is a United Methodist camp in our conference for those who enjoy playing video games on their computers. Another new ministry advertised at Annual Conference is called “Electric Faith.” This is a virtual environment where small groups will engage with each other using avatars. We older ones might not understand or appreciate that, but—as our world and society are changing—the church must change too. Last Sunday, we talked about how circuit riders carried the gospel west on horseback, and then by train; now ministers are sharing the good news in these new digital frontiers.

The third scripture we read today was about the grace involved in sharing resources with one another in our Christian connection. In **2 Corinthians 8**, the Apostle Paul was writing about grace and generosity between the churches of the Mediterranean region. As some endured great afflictions, others stepped forward and helped.

At our Mountain Sky Annual Conference, we learned of tornadoes, floods, and fires that were affecting or had affected churches of the region. We learned of generous giving that had helped out in times of crisis and transition. We heard about some who had given or received grants for their ministries. Even our Ogden First UMC was named as the recipient of a \$500 Abundant Health Grant, which we are using to provide dental care for our Cuban immigrant friends Yainier and Yusimi. We also heard that our Mountain Sky Conference’s donations of \$705,000 given to Global Ministries in 2022 totaled such a large amount that the staff at the General Board of Global Ministries double and triple-checked to make sure the figures were correct. They were!

CONCLUSION

The theme of the conference was “Give me your hand,” and—over and over again—we saw a video graphic of persons piling their hands on top of each other in solidarity. We also sang the song, “Lean on Me,” which includes these lines: “You just call on me brother, when you need a hand. We all need somebody to lean on.” And then we who were participants in Annual Conference immediately put our hands to use tapping digital donations into our cell phones. During the four days of the annual meeting, over \$11,000 was donated to East Angola Pastor Support, Family Promise of Colorado Springs, MSC Laity Scholarships, MSC Clergy Covenant Fund, MSC Flood Victims, and the United Methodist-affiliated Rocky Mountain College in Billings.

All of you are part of that gracious generosity. As Richard noted, our church has been recognized for increasing the amount we send in to the collective United Methodist ministries. We have a couple percentage points more to grow before we reach our 13% Mission Shares goal, but each donation, pledge, and tithe we offer here at Ogden FUMC helps support missionaries, humanitarian relief and global health, discipleship ministries and evangelism, and the connectional infrastructure that allows us to have a vital United Methodist congregation and conference.

So, thank **you** for using your hands to donate to this important work of God. Whether you use your hands to place coins and paper money in the offering plates at the back of the sanctuary, or use your hands to write checks that you send in the mail, or you use your fingers to type in digital donations through your computer or cell phone, you can be sure that you are making a positive difference near and far. Thank you for giving a hand!

*Lyrics (and music) by Bill Withers, c. 1972.