



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Dakotas-Minnesota Area

Resident Bishop  
Bruce R. Ough  
bishop@dkmnareaumc.org

Administrative Assistant  
Sheilah J. Kyburz  
sheilah.kyburz@dkmnareaumc.org

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### **The Bones Shall Rise: Sermon at All-Clergy Gathering**

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Dear friends and colleagues, I greet you with Paul's words to the church in Corinth:

“To those who have been made holy to God in Christ Jesus, who are called to be God's people. Together with all those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place...Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”  
(1 Corinthians 1:2-3, *CEB*)

I am so pleased and proud to be your bishop. Thank you for your attendance and participation in this Clergy Day Apart. Together, we are seeking to maintain our covenant in the bond of peace. Together, we are seeking a way forward for the Minnesota Conference that affirms both our evangelical orthodoxy and our radical hospitality and inclusion of all. Together, we are seeking to live as one of the convinced—convinced that our common faith in Christ Jesus can and will make a difference in how we live and lead. Together, we are seeking to remain “prisoners of hope” (Zechariah 9:12). Together, we are seeking to boldly claim and faithfully embrace that every one of us has been called, for such a time as this, to serve the Minnesota Conference.

Thank you as well for the mature, resilient, pastoral leadership you are already providing our congregations, particularly our LGBTQIA+ members who are confused, disheartened, wounded by the actions and messages of the recent Special General Conference, and also those in more traditional congregations who are equally dismayed by the uncivil, exclusionary tone of the Conference. You have been responding with what Dr. Randy Maddox calls responsible grace—a grace that reflects the fullness and obligation of the grace God has bestowed on each of us (*Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*).

I have already shared with the conference my own pain and brokenness. In the two weeks since the General Conference, I have found myself cycling through a series of emotions from discouragement, to compassion for all who have been hurt, to anger, to a sense of personal failure, to a resolve to push on. (I remembered telling you all that no matter what decisions were made by the General Conference, I would get up the next morning and go back to work, and I did.)



## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

In the midst of my emotional rollercoaster, I was reminded of Paul's testimony, in his second letter to the Corinthians, about his difficult and disappointing experience in Asia.

"Now that the worst is over, we're pleased we can report that we've come out of this with conscience and faith intact, and can face the world—and even more importantly, face you with our heads held high. But it wasn't by any fancy footwork on our part. It was God who kept us focused on God, uncompromised."

(II Corinthians 1:12, *The Message*)

Thanks be to God!

In the midst of the exile and the sacking of Jerusalem, God puts God's hand on Ezekiel, and while Ezekiel was in the Lord's Spirit, God opens his eyes to the valley of bones. On the valley floor lay the righteous dead whose lives ended before they saw justice. And the bones were very dry. In the desolation of place and spirit God asks Ezekiel: *Can these bones live again?*

And Ezekiel ponders: Can something be too far gone? Is it too late? From the constant warfare and hunger and death in Ezekiel's landscape, and in the constant division and mistrust in our landscape, can we know healing? As the world tumbles into chaos and the ice caps melt; as the church tumbles into depression and our positions become frozen in yet more regulation, *Can these bones live?* asks the Lord. And Ezekiel replies, *I don't know. Only you know, God.*

And then comes the instruction: *Prophecy to these bones. Tell them that I shall cause breath to enter them. Give them flesh and sinew and they shall come together again and know that I am God.*

God asks Ezekiel to preach hope to a field of dry bones, to speak of restoration when everything is falling apart. How hard. How foolish. For no one wants to bear false hope. The wars are too long, our losses too brutal, inequalities too entrenched, justice denied, the reality of the world and the distances between us too painful to look at.

But Ezekiel does as the Lord asks. He speaks hope to those dry bones. And suddenly there is a noise, a rattling, and the bones come together—bone by bone—and the sinews and flesh and skin come upon them.

And then Ezekiel calls to the winds: *Come breath; breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.* And the slain came to life and stood.

The people of Israel, says God, will protest when Ezekiel calls them to rise and live. *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are completely cut off.*



## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

*But tell them, I will open your graves and raise you, and put my spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall bring you home, and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it.*

Friends, does it not feel like the valley of dry bones is our story? Is not Ezekiel's prophecy a word for our beloved United Methodist Church in this moment? Do we not yearn for God's "Spirit-breath" to fill us that we might live?

There are dry bones everywhere. The "airways" are full with accusations of blame, with pleas for prayer, with analysis of our increasingly dysfunctional polity and politics, with plans for schism, with laments of pain, anger, and embarrassment, with calls for confession and repentance, with acknowledgments of bitter defeat or hollow victory, with expressions of resistance or resignation, with protests that all hope is lost. There are dry bones everywhere.

All of these statements echo God's question to Ezekiel: *Can these bones live again?* All these statements resound with the questions: Is The United Methodist Church too far gone? Is it too late for us? Has the human sexuality battle been won, but the church lost? Are the bones too dry, too broken, too trampled upon?

I believe God has given us a word today. And that word is "no"—it is not too late. The word is that these dry bones will live again. In our season of desolation and division, in this season of Lent, in our valley of dry bones, God puts God's hand upon us and says: *Preach to the bones. Tell them they shall come together.* In the fullness of God's grace, there is nothing, no one, too far gone

- for the winds—the breath of life and change—are ever blowing;
- for the winds—the breath of resurrection—are ever blowing;
- for the winds—the breath of a new creation—are ever blowing.

So how do we catch this breath? How do we hoist our sails into the Spirit-wind? How do we prepare ourselves to live again? How do we serve as God's conduit for God's Spirit to be breathed into our congregations, communities, and conference?

For me, we need to begin yet today to open ourselves to God's unlimited imagination for our conference. We need to wrestle with the fundamental questions: What kind of church is God calling us to be in Minnesota? What dreams for who we want to be will honor God and expand God's kingdom reign in Minnesota?

I hold fast to my dream for The United Methodist Church in the Dakotas-Minnesota Area.

- I dream of a church that is colorful, diverse and full of love.
- I dream of a church that is passionately evangelical and transformative in its mission.
- I dream of a church that is deeply Wesleyan and wonderfully welcoming.



## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

- I dream of a church that reflects the strength and humility of our crucified Lord.
- I dream of a church that has the courage to challenge bias, bigotry, and injustice of all kinds.
- I dream of a church where traditionalists and progressives respect one another and truly value the contribution each makes to our missional enterprise.
- I dream of a church formed not by our doctrinal schism, but by missional necessity.
- I dream of a church that freely and joyfully provides space for all who are gifted and called by God.
- I dream of a church that is resolutely committed to the Methodist values of evangelical piety, ecumenical openness, and social justice.
- I dream of a church that will not dismiss our traditional colleagues' calls and contributions.
- I dream of a church that will not leave our LBGTQIA brothers and sisters or their gifts along the side of the road.
- I dream of a church whose first impulses are expanding love and movemental mission, not static rules and excessive regulations.
- I dream of a church where we do not file complaints against one another, but seek to resolve our differences through prayer and building trust relationships.
- I dream of a church where the radical discipleship and inclusivity of Jesus are never separated and always celebrated.
- I dream of a church that has a heart of peace toward one another and will avoid objectifying or demonizing those with whom we disagree.
- I dream of a church that no longer seeks its unity in political compromise or institutional stasis or a monolithic governance structure, but in our common love of Jesus and the fully empowered participation of all God's children.
- I dream of a church that is as comfortable with messiness and inconsistency as are the scriptures.
- I dream of a church that allows clergy to hold fast to our covenantal relationships with each other, while being free to exercise their consciences on matters related to same-gender marriage.
- I dream of a church that does no harm, does all the good it can, and attends to the disciplines of loving God and neighbor.
- I dream of a church with a loving heart, not a heart of stone, and a new and right spirit.

Dear colleagues, God is speaking to us today. Do you have ears to hear? Can you hear God saying to us: *Human ones, my beloved, can these bones live again?* How shall we answer?

Dear colleagues, God is placing God's hand on us and saying: *Prophesy over these bones and tell them they will live again.* Can you prophesy?



## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

Dear colleagues, hear the Good News: Even in the places of desolation and despair and division, the bones shall rise and shall be given the breath of life. And all shall know that the Lord has done this! May it be so. Amen!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bruce R. Ough". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough  
Resident Bishop, Dakotas-Minnesota Area  
The United Methodist Church