

New Beginnings — The Advent Witness

An Account of The Advent Gathering

December 3 and 4, 2019

St. Andrew UMC, Highlands Ranch, CO

Now, and not yet.

In the first week of Advent, the season of hope, more than sixty Methodists gathered to embody and dream of a new church. Acknowledging that we gathered on the ancestral lands of the Cheyenne, Ute, and Sioux peoples, we began our worship singing of belonging and home; we named wounds, scars, and our longing for a church where everyone can know the embrace of God. And in our celebration of Holy Communion we experienced that church.

We held as a touchstone the core values to which we all agreed as participants in the Advent Gathering:

- *Participants affirm that all people—including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual + (LGBTQIA+) persons, people of color, disabled persons, and women—are created in the Divine Image, are of inherent sacred worth, and shall be fully included in the life, ministry, practices, and leadership of the church.*
- *Participants reject any institutional policy that would deny the full participation of persons in the church based on age, nationality, race, class, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability.*
- *Participants commit to upholding Methodism's historic emphasis on grace, personal holiness, and social justice, over and above loyalty to institutional identity.*
- *Participants envision a vibrant church living the Gospel and uncompromising on Jesus' love ethic of full inclusion and affirmation—a church set free from injustice, oppression, and discrimination, building the beloved community of the kin-dom at hand.*
- *Participants are called to make a faithful future irresistible: creating and shaping a way of collective flourishing, intersectional justice, transformative healing, and liberating love.*

Contextualizing our work together, we proclaimed our reliance on the Holy Spirit rather than a legislative solution for our denominational future. We acknowledged the environment in which we find ourselves in this tender time between February 2019 and May 2020, and having recognized this context, we set aside legislative concerns. Even as Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch were not bound by customs of formal worship, we did not let legislative realities prevent us from coming to the waters of baptism and new birth.

Ilf School of Theology professor and ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, [Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath](#) guided us in the task of revival grounded in Acts 8:26-40, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism. Noting that revision is an important part of revival, we focused on the need for a reform movement for Christendom, rather than tweaking or attempting to fix a broken system. We named the ways in which a history of interlocking systems of oppression have bound us and limited our capacity to experience the freedom of Christ. In [her](#)

[presentation](#), Dr. Leath offered hope by reminding us that sixteen delegates formed the AME Church, now more than two million members.

We experienced a tangible hope, embodied in bold truth-telling and collaborative leadership. We acknowledged that Christendom, and in particular the United Methodist Church, are embedded in imperialism, colonialism, and racism. We further recognized our individual and collective complicity with oppressive systems and touched on ways to confess complicity and make reparations. We declared that in order to imagine the “new” we must divest from the violence that empire inflicts.

We learned that we must do what University of Notre Dame associate professor [Rev. Dr. David Hooker](#) described as “dirt work” — working not only on the fruits of justice, but also attending to the trunk, the roots and the very dirt which produce it, because the fruit we produce is the product of the dirt that is cultivated. We proclaimed that we cannot move into a liberative future without the reparative work of reshaping the very container with which the church holds the gospel. In [his presentation](#), Dr. Hooker encouraged us to focus on *being* to inform our *doing*, and he helped us envision being leaders in the midst of denominational chaos and the transformative work in which we are engaged.

We envisioned and embodied the contours of a liberative church, with the understanding that these ideas represent not consensus but collection, not an end of the conversation but a beginning, including:

- Holding creative tension rather than rushing to solve problems and produce outcomes;
- Decentering clergy and empowering laity;
- Mutuality rather than hierarchy, modeled after practices such as base communities and circles of consensus;
- Creating intentional communities;
- Upholding the dignity of all persons;
- Reclaiming truly holy conferencing, revivals, and connectionalism;
- Ongoing education and organizing; and
- Teaching, preaching, and practice rooted in liberation.

In order to advance this collective work, we formed three working groups — liberative leadership, liberative connectionalism, and liberative resources — to draft 1-2 page visions statements (by January 15, 2020) that articulate decolonized, organizational elements of a new, relevant, affirming, liberative church.

We concluded The Advent Gathering as we began, by celebrating Holy Communion. Receiving sustenance for the journey ahead, we continue to dream and live into this emerging church. Claiming the meaning and purpose of Advent, our “not yet” comes from trusting the promises of God as we hold, with hope, a vision for liberation.