

Called as Partners
Hawaii Conference - Aha Pae'aina

11 June 2016
Honolulu, Hawaii

Good morning friends! It is a pleasure to be here with you on the occasion of the Aha Pae-aina, a time of fellowship, renewal and celebration as you enter into this new partnership with the South Seoul Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the staff of the national setting of the United Church of Christ and in particular from the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer who serves as *General Minister and President*. One of the goals of these first two years of Rev. Dorhauer's leadership among us is that members of the national staff have taken on the task to be in touch with every United Church of Christ congregation. Some of your congregations may already have received a call, if not, you are on the list, as we reach out to affirm the covenantal relationship that is at the core of our lives and witness together as the UCC, present and visible in multiple settings across the United States and the world.

I also want to say what a pleasure it is to be here as you celebrate this partnership with the PROK and welcome my dear colleague Rev. Min Heui Cheon and the other delegates to Hawai'i. This relationship with the PROK deepens and enriches the ecumenical life of the United Church of Christ and the Hawaii Conference. It is great to see Min Heui, and I would like to thank her in this venue for the warm hospitality the PROK extended to me and to the members of the Hawaii Conference delegation led by Rev. Charles Buck and Rev. Iese Tuuao when we attended the PROK Assembly last summer.

Last, but not least, my thanks to Rev. Buck and Rev. Iese Tuuao for their leadership here in the conference and across the UCC and for the invitation to be here with you this morning. It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you.

The theme and occasion of this year's Ahi Pae'aina is all about the relational work that is the life of the Church. I am not talking about the United Church of Christ, but rather about the life of the Church universal, of Christendom. Called as Partners is the title of the opening hymn we sang, and is the named theme for our gathering here, in this place. Called as partners to serve God and to serve mankind. Yes, this all makes lots of sense, so why don't we do more of this relational work? What stops us from living into the possibilities and promise of unity that is life giving?

The Church is in a very challenging place. Mainline denominations are in decline in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center's 2014 [Religious Landscape Study](#) "14.7% of U.S. adults are affiliated with the mainline Protestant tradition - a sharp decline from 18.1% when our last Religious Landscape Study was conducted in 2007. Mainline Protestants have declined at a faster rate than any other major Christian group, including Catholics and evangelical Protestants, and as a result also are shrinking as a share of all Protestants and Christians." (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>)

Churches are in decline. If we look around most of the mainline denominations, they are also aging rapidly with very little change in spite of our social media interventions on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. How do we save ourselves by finding our way to the fountain of youth, not to reverse our own aging, but to find the young people that we think are going to save us from ourselves and bring renewal, hope and vigor to our congregations?

Pew Research has a lot to say in its latest report, so here is one more tidbit: "Additionally, more Americans have been leaving mainline Protestantism than joining the tradition. Nearly one-in-five Americans (19%) were raised in the mainline tradition, but more than half of them (10.4% of all U.S. adults) have left the faith. Meanwhile, 6.1% of Americans have become mainline Protestants after being raised in another tradition. As a result, for every convert to mainline Protestantism, about 1.7 people have left the mainline tradition behind."

We are aging, we are losing hope what are we going to do? This is a time of celebration. We are talking about partnerships, not about church decline, where is the hope? Partnerships is the theme, not decline and people leaving the church? Where is any of this going?

There is a history of the church that often gets in the way of how we live together. That is the disease of "we have always done it that way" coupled with "we have no money for that." The Church as we know it is changing around the world and we can choose to find new ways to spread the gospel and find our way to talk about Jesus and the way of the cross or run the risk of perishing where we are.

The history of the church in the United States and Europe was rooted in a missional imperative that sought to spread the gospel at the expense of people's lives, culture and heritage. Colonization around the world was done with the Bible and guns. Desmond Tutu is quoted as having said:

"When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land." (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/desmond Tutu107531.html>)

That was true on the African continent, throughout Asia, and the Pacific as well as the Caribbean. Global systems of oppression have been formulated in the wake of the early days of the missionaries and the forces of imperialism and even now, the church continues to defy the Spirit of God which calls us to live differently than we ever have in these days.

Let me revisit something I said earlier, with a change of source. I said the church is in decline in the United States. Well, according to Christianity Today, the Church is growing slowest in the United States and Europe, that's the bad news told in a different way.

What difference does it make if it a decline versus a slow rate of growth in Europe and the United States? I have good news for you here: while the statistics are pointing to a glum forecast for the future of the church here and in Europe, things are very sunny elsewhere because my friends, the Church is growing fast in all other places. How is that for good news? The Church is experiencing explosive growth in Asia, Africa and South America. That is the good news!

The Church is burdened by a past it keeps confessing but cannot seem to live beyond. We continue to confess to racism but we perpetuate it by the silence that we bring to critical issues of class, race, and inequalities that separate and marginalize. The Church continues to confess that human rights and freedom are guaranteed for all, yet the Church has been complicit in denying the rights and dignities of communities globally. Even as the Church continues to grow in places that were colonized and Christianized with the abuse of people and the victimization of masses, this colonial history continues to deny that which it cannot take credit for.

Here is what Christianity Today has to say. In the interest of full disclosure, let me name that Christianity Today may be a tad more evangelical and right than I am used to in my more recent self-orientation as a Christian. Let me also say that Christianity today is not my first resource for material dealing with the Church today, but this time folks, they have it rights and here is what they have to say about the growth of the Church outside Europe and the United States:

"...Strangely, this statistical growth is often met with some scepticism by the western Church. I often hear derogatory remarks about Christianity outside Europe, North America and Australia. There is a superiority complex when it comes to the global Church.

There remains a conviction that Western Christians should be congratulated for heading off on teaching ministries to educate church leaders or for raising funds to correct theological challenges in the rest of the world. Christians in Nigeria and South Sudan are facing extreme levels of persecution and the Church is still growing, but it is rare for Christians in the West to think that we have anything to learn from believers there...

So despite stupendous growth and spiritual blessing there is still a colonial mindset in western Churches that wishes to downplay God's work in those countries. Perhaps it is time that our conference organisers, publishers and missionary organisations help the Church in the West to reorient its place in the global Church, ensuring that we approach our brothers and sisters in the two-thirds world with greater humility and a willingness to learn."

(http://www.christiantoday.com/article/a_growing_church_why_we_should_focus_on_the_bigger_picture/49362.htm)

There is much to be said on this quote from Christianity Today, but at the very least I would own that this is a major part of the problem. Partner relationships have traditionally been rooted in a top down, paternalistic, hierarchical, let me give you something, let me tell you what to do fashion. We in the West approached the rest of the church as a place to send our hand me downs and other forms of benevolence and charity, absent from the mandate of Jesus who said repeatedly that we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In this 21st century, partner relations are not about colonization, but it is about our collective fight for freedom on behalf of all, for the rights and dignity of all, and for an inclusive Gospel that guarantees that the wounded are made whole and the captives are set free.

In this 21st century, partner relations ought to be based on mutuality and respect that says that all are equal, all bring something of value to the table, and ALL are treated fairly. Our partner relations and the relationships we forged are to be based on the love of God that calls us to live life that is right in Christ.

And, in this 21st century, we have the words of the Hebrew writer, like a herald crying out in the wilderness and saying: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken." Those words are found in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

There is strength in the possibility of relationship. There is strength in partnership but we have to be willing to walk together, to travel together and to learn and grown together.

That is the hope that lives in the possibility of this partnership between the Southern Presbytery of the PROK and the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ.

I want to share with you some characteristics of a good partnership. Trust, common values, chemistry, defined expectations, synergy and great communication. While these characteristics were derived from partnerships in business they are more than applicable here in talking about and naming the type of relationship that is desired in any partnership.

Our calling as members of the body of Christ is not of our own making or doing. Jesus' prayer that they may all be one was not a moment of idleness or frivolity but was a desire for unity that continues to escape us. There was a time in the life of the Church when organic unity such as that expressed by the united and uniting churches was seen as the ultimate goal for the church. The united and uniting churches made the ultimate sacrifice in giving up their former singular expressions to form one body. The hope was that this union would continue until the Church was once again united. In that too we claim unity but not uniformity.

These days, the focus is no longer solely on organic union but is about fresh expressions and opportunities to do ministry together and is about ways in which settings of the Church can work together collaboratively. The opportunities to collaborate abound and must be sought out if the Church, not the Church of the West or the Church of the South, but the Church is to live a full, deep and meaningful vision of the Divine.

The United Church of Christ has a lot to learn from the many global partners we have acquired over the years. Some of our partners are the product of historic missional outreach from predecessor bodies. This too is a historic moment where we can model a new way of being in relationship together.

The relationship has begun with meetings and with opportunities for visits. From a small planted seed the possibility of this partnership bloomed. From that small seed, the partnership will grow, flourish and hopefully produce new fruit that will continue to nurture and support our two communions.

The United Church of Christ and the Hawaii Conference Ucc has a lot to learn from the PROK and I would hope that we are willing to sit, listen and learn. We do not have all the answers. As we try to find relevance in the world and figure out forms of worship, the PROK can be a vital resource. As we attempt to find ways to grow our congregations and communities, may we find ways to do so together. There is so much that lies ahead of us. Let us find our way into new life together.

The **Lund Principle** is an important principle in ecumenical relations between Christian churches. It affirms that churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.

It arises from a question raised by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the [World Council of Churches](#) held at [Lund, Sweden](#). After "earnestly request[ing] our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God", it continued: "Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lund_Principle)? This means that, instead of doing ecumenical things, Christians and churches should try to do things ecumenically, in particular, to do things together which are already a part of their normal life, i.e., to share a common life.

What are the issues that require our attention? There are a myriad of justice issues that require our attention here and in Korea. There are issues that are related to life here in Hawaii differently than the 49 states that occupy the North American continent. How will join our voices together to address the global challenges that we face together as Church and as people of God?

This is a kairos moment, an opportunity to lives as partners called to called to God's service. For this we live in hope. For this we are called to God's service.

Seven Characteristics of a Great Partnership

Source: Partner Insights

The following includes excerpts, reproduced with permission, from an article by August Aquila.

The following seven characteristics form the foundation of a great partnership. If you are missing any of them or if you merely need to improve in some areas, now is the time to start strengthening your firm's foundation.

- 1 Trust. Without trust there can be no productive conflict, commitment, or accountability.
- 2 Common values. I believe that having common values is the very foundation of the successful partnership. This does not mean that partners are clones of one another, but partners need to agree upon the firm's core values.
- 3 Chemistry. How do you feel about your fellow partners? Would you still make them partners today?
- 4 Defined expectations. The best partnerships set goals for each of the partners at the beginning of the year. And they don't try to make all the partners do the same things. They look to leverage each partner's strengths.
- 5 Mutual respect. When partners have defined expectations and understanding of each others' strengths, they develop a mutual respect for each other. Respecting your partner in key areas is indispensable in making a partnership work.
- 6 Synergy. Great partnerships create more than the sum of the whole. If you are a big-picture person, then you want to be partnered with a detailed person. If you are a strategic leader, then you want a partner who is a good implementer.
- 7 Great two-way communications. The above elements of a good partnership won't make much difference if there is not good or great two-way communication in the firm. Managing partners and partners need to communicate frequently and effectively to make a partnership work.

[http://www.cpaleadership.com/
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