

Equip 2018 Opening Talk
January 20 and 27, 2018
Rev. Jay Therrell

There's a saying that often gets attributed to a Navy SEAL, but is probably from an ancient Greek poet, that goes something like this: "Under pressure, you don't rise to the occasion, you sink to the level of your training." The idea that the SEAL is trying to get across is that training is vitally important. If there's a crisis situation, we tend to automatically revert to what we've been trained to do. Accordingly, if we're trained well, we have a much greater chance of surviving the situation. I'd say that's very true for a Navy SEAL. We need those folks to be very well trained so they can survive and defend our nation.

You know something? I think that saying is true for the church, too. When we face a time of crisis, we don't tend to rise to the occasion. We sink to the level of our training. The thing is...that's a problem for us. Let's break that saying down when it comes to the church. First, we are facing a crisis. Our churches are declining. I don't say that to alarm you, but I do say it to create a sense of urgency. We don't have the year-end numbers from our churches for 2017 yet, but we know using the 2016 churches for our vitality metrics that 22 of our 72 churches are vital. That means 50 of them aren't! Almost 40% of the churches in our district in 2016 had either zero professions of faith or baptisms. We can no longer afford to wait to figure this out.

Second, the saying goes when you're under pressure, we don't tend to rise to the occasion, we sink to the level of our training. The problem with that is that most of us were trained how to make disciples and do evangelism decades ago. In 2018, evangelism and making

disciples looks very different. If we're going to default to our training we're going to be in trouble very quickly. That's why we're here today. We specifically designed this event to help people understand that evangelism in 2018 has to be approached differently.

The reality is that if you're under 50 years old – a member of Generation X, a Millennial, or a Generation Z, you're very likely suspect of church. You've heard stories of Christians doing things Christians have no business doing. You might think Christians are judgmental and hypocritical. Coming to a sanctuary on a Sunday morning at 11am in order to worship when the rest of the world is so much more decentralized seems archaic. With all of what I just said, I promise you the ways we've done church for decades is no longer working. If the 1950s come back around, we're perfectly positioned to reach people. Friends, those days are long gone and they aren't coming back. We're in a post-Christian, post-modern world.

Now all of that sounds very negative. Perhaps you might be thinking, "What's the point? There isn't any hope." I want you to know that I actually am more excited about the church of Jesus and our mission of making disciples than I ever have been. I sincerely and honestly believe that our best days are ahead!

The reason is that Methodists are perfectly poised to reach people for Jesus in 2018 and beyond. Why? Because it's in our DNA. When John Wesley founded the Methodist movement, the Church of England had become largely irrelevant. It was viewed as a place for the rich to get their spiritual services and make contacts. Pews were largely empty. People weren't going to church much anymore.

What did Wesley do? He began to preach in the fields! He went to where people were gathered. He didn't wait for people to come to the church. He knew they wouldn't. He went to

them. That's who we are. It's our history. It's our foundation. We've just gotten away from it. We've forgotten who we are.

I've shared this quotation so many times, some of you are probably tired of hearing it.

Wesley said to his Methodists"

"You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go not only to those that need you, but to those that need you most. It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance."

That's who we are. We are people who understand that we have nothing to do but to save souls. Wesley was always clear that saving souls meant helping people to choose to follow Jesus and then help them get into a process to grow into the likeness of Jesus. It's both.

You know what saving souls doesn't look like? Saving souls doesn't look like thinking evangelism happens by osmosis. It doesn't look like filling our church calendars with events that only benefit the people who are already there. It doesn't look like never leaving the four corners of our church campuses.

Saving souls means finding where people are gathered in our communities and then finding ways to bring church to them. It looks like meeting new people in places in new ways. It looks like understanding that the church is the only organization on the planet that exists for the people who are not yet a part of it. It looks like a group of people who understand that church doesn't exist to feed them. Instead it exists to equip them to go out and share the Good News of hope, love, grace, and salvation that we already know.

We are privileged. Jesus has told us that we His Plan A to reach the world and there isn't a Plan B. It's us. Even us! Yes, we're in a crisis, but we can no longer afford to default to our

training. That training was for a different day and time. It's time to rise to the occasion, recover our DNA of going to people to bring them Jesus, and make the choice that church isn't about us. It's about the people in our families, neighborhoods, and work places who don't yet know Jesus.

As Billy Graham likes to say, "I've read the Bible. I know how the story ends. God wins!"

Friends, our best days are ahead. It's time to get to work. We can do this.

Amen? And amen.