

State of the Conference Address  
Cabinet Dean Rene Perez  
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## **“Surely...We Shall Rise in New England in the next generation.” ~Francis Asbury~**

Good morning, New England Annual Conference! My name is Rene. Antonio. Perez. Avalos. I am currently and gratefully serving the Central Massachusetts “*movers and shakers*” District. But like our Bishop always reminds us, we are Conference Superintendents. So, as a Conference Superintendent and current Dean of the cabinet, it is my pleasure, on behalf of the Cabinet, to share with you the State of the Conference Report.

In this report, we want to highlight the celebrations, the hopes, the realities and the challenges, we face as an Annual Conference, through the eyes of Cabinet. We can say with certainty that God is not done with us yet, but about the future, as **1 Corinthians 13:12** says, “*We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly just as God knows us!*”

As I begin it is important to acknowledge that our annual conference is a historical gathering of merged conferences-conferences that although in name no longer exist, they are very much alive and present in heart and spirit. We are a conference that has become over time an impressive and significant hub for ethnic, theological, cultural and spiritual diversity. In the words of Bishop Francis Asbury (First bishop of NE), New England is “*a foreign land unlike the rest of the nation,*” yet one filled with hopefulness where the United Methodist movement will “*surely rise in the next generation.*” Asbury lived to witness what he had foreseen. (The NEC by James Mudge)

You and I are the fruits of that generation! We are in six states, 84,151 lay members in 589 local churches, nine districts, one conference. We are united by one Spirit, one baptism, One Lord, who is God of us all; and despite all the challenges we may face as a conference, church, and denomination, New England CAN SURELY RISE!

We can rise in the voices of the immigrants, the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the evangelicals as well as the liberals, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Confessing Movement as well as the Reconciling Movement, the dreamers and the prophets, the Mainers and the non-Mainers, all of us, from here or elsewhere, we will rise! Jesus said that “*the gates of hell will not prevail against [us] it.*” (Matthew 16:18)

### *In the words of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet Maya Angelou...*

You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies,  
you may tread me in the very dirt but still, like dust, I’ll rise.

### *#2 Myung Park*

Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom?  
‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells Pumping in my living room.  
Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high, Still I’ll rise.

### *#3 John Marshall*

Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops, Weakened by my soulful cries?

### *#4 Charlotte Prichen-Randolph*

Does my haughtiness offend you? Don’t you take it awful hard  
‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines digging in my own backyard.  
You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I’ll rise

### #5 Me? Or someone else

Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?  
Out of the huts of history's shame...I rise

### #6 Effie McAvoy

Up from a past that's rooted in pain...I rise.  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear...I rise.  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear... I rise.  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave...  
I rise... I rise...I rise...

We still will rise!

***(Poem by Maya Angelou- Still I Rise) Participants: (I will need each district superintendents' permission to contact these people)***

Friends, it is a joy and a challenge to share this report with you today. I share it in the spirit of love and solidarity, and yet, I speak with fear and trembling, aware of my own limitations, and knowing that my views may not be shared by all or many or any. Truth be told, I wish I could say what I am about to say better, but sugar-coating is not one of my spiritual gifts.

The New England Conference is at a defining moment in history! We believe God is calling out the best of us, calling us to be different than how we have been

- More graceful with one another than how we've been in our words and actions.
- More Christ-like and Holy Spirit-led than how we've been.
- More prayerful and discerning than what we've been in our decisions.
- More truth-telling and justice-seeking than what we've been in our commitment.
- More accepting and welcoming than what we've been in our relationships.
- More committed and less whiny than what we've been in our covenant.

It has been obvious for a while that, when it comes to some of the matters that matter the most, we are not all on the same page. However, if the New England Conference is to rise in the midst of strife, we need to genuinely love one another, not ignoring our differences but with eyes-wide-open, respecting each other for the sake of the love of Christ, which binds us together. We ought to do it, not because we are asked to do it, but because Christ compels us to do it.

Can we agree that the manifestation of God through the witness and diversity of our Conference be lifted up and not put down or shut down? Could we, for the love of God and neighbor- whether we consider ourselves evangelical conservatives or passionate liberals or hopeful moderates or anywhere in between- find a way to live together? If we don't, how will we authentically accomplish the mission of Christ?

My dear colleague Rev. Gwen Puroshotham, interim district superintendent of the NH District, writes: *"I see a conference, a people, that is caught in dualistic thinking- of labeling ideas and actions as right and wrong; true or false, good or bad. I see fragile communities of faith held together by managing diversity instead of celebrating it. I see churches held captives by old buildings and old visions robbing disciples of life-giving faith and depriving communities of life-giving ministries... Mixed with all this, I see transformed people and churches moving out to share God's dream for us- to love the incarcerated and their families, to heal persons with addictions, to express faith and ask questions, to feed those who are hungry, to create community with persons who are homeless, to speak truth to illegitimate power, to unleash the Spirit's gifts among the laity for ministries in the marketplace, to practice hospitality to the stranger, to speak words of grace to the fearful, sick, dying and despondent, to dismantle white racism and foster authentic and diverse communities."*

Jesus said, *“the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”* (Matthew 10:2) There is much work we need to do, and yet the future we hope for will require for us to go higher and beyond any statements we can make. It will require for pastors and leaders, lay and clergy alike, from bottom to top, from right to left, to adapt and lead in new ways and into places we have never been before. In other words, it will need our conversion. It will need for us to embrace a chaotic and seismic change that is so radical that we will become a new people, together. In the words of Mike Regele, founder of Percepts, *“A decision is imminent, but it is only a decision about how the church will die in order to live again.”* Otherwise, *“we are destined to wake up one day and find ourselves...sitting on the backburner and wondering what happened.”*

That’s what we often ask ourselves when we close churches. What happened? Although we celebrate the life and ministries of the churches we closed this year and prior years, we also mourn the inability of our connection and our structures to bring new life to them; and truth be told, the unwillingness of some of these churches to be changed by God. Yet, we cannot forget that each one of these churches were faithful for as long as they could be in their mission of extending the grace of the kingdom of God to the people in their communities.

As with all of us, most likely in their history, they experienced years of excitement, growth and influence, but something happened along the way which led them to this day. *This glorious and sad day!* It could have been an overlooked demographic or cultural change in their community, a pastoral transition that didn’t work out well, a harmful conflict that went unresolved, the unwillingness to evolve, or a conscious decision that it was just time. Whatever the case, a choice was made along the way which led to this day. We are thankful for these churches: *(ask people connected to these churches to stand as the names are read)*

- River UMC in Woonsocket, RI
- Deering Memorial in South Paris, ME
- Eaton Memorial in Livermore Falls, ME
- Bloomfield and Chelsea West Hill, ME
- Christ UMC in Wellesley, MA
- Lexington UMC, Lexington, MA

What now? We can lead or we can be led. We can let change happen to us or we can make change happen for us and through us . But no change is going to be easy. Change demands a temporary yet total surrender of our wills. It is a reexamination of what is so we can discover what could be. Change takes conversation. For and for us, truly holy conversation or a holy circle process which must be firmly grounded in trust. Yes! I said it, trust- because listening takes trust, and trust takes listening. We need deep compassionate listening. We need the willful and humble listening of the other. The easy other as well as the difficult other. The compassionate other as well as the hurtful other; and this, my sisters and brothers, requires trust. This is hard and painful work.

There is no greater and more noble task than that of listening to understand, especially when everything (I mean everything) is on the line. If we have everything to lose then we have everything to gain. I am fully aware that it isn’t all black and white. But let me say, we can fight and argue until there is no one left to fight with, or we can learn to live together, find new solutions together, embrace change together, so that what we leave for new generations is far better and fairer than what was given to us. That’s the decision.

The task is ours to do. What will be our decision? We are at a defining moment in our history. We can reject the hope of this moment and continue our course, or we can embrace the possibilities of what God can do through it right now. There is no life without death. That is central to our Christian beliefs; that to live for Christ, we must die to ourselves. So, we not only find hope in resurrection, but also find hope in death, because without death there is no new life.

It is this foundation of death to life that has allowed the flow of organic ingenuity, uncompromised excellence, and bold faith for us to be able to start and rethink new ministries in our conference, whether they be mergers, satellites or simple church starts. God’s grace has led people across our New England connection to take leaps of faith for the sake of Christ and the world. Among those we can celebrate are: \*

1. Jesus Life Center in Worcester;
2. Fresh Expressions in Augusta, ME;
3. Living Faith in Ipswich, MA;
4. Faith Community Church in Plymouth, MA.
5. 2<sup>nd</sup> Site of Simple church in Worcester, MA
6. Carter Memorial UMC in Needham, MA
7. New Church in Bennington, VT

The Spirit is already at work in our churches and communities. For this reason, the outcomes of our changes must be centered in Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit and be aimed at fulfilling God's vision for God's church.

This is God's church! As imperfect as it is, Jesus Christ is her foundation. From Limestone, **ME** to the Canadian border near West Swanton, **VT**; from Niantic, **CT** to the Narraganset Bay, **RI** where Francis Asbury crossed; and from beautiful Lake Francis in Pittsburg, **NH** to the fingers of Cape Cod, **MA** it is all God's church.

Each one of us present here is part that church. We are members of a covenant which makes us part of that church and calls us children of God. As members of that covenant, we call one another to live faithfully in that covenant. Like our Bishop tells the Cabinet, this is the covenant of the covenant of the covenant. We, as the cabinet, interpret his words as a sacred covenant which calls us- the clergy and laity of our congregations as well as the conference leadership- to live our part, and to do our very best to support one another and to hold one another accountable, in love.

We face many challenges, but they are not insurmountable. Some of us as clergy have lived, or still live, in parsonages which are unsuitable and in need of repair; while others of us may live in the best neighborhoods and homes New England can offer. We are asking congregations to support your pastors so that they can live out their calling faithfully, peacefully, and that their homes may be a sanctuary for them and for their families, as you would want your homes to be. We ask pastors to be faithful stewards of their parsonages as well. I must say, we are grateful to those churches that sacrifice time, energy and money to be good stewards of all their properties despite financial constraints. That is also part of our covenant!

Our Bishop and appointive Cabinet continue to be committed to the covenant of making prayerful, thoughtful, and discerning appointments as the Spirit leads, and to follow the process of consultation outlined in our Book of Discipline. (We are not perfect so we need your grace!) Our Bishop is sensitive and aware that in the case of clergy with high-school-age children, a move can create great anxiety and distress if the family moves. He also takes into consideration if the spouse of the clergy has a job outside the home.

Yet, even with all these and other considerations, appointment-making is becoming more difficult every year. While we are facing the challenge of having fewer full time appointments every year (2-3) and having to connect part time churches to create full time appointments, we are also facing the unwillingness and/or inability of some clergy to itinerate. Although itinerancy may be a challenge for some of us and perhaps a burden in a sedentary society and/or a change that is long-overdue; it is still part of our covenant, and a core value of our principles and theology. We need your help in renewing our commitment.

We are in this together. And like the apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 12:26 *"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."* But we are a work in progress, aren't we? God is not done with us yet. For us to truly live into our commitment with one another, we must be a community of love and respect- an inclusive community of equals. We need to address many concerns which still plague our society as well as our church.

We need to address the disparities and inequities of salaries. While we rejoice with churches who are able to increase the salary of their clergy every year, we lament that there are parts of our conference where many of our clergy have been living with minimum salary for many years, particularly in urban and rural areas, most areas in the state of Maine, many of our brothers and sisters of color, and all women.

In the last few years, Cabinet, on behalf of this body and with the support of CFA and the Board of Pensions, has felt the tugging of the Holy Spirit to financially support mission churches. These are churches who are ministering under the constraints of limited financial resources, are faithfully serving their communities, are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, are strategically located within the Annual Conference, and are serving the poor and underserved populations.

Thanks to the generosity and steadfastness of the churches of this conference, through your mission shares, we have been able to allocate nearly \$250,000 to encourage the mission and ministry of these congregations. Furthermore, with the grace of God and in partnership with the Commission on Equitable Compensation, you are also helping many of the minimum salary churches, and pay their clergy a modest compensation. This is also part of our covenant...out of our abundance *"to give to anyone who has need."* Acts 2:45

There are many more exciting things to celebrate in our life together and challenges we are facing. Although I will not be able to elaborate, each one of these are as much part of our covenant and our life together as everything else I have mentioned.

- We celebrate our ever-growing cross-cultural and multicultural appointments, which continue to add to our diversity.
- We celebrate the district resource days which have brought incredible and excellent resources to our conference churches,
- We celebrate the transitional workshops which are done for the benefit of churches and clergy experiencing appointment changes,
- We celebrate the UM Economic Ministry in Maine which *"assists the elderly, the disabled, low-income, unemployed and underemployed individuals and families to meet their basic needs."*
- We celebrate the difference that "Ripple Effect" events are making in shaping who God expects us to be as disciples of Christ.
- We celebrate the work of the UM Women through Mission U, and how Camping Ministries are ministering to our adults, children and youth,
- We celebrate the Nicaragua Covenant, and the transformational work of JFON (Justice for our Neighbors) in helping our immigrant brother and sisters, and bringing God's justice to where is needed.
- We celebrate the pilgrimages to the Holy Land, South Korea and Taize, which have enriched the spiritual life of many of our youth, young adults and adults, over the last three years.
- This of course is not a comprehensive list, but we do celebrate the work of many of our churches and conference agencies, which continues to further the work of Christ in New England.

To conclude, my sisters and brothers, I am praying that we can work things out, but I know that unity comes with a price—a price that may be costlier to some more than to others. Yet, I can do no less than to believe that together, as Bishop Asbury believed, the United Methodist movement in New England will rise in the next generation...more faithful...more just...truer to what it means to be the church Jesus gave his life for.

Please remember that, *"the key on envisioning a better and fairer tomorrow is not found in fighting the old, but on building something new."*

Your Cabinet envisions an embracing, grace-filled, truth-abiding and unstoppable Christian community of faith rising out of the ashes of conflict, decline and stinginess into a vibrant and sacred movement of the Holy Spirit, focused on the principles of grace, truth and justice. We thank you and our, fearless leader, Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar for allowing us to serve you and the purpose of God through the ministry of superintending.

Because of Christ,

Rene Perez  
Dean of Cabinet