

together United Methodists who formerly attended congregations that disaffiliated.

“They are building a spirit of community out of their brokenness, and they’re feeling like a new United Methodist family,” Bishop Bickerton said.

Sitsch is not alone in building something new where once there was loss. The Texas Conference is being reshaped after seeing 294, or nearly half of its 598 churches, disaffiliate last year.

But the people who remain are reclaiming their presence in The United Methodist Church, said Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey, who has led the Texas Conference since January.

The Conference is currently starting multiple new faith communities, she said.

“In most cases it is the laity who are planting their feet firmly and leading the way to faith communities meeting in schools, homes, event venues, churches that were previously closed, and even barns,” she said. “We have also been blessed by the generosity of ecumenical partners who have opened their church doors for United Methodist worship.”

She said she is seeing holy moments and sacred surprises from small rural communities to larger cities.

Bishop Bickerton began his address sharing the story of his own conversion to Christianity at church camp after experiencing a season of bullying as a teenager. The experience found him forming relationships with peers who built him up, gave him a sense of hope, and ultimately helped lead him to offer his life to Christ.

That kind of joy he found at church camp deserves to be shared, he said, and an old church camp song that’s now in the United Methodist Hymnal shows the way. “It only takes a spark, to get a fire going,” he recited. “And soon, all those around, can warm up in its glowing. That’s how it is with God’s love ... You want to pass it on.”

The hymn, he said, offers a simple statement of faith and a firm belief.

“God’s not through with us yet,” Bishop Bickerton said. “We can be the architects of a renewed, revived, and reclaimed United Methodist Church.”

Scan this QR code to watch Bishop Bickerton’s address.



the Bridge

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Bishop: Time to move from rancor to revival

By Heather Hahn,
United Methodist News

In a highly unusual churchwide address, the Council of Bishops president urged fellow United Methodists to pivot away from the rancor around church disaffiliations to the work of church renewal.

“It is time — no, dare I say, long overdue — for us to go back to the heart of who we are, to use words once again like reclamation, revival, and renewal because we believe that those words lead to nothing less than a conversion of the heart,” Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton said in the video address released March 2.

Bishop Bickerton, who also leads the New York Conference, delivered his midterm State of the Church address as the denomination is grappling with a mounting number of disaffiliations under a church law that allows U.S. congregations to leave with property if they meet certain procedural and financial requirements.

The denomination added the church law — Paragraph 2553 in the denomination’s *Book of Discipline* — in 2019 after decades of intensifying debates over LGBTQIA+ inclusion. However, the departures have accelerated



since last year’s launch of the Global Methodist Church, a theologically conservative breakaway denomination that has been recruiting United Methodist churches to join.

So far, a UM News review found 2,036 congregations — or about 6.6% of U.S. churches — have cleared the necessary hurdles to leave under the provision. Multiple Conferences — the denomination’s regional bodies — plan to take up more disaffiliation requests before the end of the year when the church law expires.

In the meantime, Bishop Bickerton acknowledged, the rhetoric urging churches to exit has taken its toll — leaving many who want to stay United Methodist feeling bullied and sapped of energy.

“It’s created a significant amount of fatigue in us,” Bishop Bickerton said. “And it has clearly

diverted our attention away from the real reason we have this church in the first place — to fulfill the mandate of loving God and loving neighbor through a mission to make disciples in order to literally change the world.”

He urged United Methodists to reclaim that mandate and their evangelistic mission. He also shared a word of hope of United Methodists doing just that even in this time of anger and uncertainty.

Usually, the Council of Bishops president delivers an address at the bishops’ twice-yearly meetings with a message mainly directed at episcopal colleagues. But in this unusual time, Bishop Bickerton said he wanted to reach out to the whole denomination.

“In the midst of the current situation that the denomination is facing, I felt that it was important to provide the Church with a word of motivation, hope, and centering on the opportunity in front of us rather than the constant current narrative of decline and separation,” he told United Methodist News.

One passage of Scripture he has focused on in recent days has been God’s exhortation in Isaiah 43:19: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Even before the current church withdrawals, the denomination has dealt with decreasing U.S. membership for decades.

That trend now is seen across Christianity in the United States, as the number of Americans not affiliated with any faith community continues to rise.

Bishop Bickerton preached that it doesn’t have to be this way, and he attributed church decline in part to people letting the polarization of the wider culture divide the church. He urged United Methodists to discover once again what it means to be “a beloved community.”

He suggested framework for building a beloved community could be found in an 1850 edition of the *Book of Discipline* — a far smaller volume than the *Book of Discipline* is today. Back before it became a book of legislation, he said, the *Discipline* mainly called Methodists to a lifestyle. The old *Discipline* contained a section with the title, “The Necessity of Union Among Ourselves.”

The section urged Methodists to speak freely with and pray for each other, to defend each other’s character, to never depart without prayer and to not despise each other’s gifts.

“The reality stated is simple, yet profound: If we are united, we are strong,” Bishop Bickerton said in summary. “But if we’re divided, we will destroy ourselves, kill the work of God we have been called to, and do irreparable harm to vulnerable souls.”

He pointed to the Rev. Shuler Sitsch, a pastor in the Texas Conference, who is bringing

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