

2019 Michigan Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church  
*Remarks at “Teaching Session: Courage”*

Friday 31 May 2019

Rebecca L Farnum

I’m going to start with a few disclaimers.

The first is less a disclaimer and more a statement of somewhat distressing fact. I need to disabuse us all, myself included, of the idea that I am a particularly young person anymore. Those of you who remember me as a kid: I am now in the life stage that you were when you began teaching me.

Now, it’s true that I ran away to the Central Conferences of the Methodist Connection - and over in Eurasia and Africa, we’re ‘young people’ until we’re 35! So I bought myself another few years. But even thirty-five isn’t really that far off anymore. People I babysat are now having children of their own. My niece is in college.

I’m mentioning this for two reasons: One, I need to get off my chest that it’s weird for me to be back here and realise that all the ‘adults’ look far more like me than they used to, and the youth look really, really young. Two, and the second disclaimer: with my age has come a ‘big kid’ job as a professor in London. I teach courses on environmental and corporate leadership. For those seminars, I’m given four months of three-hour class periods every week. I’m used to fifty hours for each group of students. The Conference Committee gave me like fifty *minutes*. These remarks are meant to *start* conversations and plant ideas, not be the final word. So please, please, come talk to me over the next several days about anything that jumps out at you here. And I’ll make a version of my remarks, with links to the different projects I’ll be talking about, available.

Last disclaimer: Anyone who teaches will tell you that if you’re totally comfortable, you aren’t learning. When you’re exercising, there needs to be a bit of exertion past the zone of what is physically easy. When you’re learning, the brain that Bishop Bard preached on yesterday needs to be stretched a little. When I teach, I know that class is going well when my undergraduates start squirming. That wiggle zone, when something has been said that challenges you, is when the good stuff happens. I’m expecting to anger or annoy most everyone in this room at some point in the next hour. Bear with me, and there will be a chance to push back during coffee breaks.

My remit for the next hour: Bold and effective leadership, with a focus on courage. Here we go.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, the first thing I learned growing up in this United Methodist Church was collaboration. It’s kind of in the name: We’re together (United) and there’s a process (Methodist). Collaboration.

I grew up watching this happen in a lot of ways in Michigan congregations. To that end, I am entirely incapable of teaching on my own. I'm a terrible lecturer. I will inevitably force one of my poor students to take center stage at some point. So...

A few of you were given a big paper puzzle piece when you came in this afternoon. If you have one of those pieces, would you please join me on stage?

While they're making their way here, lesson one in courageous leadership: collaboration. We can't do this on our own, and we aren't meant to.

We all know, on some level, that we aren't omnipotent. But society certainly pressures us into trying to do it all, and we often feel like a failure when we can't.

Collaboration is really the only way anything gets done, and yet intentionally doing so and sharing credit is incredibly counter to the mainstream.

Regardless, it's something that our Christianity explicitly calls us to.

Friends on stage, then: Would you please put your puzzle together?

We collaborate because we all bring something different to the table. We all have different skills and experiences. The puzzle this group of people has just put together, with their individual pieces, reminds us of the Church's long history of knowing this, and theological call to care deeply about it.

*1 Corinthians 12: 20-21: "There are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'"*

I am an academic. I am a head. And heads are brilliant. When they work, they think of new ideas. But they don't always work. And a world of nothing but heads would actually be quite a horrific place. Nothing would get done!

We need collaboration for leadership, because everyone has different gifts to contribute. 1 Corinthians 12 details this with the fruits of the Spirit. There is also, though, the fact that we all bring different perspectives.

Now, you all brought an academic to a conference, gave her an hour, and called it a 'teaching session'. So you're going to get some scholarship.

We're going to do feminist standpoint theory today. In my university work, I write about this in gloriously dense papers with six-syllable words. But really, it's very simple.

Friends who have joined me on stage: I'm going to move you to a particular place on stage, and then ask you one by one to share with us what you see.

[Conversation with on-stage guests.]

So, our first friend saw bread. Our second had a different angle on the table, and was witness to not only bread, but the cup. Most of us in the room can see those

two things on the table. But there is more. Our friend on the floor saw money, hidden under the table from most people's view.

Standpoint theory is about recognising this. Different people have different perspectives. These standpoints come about because of our life experiences. Our gender, race, class, religion, country of origin, bodies, family lives, and any other number of things affect who we are and how we see the world. Feminist standpoint theory points out that people on the margins - women, persons of colour, persons with different physical and mental abilities, and other minorities - have perspectives and knowledge that is too often unheard. And good leadership requires intentionally listening to and amplifying those whose voices aren't the loudest or most regularly noticed.

Now, the United Methodist Church has this kind of idea quietly built into our slogan. Open hearts, open minds, open doors.

We position ourselves as open to these multiple perspectives. But I'm going to suggest that a slogan, and the willingness to be open, isn't enough.

Open hearts, open minds, and open doors is great. But how that phrase is currently interpreted, we're sitting in our spaces, our sanctuaries, waiting for new ideas and voices to come to us. Standpoint theory points out that we need to actively work to seek out those marginalised and diverse perspectives.

What if, instead of understanding 'open' as an adjective for our hearts, minds, and doors, we approach it as a verb? Open hearts, open minds, open doors is not what we *have*, but what we as United Methodists *do*.

In order to do that well, we need to purposefully open doors and *walk through them ourselves* to seek out new voices and perspectives that are currently missing.

So, that's what we're going to do a bit of this afternoon. I'm going to take you on a journey through my last ten years on four continents. It's a journey that happened because of people in this room and the leadership they displayed while I was growing up here in the 90s. Along the way, we'll try to pull out some lessons for courage in leadership.

We have opened doors, and are walking through them, out of comfortable spaces in pursuit of new perspectives. It's a scary thing to do. The first thing that you need to do, as a courageous leader, is understand that a lot of what you know is wrong. Or at least incomplete. Courageous leadership requires an understanding of your perspective. Where do you stand now? Building on Laura's sermon from this morning: Are you in a boat? Which boat? Are you still sitting on shore?

For most of us in this room, understanding our perspective involves a confession of our privilege, our sins, and our missteps. We have to come to grips with our baggage, our bias.



On the screen now are the pictures of two men who have most helped me with this. On the left is Jerry Devine.

It may seem contradictory that I have just spoken about the importance of seeking out underrepresented, minority voices, and the first picture I show is of an old white man. (Sorry, Jerry.) But those of you who know Jerry's ministry know that he is deeply, deeply committed to racial justice and education. And it was Jerry who, when I was a very young girl, modelled to me the responsibility that every white American has to educating themselves about their racial privilege and the

sins that Eurocentric patterns of slavery, colonialism and capitalism continue to perpetrate against God's non-white children.

It is not a black person's job to teach a white person about racism. Our Ottawa and Chippewa siblings should not have to remind us of the history of this land and what has been taken. Accountability lies with those who have power. If we want to be courageous leaders, we must understand and acknowledge our sin, and seek to change.

I grew up watching Jerry wrestle with and share the need for racial healing. Now, I have the incredible privilege of guiding students along that journey.



The person pictured on the right is a Sami man in the traditional red, yellow, and green dress of his people. This is Jani. Jani is a reindeer herder who lives in the Arctic Circle. The Sami are Europe's only recognised indigenous community. Like the indigenous peoples of North America, the Sami have experienced a great deal of harm at the hands of European settlers. Political borders have been drawn cutting off traditional migration routes for the deer, fishing waters have been polluted by Russian nuclear testing, tribal languages have been systemically eliminated.

Three times a year, I take a group of undergraduate students into the Arctic to spend time with Jani and his family. The learning and personal growth is astounding. Most of my American students grew up with tribes very close to them and their schools. Very few of my students have ever actually studied anything about those tribes or their histories. Even fewer of them are aware of similar struggles faced by indigenous communities all around the world. Their time with the Sami is eye-opening, and it's a privilege to co-teach with Jani and his herd.

Last year, I had a student of the Mohawk nation join my class. It was fantastic. It was the first time I had ever taken a member of an American first nation to visit this European first nation community. I knew that it was going to be incredible for the class to have this perspective. And she did not disappoint. But when we first started off, I did something really terrible.

The first thing I do when our itinerary is set and the students have signed up for the class is email everyone the syllabus, travel notes, and key readings. In this email, I list everyone's name in the salutation, because I want them to feel like this is personalised, and start getting to know their teammate's names.

I had the class list. And I had this student's name in front of me. And I looked at the register and went 'huh'. K-a-h-s-e-n-n-i-i-o-s-t-h-a. Uh huh.

And there on the roster, next to K-a-h-s-e-n-n-i-i-o-s-t-h-a, is the legal middle name 'Sarah-Ruth'. Making an incredibly problematic assumption, I typed Sarah-Ruth in that first email to everyone in the class.

When the first day of class came around, she introduced herself not as Sarah-Ruth, but as KJ: her main initials. And for a few days, we all called her KJ. And then suddenly, I recalled what I had been taught by indigenous peoples in this state about the importance of language and names. And, a long time after I should have, I thought to ask: 'Do you like your true name?' She responded 'I love my name. I miss my name. But no one is ever going to learn it, so KJ it is.'

So I asked. As humbly as I could, because I had already messed up by not learning and using it in the first place myself. 'Would you please help me call you by your name?' And we had a lesson. And I stumbled. Many times. I also had one of the most honest and humbling exchanges I have ever had with a student.

Her name is Kahsenniiostha (pronounced 'gah-sen-ee-oh-sta'). In Mohawk (more correctly called Kanyen'kéha), this means "she makes the name beautiful".

And she does. She does make the name beautiful. Yet in three years of classes at a predominately white university, no one had ever bothered to learn that name that Kahsenniiostha makes beautiful.

Now I've just told you that I get to go to the Arctic three times a year playing with reindeer and mushing huskies, and I'm going on about a student's name. That's because if we truly want to open doors and hear new perspectives, we have to be willing to put in the work, and we have to understand and confess when we don't do that well. I messed up. I did not do right by Kahsenniiostha. In Isaiah 43, God reminds us that God has called us by name. And as God's children, the absolute least we can do is the same.

Kahsenniiostha was incredibly gracious about it, and healing has happened. But I cringe when I think of my sin, of the harm I did with that first email to 'Sarah-Ruth': yet another white person in power refusing to acknowledge Kahsenniiostha's full personhood.

We do this harm in small ways. We do it in big ways. But we have to work, constantly, to understand our mistakes and blind spots. And with that self-awareness, we can better respect and recognise other people and perspectives.

Truly open minds and open doors lead to meaningful collaboration. But they require a genuine respect for others. This country - and the UK, where I am

currently based - has become horrifically divided in past decades. Bipartisanship in our political processes is no longer seen as a valued, appropriate way forward, but rather as some kind of betrayal.

I am not going to change anyone's minds about various hot button topics in the next ten minutes. I am not going to try to. It doesn't matter whether it's homosexuality, abortion, guns, terrorism. There are people in this room whose political stances I know I do not respect. But I do respect the people. And I respect that, like me, they have been on a journey that has led them to the place they are currently at.

One of the greatest gifts growing up as a pastor's kid in Michigan gave me was an awareness of how worldviews and political opinions are formed. Moving from a farm village of 500 people to inner-city Battle Creek to a university town, you get a sense for how the life experiences of people inform the conclusions they draw.

In today's polarised world, it is a courageous thing to respect another's journey. Regardless of where we stand on any issue, we can work to understand why people think and feel differently. And we can respect the fact that God isn't done with any of us yet.

I truly believe that the most God-filled, Christian decision around all the issues you will be wrestling with this weekend is not what I currently think it is, or what you believe it to be. Rather, it is some destination and conclusion that we've yet to arrive to. Let's keep marching toward Heaven - but let's remember that we aren't there yet, and none of us know exactly what it's going to look like. We have to respect what we know, and what we don't, and what God is still teaching to us and through us.



Time for another example. I work in war zones in the Middle East. This is the [Jerusalem Youth Chorus](http://jerusalemyouthchorus.org) (jerusalemyouthchorus.org). They are a dialogue program made up of Israeli and Palestinian teenagers who sing and talk together. This is not some wishy-washy peace thing. They sit in extremely well-facilitated dialogues where incredibly personal and hard-hitting topics are discussed.

Five years ago, John Boley's daughter Hannah left North America for the first time to come visit me while I was in law school in Scotland. During her visit, I had a speaking engagement at a university in Gaza. So I say to Hannah 'hey, just come to Israel and Palestine with me. I'll show you around the holy sites; you can stay with friends while I'm doing a few business things'. And off we go.

This was July 2014. Those of you who follow events in the region may remember that there was a war that summer. We landed just as the first true violence happened.

Our plans changed abruptly. We ended up staying in Jerusalem. One afternoon, we visited the choir's rehearsal. During the session, the alarm went off: rockets were being launched, and we all needed to evacuate into the bomb shelter.

We were at the YMCA, which serves as a hotel for Western visitors as well as a community center. This shelter was thus filled with confused, scared tourists. And as Hannah and I were looking around at all the nervous travellers, one of the most poignant moments of my life happened.



As two countries literally fired missiles at each other, the teenagers of those two countries began to sing. They stood there in the bomb shelter, saying 'I refuse your hate. I'm singing with my friends'.

Their music gave peace to the bewildered tourists. The teenagers actively demonstrated the respect they had for each other - as singers, and as people with complicated histories and diverse perspectives - and put their shared humanity above their nations' animosity.

I am genuinely over the fact that Republicans and Democrats in this country can't find any common ground. If fifteen-year-olds who have been living in war zones all their lives can do it, surely we can too? I am not asking you to agree with someone whose views you believe are counter to your Christian values. I am asking you to recognise that they, too, are seeking grace on a confusing journey. If you didn't vote for Trump, and you can't find something worthwhile or valuable to share with a Trump voter, shame on you. And vice versa. It is not merely that we are children of God and called to love one another. It is that are lessons to be learned from the different journeys we have all been on, and we are called to recognise those and make use of what we can learn.

Alright, so thus far I've bullied you into collaboration, opening your minds and doors, understanding your own ignorance, and respecting others' standpoints. Next, I want to talk about abundance.

We live in a world that teaches scarcity. We are trained to think that there isn't enough. That we can't do this or that because it takes too much time, too much money, too many resources.

Scarcity is convenient to those in power. The idea of scarcity explains why we can't change things, have things, do things. Scarcity helps validate the status quo.

It's also a myth. There is plenty. We have enough. We have more than enough!

As an environmental geographer, I can say this about the Earth's natural resources. There is, objectively speaking, plenty of food and water and energy for everyone, with enough left over for the needs of non-human animals and healthy ecosystems. We are simply terrible managers. And we get sucked into this scarcity myth, and it absolutely stifles our creativity and the possibilities we have for doing ministry.

We've moved from the Arctic down to Jerusalem. Let's go west to Morocco.

I worked with three incredible organisations for my PhD, groups in the Middle East and North Africa doing amazing environmental work as a conflict resolution tool. I can go on about them for hours: the [journalists](#) in Lebanon advocating for interfaith community parks, the [scuba divers in Kuwait](#) cleaning beaches they did not make dirty. But the clock is ticking, so I'll just focus on one of them. It's a story of abundance in Morocco where most people see scarcity.





On the screen is a picture of the Aït Baamrane mountains, located just north of the Sahara Desert. Beautiful but a relatively barren, inhospitable landscape. In this region, women walk three hours a day to collect eight litres of water per person. That water has to be used for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and everything else.

To put that in perspective: the average Michigander uses 300 litres each day. This community in Morocco gets 8.

Our friends in Flint are all too well aware of what water stress does to a family, a home, a child's future. Our friends in Flint are also well aware that their lack of water has *nothing* to do with there not being enough water. They live fifty miles from Lake Huron. There's plenty of water. What is lacking is a political will to get certain groups of people clean water.

A similar problem exists in southwest Morocco. Here on Mount Boutmezguida are the Amazigh people, Morocco's indigenous community. The country, like most of the world, is not currently ruled by its native peoples. French, Spanish, and Arab colonialism have wreaked havoc with the territory. Many of its original inhabitants are not a priority for the state, and are not connected to the national water system. And unlike Flint, the Amazigh aren't surrounded by the Great Lakes. To the eye of scarcity, there is genuinely not enough water in this space.

There is, though, a lot of fog. There is a cloud system that rolls in from the Canary Islands and dissipates as soon as it hits the hot wind from the Sahara. The fog in these mountains gets so thick that animals fall to their death and can die from a lack of good water while not being able to see a foot in front of your face.

For years, the Amazigh referred to fog as 'dead water'. They knew what it was, but it was useless.

That is a scarcity mindset.

One day, a local Amazigh man heard an idea about abundance. And he decided it was worth a try.

Hydrologically speaking, fog is simply water that hasn't yet come together enough to form a lake or river. But it's easy enough to encourage it to do that. So now, on the top of Mount Boutmezguida in one of the most underprivileged parts of Morocco, there sits the world's largest [fog-harvesting operation](http://darsihmad.org) (Dar Si Hmad, [darsihmad.org](http://darsihmad.org)).



Water passes through nets, condenses on the material, and falls into a storage trough. I'm happy to explain the technical aspects of this at some point - but the punchline is that, with no additional inputs of energy or significant environmental damage, Amazigh families now have as much clean water as they need piped directly into their homes.

Since we inaugurated this and turned the taps on in 2015, we're already seeing girls staying in school for longer, instead of leaving as soon as they hit puberty to assist with water-related chores. Families are keeping livestock for longer, because they can water them. They're also growing food in household gardens.

Because, you see, we live in a world of abundance. There is grace and beauty all around. God has given what we need. We must only have the courage to reject the false prophet of scarcity, and open our eyes and hearts to the glorious abundance of God's love and creation.

Could my puzzle piece friend come back to the stage for me? How much money was under the table? \$20? Go ahead and grab it. [Discovery.] Oh, there's \$100

there. We live in an abundant world! Would you stay here and hold that for me for a minute?

From this abundance, we are called to be generous.

If you are not tithing, you are not being the Christian leader God has called you to be. Let me say it one more time. If you are not tithing, you are disobeying God. Jesus talked more about money than any other social or political issue. His ideas on homosexuality, abortion, and guns are not explicit. His teachings on money very much are. Sixteen of his thirty-eight parables teach us how to handle money and stuff. One in every ten verses in the Gospels is about money. And spoiler alert, it's all about giving it away.

This shouldn't be hard. It isn't yours, anyway!

Theologically, it's all God's. You're just a steward.

Socially, you have more than 90% of the people on this planet. Regardless of how little you make, if you are in Michigan and sleep with a roof over your head, you are in the top ten percent of the world's richest people. You can afford to be generous. And you can certainly afford to tithe.

Growing up, my father was the only member of the household earning money. We tithed his low-tier salary with a family of four. And I'm alright. I had all I wanted and more than I needed. You can do it. And your congregations can to. But they can't be expected to tithe if you're not willing to model that as a leader.

For many of us in the room, our time feels more valuable than our money. If that's the case, tithing your income shouldn't be a problem! So do that. And I would encourage you to also tithe your time, as a way to actively and intentionally build your leadership capacity. This courageous leader stuff requires an investment in your own relationship with God, and the space to wrestle with understanding your own perspective and respecting others'.

If you really want to do this right, a tithe is 2.4 hours a day. If that's too much to start with: You work 40 hours a week on a full-time job. At least 4 hours a week should be spent in active discipleship. Pastors and church members, your work hours do not count as this tithe. I am talking about dedicated personal time set aside to work on improving your own mental and physical ability to be a bolder and more effective leader - by learning, by serving, by listening.

Be generous. To yourself, to others, to our world. It's all God's anyway.

Puzzle piece friend: Your unique perspective on this table found an abundance of \$100. It's yours. You can do whatever you want with it. Several offerings are being taken this week; there are camping and Wesley ministries in the hall who would happily take your donation. There's also ice cream to eat, and toys to buy, and parents to help. You can do whatever you want with that money. Keep it all, give it all away, tithe it. It's up to you. We live in an abundant world, and God calls us to be generous. So enjoy.

Last one. We live in a world of ugly news. Violence, greed, and hate sells.

But for all this world's brokenness, the stories making headlines aren't truly representative of this world. After money, one of Jesus' most frequent commandments was to go share some news, go bring a friend, go spread some love.

In today's world of scandal and shock, good news and happy stories are bold. And they're effective! We've become so unused to good news that it surprises us. So go tell your stories!

I work in the Middle East as an academic. I am not there explicitly as a Christian missionary. But I am there as an evangelist. I am trying to share the love of God that was taught to me by this Church. And I am collecting stories of amazing, beautiful, God-blessed things happening in a part of the world that we know too little about and demonise too much. In the classroom, I am an evangelist for the lessons we can learn from what creative, abundantly thinking people are doing in the Middle East.

No matter where you are based and what your story is, you have some good news to share. Please share it.

Puzzle piece friend, you can indeed do whatever you want with that money. I don't care what it is. But I do have one request: sometime this weekend, come find me, and tell me a story about something that money made possible. Share the good news.

So, bold and effective leadership:

**C**ollaborate

**O**pen your mind and go out your doors

**U**nderstand your own privilege and bias

**R**espect other journeys

**A**ct in abundance

**G**ive generously

**E**vangélise the good news

And there, my beautiful, beloved family of God, is your COURAGE.

I've seen this courage at work in Michigan. I am a product of the leadership greenhouse Bishop Bard preached on yesterday.

I witnessed collaboration happening all around me. My doors were opened with Carrie and David Morton took me to Haiti when I was fourteen. My understanding of privilege and power grew watching monitoring reports about who speaks at Conference. Exposure to many cultural backgrounds through our global Church built a respect for diverse walks of life. I was taught the abundance of life at camp and in Wesley campus ministries. I was the recipient of generosity as local congregations supported me with scholarships to go to all of these places. And I've heard the evangelism of good news from all of you.

So thank you. Thank you for being the greenhouse I needed. Since graduating from my youth council days, I've studied for seven degrees and researched and taught in more than twenty countries. I am now in a position where I get to make sharing love and grace my primary job at work. My teaching, my mentoring sessions with students, and my publications are reflections of what this group of people taught me about the world. I am forever blessed by the skillset I developed because of opportunities afforded to me by the United Methodist Church.

But. I was an easy plant. I was an outgoing, extroverted pastor's daughter. I had faith already - not just in God, but in the people of the Church. You raised me in love and opened doors for me, and I am so grateful. But to truly live up your potential for youth empowerment, for world change, for discipleship, for developing leaders, it is not the Beccas of the world you need to be investing in.

Some people will need a different kind of greenhouse. Or a bit more attention. Slightly more water, slightly less sunlight. If you want to be the Church, if you want to grow courageous leaders, you must adapt to the plant and give it what it needs. You cannot expect different kinds of plants to thrive in the exact same greenhouse you did.

This is happening in some of our communities. Church attendance has grown by 25% this year in both the Winn and Coomer congregations. In Nashville, an outreach program at a local bar led to the ladies' euchre club asking if they might come to the church for a service. They'll be kicking off a summer series with a potluck, sermon, community clean-up, and game night in the sanctuary on June 6<sup>th</sup>. And in Alanson (al-ANN-sen), a newcomer to the church who was serving Communion for the first time effortlessly echoed the grace she learned from her pastor. An elderly woman was fretting that she couldn't take communion during an outreach service in a nursing home because she was Catholic. The words she heard from a brand new Methodist laity member were: 'Sweetheart, this isn't my church's table. It's God's. You are welcome.'

There is courageous leadership happening in Michigan. There is joy happening in Michigan. The spirit is moving here. You were a good greenhouse for me, and you can learn and adapt to being a good greenhouse for many more.

So please. Keep investing. Keep gardening. Invite different kinds of gardeners, and plant different kinds of seeds. See the beauty in other kinds of plants, and give them the water and food and energy they need. Collaborate together; open your hearts and minds and doors; understand your privilege; respect the 'other'; act in the abundance of God's grace and give generously from it.

And then...show off the harvest. May it be bountiful.

[For more information or to join in conversation, please feel free to email Becca: [becca.farnum@gmail.com](mailto:becca.farnum@gmail.com). My thanks and blessings to the Annual Conference Committee for inviting me to reflect on my journey with you.]