

“Welcome to the Future”ACPE Annual Conference, Salt Lake City, April 2011

Executive Director Reflections, Rev. Dr. Teresa E. Snorton

In one of his December 2010 column “Thinking out Loud”, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s President Michael Jinkins wrote:

Welcome to the future. It’s not what we were led to expect. The Jetsons don’t live here anymore. It’s messier than we imagined it would be. Technology did not save us after all. Our high tech gadgets just fill up our inboxes while we sleep and leave us more perplexed when we awaken.

Welcome to the future. No, it’s not what we expected. Not even in matters of faith.

Most of us present would probably agree that the future that has become our today is not what we expected, not even in matters of faith. Our sense of call may have been a surprise to us, our ordination may have been a surprise to us --- nothing that we ever imagined we would be or do. Many of you, like me, started your ministry in traditional ways, committed to the parish and congregational ministry, and if someone had told you that you would not continue that ministry in the future, you would not have believed them. But the future is now, and the reality is that many of you left parish ministry or other occupations –planned or unplanned – and somehow your future became clinical pastoral education. Welcome to the future.

I resisted the call to ministry, as a child of the parsonage, I wanted to do anything but ministry. Yet, I could not escape the call. As a young woman, with few female models as pastors, I first toyed with the idea of being a minister of Christian Education. That got me to seminary. Then in 1980, I fortuitously enrolled in a unit of CPE for the summer after my first year in seminary. I was hooked and my future began to follow a path about which I knew very little at that time. From being a CPE student, to becoming a pastor and then a staff chaplain, into a graduate program in Psychology of Religion, into supervisory education, and eventually becoming a certified ACPE Supervisor. The future looked different from what I had imagined, but the future looked bright. From Central State Hospital in Louisville, to the Medical College of Virginia to Emory, I travelled --estatic to be a part of the small but elite club of certified ACPE Supervisors. I was living my future and I was quite happy.

In 1999, while serving on the ACPE board, I heard that the Executive Director position was open. I received it as interesting news that did not have anything to do with me. But, while in Ghana of that same year, someone asked me if I was applying. I thought the question a bit odd, and the assumption within the question –that I would be interested – to be a bit presumtuous about where I wanted to spend my future. But the future became now, and I applied, interviewed and accepted the position when it was offered.

I don’t think I could have ever imagined that I would spend almost twelve years as the Executive Director of the ACPE. When I first thought about my future in ministry, I was content with the congregation. When I got certified, I was content to teach CPE groups, when I became ED, I was content in that role. And my hope is that in all arenas, my contentment was indicative of a job well done, an investment well made, a vocation well lived.

When I was elected Bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in the summer of 2010, I found myself yet again, at the portal of a future that I had not expected. But to quote Michael Jinkins again:

Welcome to the future. It’s not what we were led to expect.

I am deeply appreciative to the ACPE Board and Personnel Committee, who – in spite of some misgivings, accepted my plan to use my accumulated vacation time, to make two trips to my assigned area in Central and East Africa, to

explore the meaning of this new future with me as CME Bishop. While on my second trip last month, things were beginning to take shape and beginning to fall in place for this new mission field for the CME Church.

Then, the future became now....and on March 3, 2010, less than 12 hours after I and the other members of the mission team said goodbye on the road to the airport in Kampala, Uganda, to my Bishop colleague and friend who had traveled through Zambia, DR Congo and Western Uganda with us, boarded a plane and somewhere between Nairobi Kenya and Amsterdam, he died.

Welcome to the future. It's not what we were led to expect. It's messier than we imagined it would be.

During my 30+ years in ministry and pastoral care, I cannot begin to tell you how many deaths I have been present for in the ER, the ICU, or the bedside. I cannot tell you how many funerals I have attended or how many I have conducted. But being present at, around, near and after death is not an unfamiliar place.

Yet, the phone call about my friend and colleague's death, felt unfamiliar, foreign, unbelievable, unthinkable.

Yep, Welcome to the future. No, it's not what we expected. Not even in matters of faith.

Many of you recall the death of Joanna, my son's girlfriend, back in 2005. The ACPE family supported me and my family through that tragic loss and my son's struggle to maintain his own will to live. I remember how my "faith" was reformed by that chapter in my life. Not since then, I have felt a "shaking of my faith" that I have felt since Bishop Lockett died.

Yep, Welcome to the future. No, it's not what we expected. Not even in matters of faith.

But something is different for me this time, something that I truly had not expected. I have always had a deep affinity for the church. Although I have not pastored since 1985, I have maintained my connections to my home conference, annually making a pilgrimage back to Kentucky to be present and to give my "pastoral report", that did not sound like any other reports. I have been active in a local church in Atlanta since I moved there in 1990. While the church was not the foreground for my daily vocational activity, it was always the background ---no, not even background, but the backdrop for my life in general.

So, I am not surprised that I still have an affinity for the local church and congregational life. But I have been surprised by the profound sense of call that has consumed me in recent days.....

If we understand call as both inner and outer call, in recent weeks, I have embraced the inner call to serve as a Bishop in my denomination, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Once over the shock of being elected and the challenge of serving a new mission area of our church thousands of miles from my home, I realized the true meaning of being an itinerant Methodist preacher and began yielding to the inner urging and strong impulse to see a new future for my ministry.

When meeting with the Personnel Committee soon after my election, Sheila Hammond said something like this to me, "I know it's inevitable that you will fall in love with the people of Africa". I recall vividly the day I arrived in the mountain town of Gisenyi, Rwanda on a rainy October day last fall, feeling overwhelmed by the expressions of joy and love that "their Bishop" had arrived. The music, dancing and celebration was so intense and in that moment, I felt unworthy of the honor, yet humbled that I had been called by God for this ministry. An inner shift that I never imagined, but of which Sheila intimated, began to happen in a profound way.

But call is more than an *Inner call*, more than God in the heart, speaking to us. A true call also includes an *Outer call* --the confirmation of others who know us. That is what our certification process is all about – in theological terms – even if it does not feel that way. For unless a community embraces and affirms our sense of call, our ability to live into that call is very difficult. That is why many of you present tonight are here --the traditional church did not affirm your sense of call, but Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE did.

I have come to see my election last summer as the outer call from the denomination of my birth, the denomination of three generations of Snortons before me. The courage of the church to call its first woman Bishop is commendable, but coupled with the fact that it called one who has spent the last 25 years – not in traditional parish ministry, but in clinical ministry, is simply remarkable!

Personally, it is even more remarkable to me because when I completed my first unit of CPE back in 1980, I left with the goal of making sure my denomination embraced CPE as a requirement for ministry. I had long abandoned any active efforts to make that happen, yet, somehow, the church discerned the hope of this calling in my life and transformed it into its own, even if it took 25 years!

Dreams and visions for the future are born in what we sometimes consider inconsequential events, thoughts and conversations. Yet, because the call to a vocation, like ministry is both an inner and outer processes, I have learned to be in awe of how this process actually works.

Many of you know I have a five year old grandson. When I was elected Bishop, he came for the consecration on the last day of our General Conference. I had been gone from home for a week, and I think he can thinking he would again have my undivided attention. He did not understand what it meant that I had been elected Bishop, and that people kept moving him to the side to take a picture with this new Bishop! About a week later, as I was looking at pictures from the Consecration, he stood beside me in my bedroom, and commented, “I don’t like that you are a Bishop!” I knew enough to realize he was re-experiencing the loss of my attention at the event and perhaps even anticipating further loss of my attention and focus – his own grief reaction to the change.

A few days later, after I had preached that Sunday, Micah put on my clergy shirt, a stole and grabbed a book with the picture of a church on front. He stood on a stool, and then announced to me “I’m a Bishop too!” I laughed, but quickly saw a young life, previously in grief about change, embracing a possible future for himself --where he had his own call!

Micah’s transformation speaks to us in many ways. As the ACPE engages in conversation and decision-making about governance changes, strategic planning, and now the departure of its Executive Director, we are challenged to accept that the future is now. And it may not be what we expected. It may feel messy. It may make us anxious. We may wonder “why” or even “why now”.

From personal reflections on my move from being you Executive Director into the role of Bishop, I have much grief as well as much anxiety. Yet, I know in my heart that what is really happening for me is a move towards greater wholeness. I am no longer divided between CME and ACPE, as I felt for so many years. It was as if I had two calls. But the opportunity to now carry into the CME world all that I have gained from ACPE is true wholeness for me, a fullness of time.

In Parker Palmer’s *A Hidden Wholeness: A journey towards an undivided life*, wrote about a twenty-minute malestorm of hurricane-force winds in 1999 that took down twenty million trees in the Boundary Waters area on the border of Minnesota and Ontario. He wrote: “A month later when I made my annual pilgrimage up north, I was heartbroken by the ruin and wondered whether I wanted to return. And yet on each visit since, I have been

astonished to see how nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth, slowly but persistently healing her own wounds.” (p.5, 2004)

This is how I think about change....it alters that which is familiar to us, it can feel destructive or even dangerous, it can make us anxious or worried about the future, the hopes we had might feel sidetracked or derailed. Yet, the changes that sneak upon us, often come with the seeds of a new future embedded within them.

One writer’s commentary on Ephesians 2 states:

The Bible tells us that God has brought you into this world for specific purposes in his eternal plan. You have been born for such a time as this. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” God has been ahead of us, getting everything ready for our accomplishing what he calls us to do. He is “manipulating all the resources of the universe in order that the work you do may be a part of his whole great and gracious work.”¹¹ The life of faith opens our eyes to see ourselves and the world around us differently. The closer we walk with God, the more we understand God’s agenda for humanity and our part in it. Incredibly, God calls us to be his “fellow workers.”¹²

Live Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission in Life, p 7.

As we live into this transition moment in the life of the ACPE, perhaps we should be asking ourselves “What should we be seeing differently now?” Are we willing to relinquish our infatuation with our past successes and failures in exchange for the possibility of a renewed call to embrace the future -- a future that we can envision, yet not control – a future that we can plan for, yet not guarantee – a future that we can anticipate, yet not predict.

If we can continue to embrace the future, even though we know it may not be what we expect, in essence we affirm that call is not a singular event, but that in reality, call ---like marriage vows or like memberships in civic and social organization – must be renewed. And in our renewal is our hope for the best of the past, along with the best of the future.

So, I am certain that my retirement from service as your Executive Director is not an abandonment of the call that you issued in 1999, no more than me becoming Executive Director was not a abandonment of the call I responded to in the CME Church in 1976. Instead, it is a renewal of call, a renewal of hope.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.

Maintaining hope is critical to our individual and corporate futures. In the 1660’s puritan Os Guinness said: “Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own.”

We have done great things, but what will carry us into the future is the believe in more than what we have done, a larger purpose than we have had in our past. To reach new heights, we must risk embracing governance, strategies, policies, procedures, methodologies, projects, programs, and relationships that have not been a part of our past.

A couple of months ago, the Wall Street Journal published an internal memo issue to Nokia executives by its new CEO, Stephen Elop, formerly a Microsoft executive. Elop has seemingly begun bracing the company for radical change with a no-holds-barred memo saying the once dominant mobile phone company is now "years behind" its competitors.

In the memo, Elop says Nokia is like the man on an oil platform in the North Sea who woke to explosions and fire, but survived after choosing to leap into the icy sea. "Nokia, our platform is burning," Elop said, and Nokia itself, not just competitors, has poured gasoline on it.

He said Nokia has failed to respond to three competitive challenges: Apple's iPhone, Google's Android operating system, and low-cost phones from China. Its own Symbian operating system is unwieldy, and its higher-end MeeGo is late. And while Nokia failed to respond, the rules of mobile phone competition expanded from specific devices to ecosystems.

"The battle of devices has now become a war of ecosystems, where ecosystems include not only the hardware and software of the device, but developers, applications, e-commerce, advertising, search, social applications, location-based services, unified communications and many other things. Our competitors aren't taking our market share with devices; they are taking our market share with an entire ecosystem," Elop said.

Clearly, Elop is laying the groundwork for a new Nokia to be unveiled later this week. The big challenge will then become to convince employees, customers, developers, investors to go along with it.

The ACPE is part of an ecosystem – and it is an ecosystem that is changing almost daily and rapidly. We have a great platform, a great foundation based on our history and commitment to standards, accreditation and certification. And we should not pour gasoline on our own platform by failing to respond to the world and communities in which we live. Nor should our creations and processes be unwieldy nor too late to make an impact.

If we think of standards, accreditation and certification as our devices, our tools, then we must realize that our future is not just about our perfecting our devices, it is about interfacing those tools with the real world – the ecosystem of church and theology, of health care and health care reform, of seminaries and graduate schools, of traditional religions and new age religions, of people who look and think like us and those who don't. It is a real world of technology as a vehicle not just for communication and but also for relationships (as unfamiliar as that may seem to some of us). It is a real world where values are shifting, language is changing, and even new cultures are evolving around because of migration and immigration.

Welcome to the future. It's not what we were led to expect.

Welcome to the future. It's not what I expected. When Bishop Lockett and I were ordaining pastors in the DR Congo, our hands joined on their hands, little did I realize that what was actually happening was a transfer of authority of the Fifth District of the CME Church from him to me. I go now to accept that call. I will miss the ACPE and I thank each of you for the privilege of serving as your Executive Director. My life is richer, my ministry is deeper, my vision is bigger because of the opportunities you have allowed me to experience. I am grateful for the support of the president that I have served with, for the

board, committee and commission chairs and committee members, for the outstanding staff, for the regional directors, for the members, the students, the faith group and seminary representatives, for family and friends, and all that I have met and worked with.

To each of you, I say, welcome to the future. It may not be what we expected, but it is what we have. May each of us use the gift of today and the promise of tomorrow as best we can. May each of us live into the call, even if it is to work that we did not expect or sometimes don't feel ready to do.

In closing, one of the ministers in Rwanda sent this email, after learning of Bishop Lockett's death. He has a reconciliation ministry, working with the youth and young adults from the two tribes impacted by the genocide in the 1990s. He wrote:

"It was so sad to hear all the troubles you have had during your last trip to Africa. Though I could not talk to you directly, I just felt affected by all the pain and the death of one of your team members. I am with you in prayer. May the grace of God refresh your hearts and lives."

His words spoke to my own personal pain and grief, then about the Bishop's death and even now as I bring this chapter of my life with the ACPE to an end. The last sentence of his email, "May the grace of God refresh your hearts and lives", more specifically, the word "refresh" caught my ear because it describes the gift we have in the hope for our future. So, may we all be "refreshed" – by our history, by our successes, by our growing edges, by our friendships, and even by our challenges, to do what we feel called to do!