

Can a Church Like Ours Change a World Like This?

Central Baptist Association

93rd Annual Session

Holiday Inn, Harrisburg East

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C. Kim Bracey, Mayor

City Of York, Pennsylvania

Thank you very much.

Central Baptist Association, Happy Birthday! You are 93 years young! To the leadership of this great organization, all the clergy here tonight, to my Friendship Baptist Church family, particularly my mom, and sister, and to my Pastor, the Rev. Melvin R. Baber, the Central Baptist Association's, Moderator...I am honored to join you on the occasion of the Central Baptist Association's 93rd annual session! Congratulations to the distinguished honorees, Brother Pressley, Sister McWhite, Sister Moorner, Deacon Moore and posthumously, my friend and sadly missed, Deacon Hawkins. You are all well deserving of this recognition.

As you know, it was election day on yesterday, and I must admit to it being a little odd going to my voting place and

NOT see Mr. Hawkins working. Or working alongside of him...our community misses him.

I have been a Baptist for a little while now, and much of who I am is based on my faith and my ongoing journey as a Christian and as a Baptist. I commend all of you on your personal journeys, your commitments to the unity of the church, and your witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Your region is the largest Association in our area.

Impressively, you currently have 39 registered churches and represent over 6,700+ Baptists, individuals, in our region. That's awesome.

At 93 years young, you have accomplished much! Brothers and sisters in Christ, give yourselves a round of applause!

Yes, much has been accomplished. But, as the Bible says, to those much has been given, much is expected.¹ My message tonight entitled, "Can a Church Like Ours Change a World Like this?", will look at a number of paradigms and offer a couple of suggestions.

Truth be told, as a regular attending member of Friendship Baptist Church, who is affiliated with this great association, I become disappointed at times by what seems to be some churches' unwillingness to play bigger roles in the communities in which they reside.

¹"For everyone to whom much is given, of him shall much be required." Luke 12:48

Let's face it. Creeping apathy can erode the spirit and good works of any church. As most of us know, this is not just a phenomenon of the Baptist Church, but rather happening among all denominations.

We have so many challenges, mandates and missions, that the outer world beyond the four walls of our worship services becomes somewhat overwhelming at times.

Yet, the 21st century demands of us more good works.

And the struggles, journeys, and letters of the early church, particularly during the era of Apostle Paul, tell us that the committed church is always, always on the move and is more than the four walls in which we hold services.

Every fine organization needs a strongly honed Mission and Vision Statement. I commend the association on its focused Mission and Vision Statements.

Your Mission Statement reads that the association “is a group of Baptist churches called and sent by the Triune God to provide advocacy, fellowship, resourcing and outreach to churches in central Pennsylvania so that they might be strengthened to carry out the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Your Vision Statement reads that the association “envisions an accessible, spiritual network which, in covenant with God, provides training and resources to empower churches in its districts to do Kingdom works

that include outreach, mobilization of volunteers, recruitment and training of gifted persons, and an increased capacity to carry out the Great Commission.”

The CBA THEME is: "A peculiar people doing a peculiar work in the 21st century by working together toward tomorrow, capturing the great essence of our past and contemporizing it into today's language".

You have a lot on your plate, indeed!

Your Mission, Vision, and Theme are very comprehensive and show a creative tension within the Baptist philosophy, itself. You see, the Mission and Vision focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Great Commission, witnessing God's grace to others. These are ageless Church-based principles.

But the CBA Theme focuses on a “peculiar people doing a peculiar work in the 21st century by working together toward tomorrow, capturing the great essence of our past and contemporizing it into today's language.”

I love that wording, especially that word “peculiar,” and want to focus on what the CBA can do to contemporize ageless principles for the 21st century.

So what should our “peculiar work” as God's “peculiar people” be in the 21st century?

As Mayor of York, much of what I work on is our physical infrastructure, our core services as a city -- our edifices,

our roads, even our sewer system. That is quintessential of government.

Getting the city's many houses in order with class and dignity for better customer service for the 21st century is an emerging theme of our young administration.

For example, we've already made upgrades to our Community Centers, serving over 25,000 people per year. We recently purchased a cost-efficient City Hall at 101 South George Street to streamline and improve customer service and to provide one-stop shopping for our citizens.

Based on grants and donations, we also have upgraded our Parks with state-of-the-art playground equipment as part of our Bring On Play initiative. Indeed, our parks are part of the city's many "houses."

Updating our parks in this way has become a remarkable annual tradition, and Westminster Park and Penn Park are next for 2011 and 2012.

That's not all. Based on federal and state grants, we also are investing millions of dollars in our two authentic farmers markets – Central Market and Penn Street Farmers Markets, and we are adaptively re-using an historic building into a multi-use community arts center.

So these all are pieces of the ***physical*** city. And all of the many physical “houses” of the city are important roles for city government. No doubt about it.

But what about the more important infrastructure – our spiritual and social infrastructure?

And how can our “houses” of worship aid in these infrastructures?

How can we work together, yes, as government and churches – to work on our spiritual infrastructure, to feed the hungry, to re-direct lives toward productivity and purpose, and to spread equality, opportunity, and hope?

Listen, times still are tough. Having engaged in two wars costing billions of dollars during a Great Recession that saw tens of thousands lose their homes, we just now are coming around. But our national debt grows, and people are still losing their homes and searching for work.

Times are uncertain. Finger pointing is becoming a national past-time.

Talking heads, gossipers, and nasty anonymous e-mails or internet posters regularly tear down others.

Instead of embracing this moment of opportunity to show our American courage and resolve, some are burying their heads in sand like ostriches.

When times are rough, our churches always have been there, but they should not be confused as places to hide, places to cocoon and see and hear no evil.

You see, some are challenging the notion that Christianity stands for anything other than worship within the four walls of the church. So, if we retreat, if we retrench in the face of challenge, our public dialogue basically becomes a

blood sport of tearing others down, staining others' character, lining pockets, and bullying the powerless.

Friends, we are better than that – much better than that. And, given the pain and suffering on our streets, we must be better than that.

Now cynics and skeptics will say that we cannot work together. Some will say, render unto Caesar's what is his, and render unto the Church what is the church's.

I have news for ya'll. Ceasar is dead.

Our people are not Ceasar's people. Nor are they one president's or mayor's or councilperson's or pastor's people.

They are **our** people -- church, state, neighborhood, and family alike.

They all are God's children and all are **our** people.

And when they suffer, we all suffer. When they fail, we all are diminished, church, state, neighborhood and family alike.

Friends, the American Social Gospel is the idea that our spiritual lives can also manifest themselves in our outreach to others who may need a hand up and the belief that social and economic justice are laudable visions to work towards in this corporal sphere.

In recent years, the American Social Gospel, as American as apple pie and baseball, has been under attack by some who are obsessed with personal redemption and their own

personal ministries – secular and religious -- at the expense of Jesus' teachings.

I am a proud Baptist in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., another proud Baptist, and the Gospel upon which I was raised preached personal salvation and good deeds in the community. End of story. This is the Gospel of fortifying the soul while feeding our “sheep,” worshiping and praying while practicing the Golden Rule, and fearing and serving God while helping those in need.

Friends, the Holy Bible has over 2,000 references to Christians helping the poor, the downtrodden, the lonely, the infirmed, the outcasts, the grotesques, the oddballs, the misfits, the “peculiar” people, to quote the CBA theme, the “others.”²

If you literally used scissors to cut away these 2,000 some references, the Bible would be in shreds.

You all know that one of the wonderful mysteries of The Gospels is that, the collective whole of the parables and the chapters is more powerful than the sum of their parts.

You see, when you really take stock of and examine “the others” – the lepers, the prostitutes, the hungry, the blind, the disabled, the money-changers, the power-brokers, and the materialists --- we don't see one person who can be categorized and shelved like a book in a library.

²Reverend Jim Wallis, President and CEO of Sojourners, writes: “When I was in seminary, we made a study of the Bible and we found 2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor, about God's concern for the left out, left behind, the vulnerable and God's call for justice.” Reverend Wallis and his fellow seminarians cut out of the Bible very single reference single reference to the poor, to social justice, to economic justice. “[W]hen we were done,” Wallis writes, “the Bible was just in shreds.”

They represent all walks and stripes of life. We don't see one person who is different and who is to be judged, stereotyped, and marginalized.

Instead, we see the man and the woman in the mirror.

We see, as your CBA theme says, "peculiar" people. We see you, and we see me. We see ourselves.

We all are weak and sinners. We all are peculiar – part of God's grand rainbow and creation scheme.

We all need God's love, grace and redemption. We all breathe the same air. We all drink the same water. We all are mortal.

We all want to be loved and to love. We all have an instinct for justice, even as babies.

In so many ways, we are more alike than we are different.

Life is hard. It is sweet, surprising, and gorgeous, but it also has patches of pain, loneliness, and suffering, and injustice. Let us not forget that.

The greatest paradox in life is that true happiness comes from helping others. Lest us we forget, it was a Baptist minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"

Friends, opportunities abound, and sometimes right outside of our own church windows. Here are a few examples.

First, **FaithNet**. Last year, our administration announced the city's first-ever **FaithNet** initiative.

During my inauguration address, I said: "It is no mystery that poverty is a major culprit in crime. Bringing together leaders from our faith-based community, Salvation Army, York Rescue Mission, Community Progress Council, Crispus Attucks, and York's Helping Hands for the Homeless, Faith Net will explore opportunities to consolidate facilities and streamline services so not only are we humanely serving our less fortunate, but making meaningful efforts to get as many of them as possible back on their feet."

Friends, when I announced the **FaithNet**, I knew that the initiative would be difficult. But if we can see past doctrinal nuances, and theological differences to come together to exemplify Christ's will and works in our own community, we can move mountains.

So I ask, will we acknowledge, as a Metropolitan York community, that a city of only 5.2 square miles with a poverty rate of 20% is unacceptable? Many of our Baptist churches are in urban areas where the poverty rates are 20% or higher.

Will we all acknowledge that it is unacceptable for the cycle of poverty to continue to keep people down generation after generation? Will we all acknowledge, my Baptist brothers and sisters, that it is unacceptable for our cities to become absolute warehouses for poor people and minorities?

Friends, will we also acknowledge that the only way to change this cycle, to turn the tide of poverty toward purpose and productivity, is by all of us working together?

Well, today, **FaithNet** still holds much potential for spiritually charged collaboration to fight hunger and poverty in York and to transform our community. And, I hope and pray that it becomes a model for other urban communities.

To date, we hosted a first-ever, multi-day summit among our community's faith leaders to plan how city government and the faith-based community can work together to improve our neighborhoods and tackle poverty. A final **Faith Net** report was published at the end of 2010, and implementation meetings are scheduled for 2011.

A **Faith Net II Summit** will be held at the Yorktowne Hotel this July to develop strategic action steps. This historic assembly will be chaired by Jason Lewis under the leadership of the York County Council of Churches and other faith leaders, such as our own Pastor Oscar Rossum.

Now, why do I mention **FaithNet** to you? It's because government, churches, and non-profits must work together if we are to break the cycle of poverty in our community cores and if we are to share Jesus' social gospel to those in need.

Our initial baby-steps of conversation and planning might not seem like a lot, but let's be honest. Historically, the biggest barriers to our churches making positive changes in our neighborhoods are politics and egos of church

leaders from church to church, dangers that the Bible constantly warns about.

We have much more work to be done, but a humble, civilized, God-centered, and people-in-need centered dialogue can break down barriers of ego, theology, and distrust that too often get in the way of the real change that Jesus worked toward.

A second way for our churches to make a real difference is by improving racial and social relations.

Let's look outside our four walls and confront the ugliness around us. A recent study concluded that York County is one of most segregated Metropolitan Statistic Area in the nation, and our churches, truth be told, are some of the most segregated places within one of our nation's most segregated metro areas. I think that this probably holds true in Dauphin County and central Pennsylvania in general.

Driven by migration from points south since the 1980s, York County has grown to now over 440,000 people, its historic high, becoming more racially, culturally, and socially diverse each year, and growing pains have occurred.

On a per 100,000 population basis, York County, according to a 2006 study, ranks second in the entire state for reported bias-related incidents. That is in a state of 67 counties.

Guess which county is number one for reporting bias-related incidents?

It's none other than the county in which we meet tonight – Dauphin County.

We, as government, churches, and non-profits—must team up to improve relations.

Ask yourselves: “When is the last time that your church sponsored a youth group exchange or service exchange program with a church that is racially and geographically distinct from your own?”

In fact, ask yourselves, “When is the last time that we made a concerted effort to engage the neighbors and neighborhood around our churches, those beautiful edifices on the corner, to do a neighborhood clean-up, to install motion-sensitive lights to deter crime, or to have regular conversations and meetings about ways to improve the neighborhood?”

Ask yourselves: “If our church were to disappear tomorrow, would anyone outside of our core church family have fond memories of our work in the community? Would the neighbors or really anyone outside of our core flock even notice?”

We may not be able to change the prejudices and backward notions of older generations, but we can open

the minds and hearts of young people to appreciate and understand others and there's no excuse why we are not.

Please hear me on this, because I am not just asking us to tolerate others, but to genuinely appreciate and understand others. There is a big difference. And it's a two-way street that transforms lives.

This is not just about civil rights, and it's not just about doing the right thing, the moral thing – which should be reason enough. It's about harmonizing the public and public safety. It's about attracting and retaining talent. And, yes, it's about economic development opportunities and productivity.

According to that same study, York County is one of the most residentially segregated counties in the nation as well. I suspect that Dauphin County and much of Central Pennsylvania is also in this same category.

That really is not a good reputation when we are trying to attract the best, brightest, and most creative to fuel our economy, design and make new products, and educate and humanize our children and workforce. Not good at all.

Here's a third way to make a difference: harvest fresh foods for hungry souls.

A lot of the families in the city have postage-stamp-size yards and maybe little or no experience gardening. And, as

we emerge from the Recession, a lot of our citizens are still struggling to get by.

In light of these factors and needs, a growing number of congregations and public authorities are working together to raise crops for struggling families.

Community gardens produce nutritious foods, reduce family budgets, conserve resources, stimulate social interaction, beautify neighborhoods, instill neighborhood pride, and provide opportunities for exercise, therapy, and education.

Potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, beets, squash, chives, and other vegetables and fruits nourish our inner-city populations. And, the social interaction required to tend the gardens harvests friendships, understanding, and awareness.

Many church-sponsored gardens donate their produce to food pantries or soup kitchens, while others rent subdivided plots to neighbors for little or no cost. They often provide tools, a water source and nutritional education to those willing to learn.

Depending on the size of the garden and the state of its soil, start-up costs can range from \$300 to a thousand dollars.

The City of York is fortunate to have 6 community gardens! This is the most in recent memory! And you all have opportunities to get involved and make a difference in the neighborhoods where your church stands.

- 1.) **Our United Way Community Garden** (800 E. King St., York) offers 41 plots (4-by-8-feet) to gardeners for \$10 each. Includes access to tools and a water source. Members of Emmanuel Church of God in Christ help maintain this community garden on East King Street at the United Way.³
- 2.) **God's Garden** (formerly St. Mary's Garden on Clark Avenue behind Our Daily Bread) has 15 plots (16-by-20 feet) sponsored by the City of York Redevelopment Authority, volunteers from Grace Fellowship Church in North Codorus Township, and a Girl Scout Troop. The produce from this garden goes to Our Daily Bread soup kitchen.⁴
- 3.) **Third, our new 4-H Community Garden** (formerly a vacant lot at 234 S. Pershing Ave., York) now offers 15 raised beds (4-by-8-feet).⁵
- 4.) Fourth, a new garden at the **Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York** (925 S. George St., York) has three beds (60-by-18-feet each) sponsored by the Unitarian Church, St. Paul's Lutheran Church and Crispus Attucks Youth Build Charter School. An organic crop of carrots, turnips, beets and other veggies will grow in the coming weeks. The plots will be tended by members of neighboring St. Paul's Lutheran Church for their food pantry; by UUCY congregants for use in dishes for Our Daily Bread

³ For more information, contact Shaun Underkoffler at the York City Bureau of Health, 854-5090.

⁴ Three more plots are available at no cost. Contact Mark and Karen Lookenbill at 814-9145.

⁵ Beds are available for \$10 each. For more information, contact Tia Underkoffler at 840-7408 or timp156@ag.psu.edu.

soup kitchen; and by families affiliated with Crispus Attucks Youth Build Charter School.⁶

5.) **Fifth, Broad Street Community Garden** (across from Alexander D. Goode Elementary School at 51 N. Broad St. York) has 10 to 12 plots. On City Redevelopment Authority-owned land, volunteers from the Northeast Neighborhood Association and others maintain the property.⁷

6.) Sixth, our Cottage Hill Garden Of Hope is maintained by a community volunteer, Mike Martin, on city redevelopment authority owned lots. One citizen in recovery – Mike Martin – teaches children and families about urban agriculture and shares food and love to those in need.

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So in closing, my friends, if one determined man can change to change a neighborhood in need, what can one **church** do?

What can **your** church do?

Look outside the four walls of your churches. Sometimes the stained glass windows can shroud and steal our views of our own opportunities outside.

Don't let your church's stained glass windows stain your belief in your own potential – and in your church's

⁶Next year, the UUCY hopes to offer more plots to city residents. For more information, contact Steve Snell at 246-1401.

⁷Three more plots are available for community members. For more information, contact Chrystal Sexton-McEachin at 578-8979.

potential -- for goodness, charity, justice, equality, opportunity, and hope in your own neighborhoods.

Friends, I invite you to renew a passionate relationship with God through the possibilities of radiating hope and love in the homes and blocks in which our churches live.

Again, Ceasar is long dead, but you and I are not. This is our moment. While we have air in our lungs and blood pumping in our legs and arms, we can make a difference. In 2011, we must make a difference.

Your acts contribute to a mighty chorus of goodness that infuses hearts with love, purpose, and meaning, and whose lives, in turn, create symphonies of charity and kindness that resounds beautifully in the ears of God.

And our churches hold much power to stabilize and revitalize the neighborhoods in which they sit. Look beyond your own stained glass windows for opportunities. I promise you, those opportunities are right before your eyes.

Concentrate on your own ripple of hope and let God cascade that ripple through souls, families, and communities in mysterious and powerful ways.

So trust God in the seemingly mundane opportunities for goodness in your “own garden patches.”

None of us are centers of the universe, but we can become the center of a disenchanting or under-appreciated person’s life. And we can become a neighborhood anchor of pride and renewal.

I urge you all to embrace the CBA theme. Take in pride in becoming a “peculiar people doing a peculiar work in the 21st century by working together toward tomorrow, capturing the great essence of our past and contemporizing it into today's language.”

Hopefully, tonight I've given you some sound ideas for contemporizing your mission into day's language.

I will leave you now with one of my favorite quotes by Paul – a clarion call from the Book of Philippians to go forth into the world still hungering and thirsting for righteousness, equality, opportunity, and hope.

[A]ll that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and gracious, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill all your thoughts with these things.⁸

Thank you for having me this evening! May God bless the CBA, and may God bless all of you.

⁸ Philippians: 4:8.