

Inaugural Address to the Aliquippa Free Methodist Society

November 2, 2008

Good morning.

Today, I'm pleased to address you as the 28th appointed pastor of the Aliquippa Free Methodist Church.

Many of us here today realize just how tumultuous and shrouded with mystery was the road that led our church to this moment. For you, the questions that loomed over the past seven months were, "Are we going to have another pastor? Are we going to close?" For me, the questions were, "Will I be able to continue my education? Will I have a job or a place to live?" So it is with great joy that I can remind you that the Holy Spirit was with all of us each and every step of the way, and that if we continue to look to Him for our guidance and support, He will remain as such.

Today, I also address you as the youngest appointed senior pastor in the history of our church. I'm honored, not just that I can make that claim, but also for the indescribable trust that all of you have placed in me to bring us to this point. I'm also humbled, because I know that for us to achieve success here by any man's measure will require both God's direction and protection now more than ever.

Success is the operative word of the morning. Many of you are no doubt weary, which, I believe, is part of the reason that God has chosen to place a more youthful and energetic person behind your pulpit and in your parsonage than to which many of our Free Methodist churches are accustomed. To me, that's no joke, but rather, a humbling thought. Pastoral ministry is not something that I take lightly, but a high calling that I've felt since the time that my mind began to register the world around me. It is my job to model to the best of my ability the shepherding relationship that Christ had with His disciples, especially as that of a shepherd to a flock. Christ set out that metaphor in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, and in fact, our very word for "pastor" comes from the Greek word meaning "herdsman" – henceforth, we have our very own application of the old adage: "Strike the shepherd, scatter the flock" – that is, that our success here will depend largely on the character and integrity of your pastor. So here today, I pledge to you that I will set the example through speech, through life, through love, through faith, and through purity.

Another key part of a pastor's responsibility is to set the vision, but to that end, success is much too broad a term. What does success mean for us? For the short term, it

means strengthening our invitation to God for His presence on Sunday mornings, and over some period of time, having strengthened our own personal relationships with God that we might desire more earnestly to see and to be the change that we want in our communities and our world.

Unfortunately for any pew warmers we may have in our church, one of the drawbacks of unbridled, youthful energy is having too many ideas to know what to do with, so to accomplish our mission, I'm going to need the help and support of every soul in our building this morning, as well as the ones that are still out there on the streets. I need your hearts to be open to new people, and your minds to new ideas. I need you to join me in reaching out to the lost, in finding new ways of doing so, and in recommitting to John Wesley's call not only to personal holiness, but also to social holiness, an area from which, sadly, our denomination has shied away from time to time. Together, as one body and as one family, we need to recommit to our Redeemer this day, and for any of us who haven't already had the experience, you must be baptized not only of water but also of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, the strength of our call to personal holiness hinges on the kind of Christian education that we provide for our members and our community. Later today, I will be submitting the name of Joe Daniels to our membership so that, by common consent, he may fill the newly created position of Minister of Education on my Cabinet. Joe and I will be committed to bringing this church towards more whole, spiritual food. We'll be evaluating our Sunday school ministry and making any changes that need to be made toward that end. We'll be relying on our new bible quizzing program to place God's word in the hearts of our youth, all the while we make every effort to strengthen that program. But we won't stop there. We'll be looking to times and places that are not Sunday mornings or church buildings to accomplish our goals. We'll be starting churches in our homes and making our homes welcome places for Bible studies and pre-Christian programs like the Alpha class, which introduces the lost and/or new Christians to the basic tenants of our faith, and for those who decide to dedicate themselves to this specific body of believers, we'll be creating a new, more comprehensive process for membership, which will be required for serving in key areas of ministry within our church, such as teaching Sunday school or leading praise and worship.

But if we only focused on education, we could not be successful in reaching the goals that I am now placing out in the open for our church family. Later today, I will submit Sandra Daniels name to our members so that, by common consent, she may fill the newly created position of Minister of Care on my Cabinet. Sandra and I will be

committed to caring for both our membership and the communities in which we live, and in effect, our world as a whole.

Caring for all of these people, however, will not be easy, nor is there a textbook answer for how one does it. I have several ideas, but I'm going to need yours as well. As a start, we need to rededicate ourselves to James 1:27, which states that pure and undefiled religion before God is taking care of orphans and widows and remaining unstained by the world. We'll be looking for people to visit the sick in our hospitals and the shut-ins in their homes, and soon I will begin recording our services for their benefit.

We must also mentor the youth of our community, which is especially important to me, as it should be to you, for if it weren't for those who went before us and reached out a hand to me and many others like me, you would have another pastor this morning. I understand what it means to come from a broken home, a home without a love for God or its other members. I know what it's like to come home from school and wonder if there would be dinner that night. I know what it's like to be immersed in the culture of sexual perversion, also known as the public school system, and right now as we speak, there are many youth in Aliquippa that understand likewise, and each day, the number grows.

By the world's standards, I am a casualty – a statistic. But because of a pastor who was more of a father to me than just a religious leader, a warm and welcoming church family, and of course, the grace of God, I'm so much more. We have to make sure that the youth of this community hear that and know that, that they can experience joy as only God can give it. We cannot stop – we cannot rest – until we accomplish that goal. If we don't provide the alternatives, how can we expect our culture to turn from its sin nature, for our families to heal, for the gunshots to cease, and the angels we unknowingly entertain to rejoice as the great cloud of witnesses that is around us begins to kneel and confess that Christ is LORD? But God willing and directed, we will provide the alternatives.

Some of you look to change our community by our traditional Christmas services or our shut-in ministries, and while I value these things, they're only the beginning. I challenge you to look beyond these things and to step out in faith with me as I set forth a much bigger picture for these, our first few months and our first year together.

By the beginning of 2009, we will start a second service geared specifically to our youth, with energetic presentation of the Word and contemporary music. This service will serve as the successor to the Phil 2:5 Service, which was a monthly, multi-church service

for youth that I co-created to revolve around a band by the same name, as well as dramatic presentations a rotating speaker schedule. Second, we will create several new outreach programs centered on home churches. One such program that I will lead will serve our area's migrant workers, such as Chinese restaurant workers, and will seek to bring people to Christ whether red, yellow, black, or white. We'll be seeking to forge and strengthen relationships with them, provide fellowship, and present the Gospel. In likewise manner, we must all ask for God to lead us toward the groups of people that He has ordained for us to reach.

We must also have longer term goals. By Sunday, November 1, 2009, I expect that we should be uninhibitedly open to great things of the Spirit. We will make room for prophesy, train prayer warriors to heal the sick and baptize by the Holy Spirit after every service, open our doors each Sunday morning with a quality worship band, and welcome such a vast number of people that it takes our entire sanctuary to accommodate them.

Outreach doesn't end at the borders of Aliquippa, however. The other aspect of outreach lies beyond not only our community, but also our country. To this end, I submit to you that it's time to do more than simply learning about other cultures and sending money to help. For those of us who are able, we must follow the command in Matthew 28:19-20 and forge teams that will go out into the world on divinely driven missions. God willing, we will send at least one missions team abroad by the end of Summer 2009.

There's an old saying: "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars." But for us, it's nothing short of absolute perfidy – foolish blasphemy. My friends, I want the moon itself for my sheep. I have not spoken these words to set a list of unattainable goals with the goal of falling short but still accomplishing great things. Rather, each and every one of these goals is perfectly attainable with your sacrifices and dedication.

These are the things that those who went before us in the Aliquippa Free Methodist Church did not see but welcomed from a distance – save maybe the drumset – but not this year, brothers and sisters in Christ. This year, we will welcome these things in person. This is the Year of Jubilee.

So stand with me. Literally, stand with me. We're going to offer up these dreams to God right now for His glory and ask for His blessing on each and every one of them, and we do so knowing that God's promises are not the promises of man.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

This year, we will see all these things. We will see them, the community will see them, and as your pastor, I will see to it that because of these things, we will know God more and long with the burning passion of a thousand suns to see Him made known.

So now, Lord, we pray Jeremiah 29:12-14 to you...

We call upon Your name, LORD, we come and pray to You, knowing that You will listen to us. We seek You and find You, because we seek You with all our hearts. You declare that You will be found by us and will bring us back from captivity, gathering us from all the nations and places where we've been banished, and so now, LORD, we ask that you restore our fortunes, and we ask that you do so for Your glory in Jesus Christ's precious and holy name.

Amen.