Thanks be to God. I am the archbishop of Nebraska. (Applause-laughter) There is no other bishop there so I can call myself that.

But you’ll no tice as you look at my co-leagues up on the platform that all the clergy shirts are gone. They’re at the laun dry. There’s a song by Willie Nelson, “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” has a line in it that some of you know and probably have experienced this week. If not yet, maybe tomorrow, where he says, “sometimes you go and find the cleanest dirty shirt to put on.” So I’m wearing my shirt again today.

I praise God, I thank God, for the privilege of being a part of the worship service this morning and thank all of you who have been promising to pray and hold me up to God in prayer for this hour.

Buenos días.

Buenos días.

Good morning.

Good morning.

Bon día.

Anyo haseyo.

Anyo haseyo.

Guten morgen

Guten morgen.

Abari asebui.

Abari asebui.

Ina kuana.

Ina kuana.

Holy tee chuk mu.

Holy tee chuk mu.

Dubroi dutro.

Dubroi dutro.

The morning greeting was spoken in Spanish and English, Portuguese and Korean, German and Swahili, Choctaw and Russian. With varying degrees of adequacy in pronunciation, to be sure. But think for a moment with me this morning, about the lands and the people, the cultures and the histories represented by the persons who speak those languages among us this week. Have you caught yourself this week in legal com mittee or in the hallways or here on the floor us ing the word “we?” Who is we? Some of our speakers from time to time have made references, in the course of the week, that presupposed that we are a U.S. church rather than who we are—a global com mu nity of faith with nearly global representation but certainly a com mitment to global mis sion and a vision of all of God’s people as we seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Dr. Justo González reminds us in one of his books that, while it is true that the nations need the gospel, it is also true that the gospel needs the nations. González makes the point that the fullness, the catholicity of the gospel is made manifest only as it is expressed and shared by all of God’s people, in all of God’s cultures throughout the earth.

Charles Wesley, one of those who taught us to sing and challenged us to sing God’s grace, longed to have many tongues to sing the great Redeemer’s praise. So he wrote, “Oh for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!” No hymn of the Wesleyan movement summarizes better the joyful, grateful spirit which inspires boundary-crossing ministry, border trans cend ing mis sion, among United Meth ods to this very day. And it is as we have been faithful to the great com mission and its re-state ment in the 18th century by John Wesley, “the world is my parish,” that we have been blessed by the singing of the theme of grace in more and more languages throughout the world. Dr. González’ assertion that the gospel in the nations, about the gospel and the nations, echoes the earliest struggles in the church and is reflected in its primary doc ument such as the letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians is in some ways one of the ear liest com men taries about the theology in the church. We might see it as a summary of Pauline theology dat ing to that last decade of the first century. The particular reading from chapter 2 this morning, which was shared with you—there are two im por tant af fir mations that are at the cen ter of the early church’s struggle. First, you do not have to become a Jew to become a Chris tian be cause something so new and rad ical is happen ing in Jesus Christ that the previous categories and bar riers no longer define the future. But also, that you, the church, we to geth er, are nothing less than the dwell ing, the living temple of God’s presence in the world.

Earlier in the letter in Ephesians, especially the first chapter, the emphasis is on the individual and the cosmic dimensions of Christ’s mission, but now, in the second chapter, the focus is on the social community. It centers on the community called church and its mission and ministry to the nations, to Gentiles. It uses social-political categories like citizens and aliens and strangers and common wealth and members of the household. But, more importantly, it
underscores the theme of covenant as the underlying central idea, which explains Israel and explains us. Ephesians' theology of the power of Christ that unites all things in heaven and on the earth is a theology of grace, unbounded grace, universal grace that reaches the whole cosmos that is at work everywhere, everywhere.

Be giving with chapter two, the grace of God in Jesus Christ is described by the writer to the Ephesians with the power to unite, to bring to gether people in community, both Jew and Gentile, be cause both Jew and Gentile, both slave and free, both women and men—in all the catechisms you can imagine—all needed Jesus Christ equally. Both Jew and Gentile have been blessed by the same Spirit. And, the writer says, those near and those distant from the tradition of Abraham and Moses and Sarah and Miriam have been reconciled, brought togeth er in one body, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our theme of General Conference this year has been “We Who Are Many Are One Body.” My colleagues are very much of this morning have been lifting up the call to unity among us. They have re minded us that while we celebrate our diversity, we are called to affirm our unity in Jesus Christ. They have urged us not to be sparing in our dif ferences but to embrace them and grow stronger and more united, not by insisting on unity for its own sake, but through the offering of our diverse gifts to the ser vice of the one Lord who has gifted us through the one Spirit and marked us through the one baptism. Our diverse gifts do enhance and enrich and deepen our unity. They also require us to reflect on the reality that the gifts of one people may not be accessible to another. They do not diminish it or threaten it, my sisters and brothers. Is there any person from whom you do not learn? Is there any person from whom you have no gift to receive? Any group? Any nation? Any race? Any culture?

Dr. James Cone has written and spoken eloquently about the struggles of African-American people. He has offered powerful theology in his talks in the re-read ing of the gifts of the Basilisk covenant. Nearly 15 years ago he wrote of the challenges faced by people of color in coming to the table of trust and dialogue, and I quote: “In our efforts to act on the promises made by both Jew and Gentile, both slave and free, both women and men—in all the catechisms you can imagine—all needed Jesus Christ equally. Both Jew and Gentile have been blessed by the same Spirit. And the writer says, those near and those distant from the tradition of Abraham and Moses and Sarah and Miriam have been reconciled, brought togeth er in one body, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The tension of multiple and competing visions for a global church?

The mercy of an affectionate handshake and hug by new friends from distant places?

The tensions of principled debate where discernment does not always lead to consensus but to voting and perceived winners and perceived losers?

The mercy of the hopeful enthusiasm of youth who see visions and the reassuring witness of elders who have dreamed dreams and are still dreaming them among us?

We are God’s family, called to encounter, beyond the familiar and the known to participate fully—as Ephesians would express it—as citizens, no longer as aliens; as members of the one covenant family, no longer as strangers.

Ephesians further affirms in that second chapter that all social/political/racial/cultural categories are relativized for ever by the category of covenant. Covenant. Implications for us? Skin color and racial category do not diminish or enhance our sacred worth. God’s creative act does. Green cards and visas and passports do not confer or deny human dignity. God does that. Neither does gender; neither does sexual orientation, nor physically or mentally challenging conditions. Folks, brothers and sisters, United Methodists from around the world, we are part of one diaspora, originating in the Garden of Eden, if you will, or originating in Southern Africa from one single female. As you will, we are one family. Una, una familia.

The gospel calls us to large commitments. It challenges every small attachment by enlarging the boundary of our community until it includes every single one of God’s children. I am here today to talk about some body, some body, loved the promises of the gospel more than their secure and comfortable circumstances. Some body had to cross a boundary in history to reach my maternal grandmother in northern Mexico in the late 1870s. The family embraced the gospel preached by the Methodists. She was baptized and by and by immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century. She would later marry into the Roman Catholic tradition of her husband, baptize all her children in that tradition, and live the life of a sharecropper’s wife in southern central Texas. But she returned to the Methodist fold of her childhood three years before her death, just in time for my mother—one of her two children who joined her, at La Trinidad, Iglesia Metodista en Seguin, in mem ship. And two years later the baptismal waters were sprinkled over me as she had received so many years before, across the border and beyond the boundary.

My grand mother was born poor. She was an immigrant in a land dominated by another culture, another language, and different ways of life. She had to survive in the midst of circumstances slightly above indentured servitude. She lived out her hopes and her dreams in the midst of poverty and racism and exile from the home of her childhood. But in the midst of all of that, the church of Jesus Christ continued to offer the gospel of grace, the gospel that we preach about and teach about, and we read about this morning. And she was taught the songs of the faith, and we learned them, and she had the support of a community, in a language and a context and a style that affirmed who she was. She didn’t have to become anybody else. She was fully a member of the body of Jesus Christ. She was sustained on the journey. So I celebrate this church, my grandmother’s church. She loved this church, and she sang some of its hymns to me during the first 11 months of my life before she died. She never went to annual conference. She never voted to elect bishops at jurisdictional conference. She never sat where you sit. But she believed in Jesus Christ, the power of Christ to redeem and unite and bring life anew. She was blessed by the church.

But the church was also blessed by my grandmother. She gave this church gifts, just like you have gifts to offer. She gave this church the capacity to weep and laugh with poor people. She challenged it to speak in new languages and accents. She shared with it the reality of cultural ways and values that were different—not superior or inferior—but different from those of the majority. My grandmother was one of the Gentiles.

So this morning, I say, Thank you, Paul. Thank you, editor of the Ephesian letter. Thank you, saints of all the ages who have served the letter to the Ephesians. Thank you, United Methodists, for being willing to live in larger boxes—one of our speakers alluded to early in this General Conference—to hold larger visions, and to dare to journey across all the boundaries and to ward the wider horizon of the reign of God. Amen.