

NACC Conference 2015
Opening Prayer Service Reflection
March 6.
HONORING THE GIFT

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Welcome to you all, my dear and faithful companions! Welcome to this first prayerful gathering of our national association's Conference, "*Honoring the Gift.*"

I imagine that for some audiences, it might seem strange to begin a Jubilee celebration with a memorial service honoring the dead! Such audiences might think that to do so would run the risk of beginning our celebration on a note too "*somber*" or a "*bit of a downer.*" However, THIS assembly is not your everyday audience! For **us**, we understand that this beginning is precisely the place from which all human activity really proceeds: **Memory.**

This Jubilee year's NACC conference is perfectly named: "***Honoring the Gift.***" "To Honor," means, "to regard with great respect." It also means, "to fulfill an obligation or keep an agreement." So, in this *little* three-word title can be found two *enormous* gifts for us all to reclaim this week: Memory and Imagination!

We come together this afternoon to honor and "regard with great respect" all in our NACC family who have gone before us and whose names are woven into the very fabric of this organization and whose names now, through the creative efforts of many, are inscribed on the cloth that now covers this altar.

In the book, *A Room Called Remember*, Frederick Buechner writes, "**The time is ripe for looking back over the day, the week, the year, and trying to figure out where we have come from and**

where we are going to, for sifting through the things we have done and the things we have left undone, for a clue to who we are and who, for better or worse, we are becoming.”

He continues,

“There is a deeper need yet, I think, and that is the need to enter that still room within us all where the past lives on as a part of the present, where the dead are alive again, where we are most alive ourselves to turnings and to where our journeys have brought us. The name of the room is Remember—the room where with patience, with charity, with quietness of heart, we remember consciously to remember the lives we have met and the lives we have lived.”

Let’s linger with those words and enter that room of Remember together... (Pause)

While we’re in this moment of recollection, I’m going to ask you to retrieve an ancient word from your theological studies; it’s one I think we all learned: “**ANAMNESIS**.” As you may recall, it is a word that is almost untranslatable in English. Attempts at translating it such as “Memorial,” or “Commemoration,” or “Remembrance” all suggest a *kind* of recollection of the past. However, anamnesis is far more than that kind of memory alone. Anamnesis means **making present** a person, object or event from the past.

Anamnesis is a "remembering" which brings the person who is *doing* the remembering into contact or presence with the inner core meaning -- *the mystery* -- of an event which happened "once and for all."

So, as this prayer service points to those individuals who envisioned and created NACC in April of 1965, I imagine that those

founding giants would, in turn, point to all who also enfolded that dream over these fifty years. I have no doubt that, in that room of remembering, each of those departed sisters and brothers would point beyond themselves to the Christ, who beckoned them to be signs of mercy and compassion and peace among the suffering people in our world. “Do this in memory of me...” --the ultimate anamnesis.

In his work, *Faith in History and Society*, theologian Johann Baptist Metz proposed that **memory** is indeed what gives human beings, both as individuals and as communities, their **historical identity**: “Identity,” he said, “is formed when memories are aroused.” And so, as we remember, our identity drifts back to us.

Metz also said that memories take different forms, that they generally fall into two categories. In the first category, memory is simply the recollection of the past, a kind of “good old days” reminiscence. However, there is another kind of memory, a memory that **shocks** us out of the familiar by radically acknowledging the reality of human suffering.

Metz calls these memories of human suffering “**dangerous memories**” because they “**interrupt**” our lives and “reveal new and dangerous insights for the present.” // Memories of human suffering “**make demands on us.**” They radically challenge the present in light of a future promised by God.

Our predecessors **got** that. They skillfully and professionally interrupted the “interruption” of suffering in the world with their own gifts of pastoral care. And **YOU** get it! You remember what you have inherited because you remember the God who remembers you. You are here, members of this organization, creating this great body of tender mercy for our time. . . **you** are this time’s

“interrupters” of the interruption of suffering.

So now we return to the second definition of the phrase “to honor” with which I began my reflection. You may remember that “to honor” means “*to fulfill an obligation or to keep an agreement.*” During this time together --right now-- we have drawn from our collective gift of memory. In these next days of deliberation and community, I encourage you to seek and use the ever-necessary gift of **imagination** so that we, the living, may find new ways to “fulfill the obligation and keep the agreement” of bringing into **every** age the saving grace of God . . . a grace that neither “goes gray” nor “dies out!”

Only a few moments ago we sang our opening hymn and watched the beautiful memorial altar cloth be carried up the aisle and placed on the altar. I see something different, now. Now, I see more than a cloth with names resting on a table. I see, additionally, a **mantle** woven by the hands of our organization’s history --- a mantle which is now laid upon the shoulders of every chaplain in this room and in this organization. Assume it . . . and be wrapped in it. Feel its softness; feel its warmth; and, yes, feel its weight. Let it remind each of us that it now is for **us** to strengthen and renew this ministry, finding meaningful ways to bear tender mercies into a beautiful yet struggling world.