

**Rev. Bruce Beard**  
**City and Congregation Workgroup Presentation**  
**The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage**

**Rev. Beard:** Good Morning, everyone. First of all, I want to say thank you to Charles for this experience. It has been a very rich and very rewarding experience for me personally and I want to just take a few moments to share a few personal reflections. John and Jenny kind of gave an overview of the work that we did, some of the things that we went through in that process. I've appreciated our workgroup and all of the work that we did, the sharing that we did together, the readings that we did together, the dialogue was rich, and I really appreciate that. I was enriched by the process. When this guy goes away to – where you going? -- Beijing or something like that, Bosnia, someplace, we're going to miss him dearly.

I do want to share some personal reflections about this process for me as a pastor not having been born and raised here in Charlottesville. My wife and I are originally from Pittsburg, PA, and having left the corporate setting and going into full time ministry coming here to Charlottesville, a town that I had never heard of, I did not know quite what to expect here in Charlottesville. What I found here was a very divided town, as are many towns across the United States. But divided perhaps in some very unique ways. Of course, there's a divide between what's called the city and what they call the townies. There's the racial divide. There's a great deal of sexism in this town. Socio-economic divide. And the strangest part about all of that is that it seems to be accepted, it seems to be normative for the community. It seems that no one wants to really address the issues, no one wants to rock the boat. But let's just maintain the status quo and everything will

be alright. And so as I look at the community itself, or look at the church community, I can't help but wonder what it is that God thinks about what we're going here, not just in Charlottesville, but even in the global sense. What does God think we're doing? What does God think about what we're doing in this conference? I can't possibly even begin to imagine, but if I had to try to imagine, I would think that there's at least some degree of sorrow in God, that His heart must be broken, and broken largely because what God has intended to be a gift to us, we have turned into reasons to divide and to do battle with one another. That God has created us purposefully to be white and black and Asian and Hispanic. He has purposefully made us different ethnicities and racial groups. He has purposefully given us different giftings. Some were, I believe, by design to be scholars, and some theologians, and some activists, and some practitioners, and that was God's gift to the world. But we've taken God's gift and, somehow, have divided ourselves and have separated to our various corners and now we declare, quite boldly and proudly, that our way is the best way, and no one else really counts, and if everyone else would just listen to me or just listen to just our particular little group, then everything would be alright. I just imagine that it breaks God's heart.

I also see in that, though, a tremendous degree of opportunity for us, and that's one of the reasons why, though I had some doubts about being involved in the Lived Theology project, I'm glad that I became a part of it, because it is an opportunity for us to come together, to not only share together but to perhaps carve out a new paradigm, a new way of being, a new way of living, a new way of thinking, if in fact, we are willing to go beyond the step of just analyzing, of dialoguing, and leaving it at that. But there has to be

something more that comes about as a result of that. The reason why I had some doubts about this process is that I have over the years been engaged in a lot of conversations very similar to this. Symposiums on racism, symposiums on sexism, symposiums about the ecclesiology of our nation, symposiums about the divide socio-economically, and usually what it turns out to be is interesting discussion and that's about it. About two years ago there were several clergy from our city who began to engage in conversation with the president of this University and the Chief Financial Officer about ways that the persons in our congregations can be impacted in a more positive way by the University. What ended up happening was we would show up at the meetings and they would have for us laid out doughnuts and fruit and they would have already set the agenda. And they would begin to discuss their agenda. After about the third meeting, I had decided that I had had enough because the topic of each meeting was very different, it was based on the University's agenda. And it was obviously no intent whatsoever to address the real issues of this community, very real, serious issues that face this community. And so, what I would ask questions in those meetings, "Okay what are we going to do about the disparity between those who are the laborers in this University and those who are the professionals?" And we would get answers like, "Well, the different departments have different department heads and the different department heads make their own decisions and they farm out business in some cases, and so we really don't have control." And I'm thinking, "How can you be the President and the Chief Financial Officer and you don't really have control of your University?" So, some of those things just really bothered me and I decided that I just really didn't want to be a part of that. So, when Charles extended

the invitation to become a part of this process, once again, I began to have those same old feelings of, “What is this really going to be all about?”

What I’ve been interested in is community, and what I define community as what the word says, common unity. What are those areas that are common among us that can bring about unity, though we are created by God to be very, very different. I don’t think God has any intention for us to be the same, but we can have things in common and therefore be unified in purpose. In a situation like this conference where we do have people from different disciplines here, I see this as spokes of the same wheel, but if one spoke decides that it wants to bail out, or if one spoke thinks that it’s bigger and better than another spoke, then the wheel’s not going to go very far. But it is an opportunity for us to find unity in our differences. That’s the paradox of God. To truly be authentically Christian, for me, means we have to live in a world that likes everything to be normative, but God is a God of paradox. In other words, to live, you must die. If you truly want to be free, you must become a slave. The more you give, the more you receive. All those kinds of things run contrary to the kinds of things that we are taught in our common culture. And so how do we live in a culture where everything has to be spelled out “A, B, C” and at the same time be authentic to the paradox of our faith. I believe that these kinds of debates will help us to face these kinds of challenges if in fact we are willing to face these kinds of challenges. And I want to perhaps lift a couple of possibilities at least of some things that we can do rather than just dialogue, but things that we can actually do to get us to the next level. One of the things that I did when I first came here to Charlottesville when I was doing some doctoral work is I took a video camera out on the

street with some friends and I began to ask questions of people at random on the street, “what do you think about the churches in Charlottesville, and specifically, what do you think about the church that I now pastor?” I can tell you that not one person had anything good to say about the churches in Charlottesville, especially the church that I pastor. And, I recall some people making statements like, “You know, I love the Lord Jesus Christ with all of my heart but the Church is just another oppressive institution like all of the rest.” In essence, they were saying, “We hear a lot of theological jargon but we don’t see it lived. We hear a lot of academic rhetoric but we don’t see the Gospel lived. We hear the debates about denomination but we don’t see the Gospel lived. We see the Church fractured and divided but we don’t see the Gospel lived out in the life of Jesus Christ. What we see is a church community that is Presbyterian and Baptist and Pentecostal and Episcopalian, but they don’t meet, they don’t agree. What we see, even among Baptist churches, there are 38 versions of Baptist. I’m a Baptist preacher and I don’t even know what they all are. And so what they saw was fragmentation. They were living in a city that was fragmented, and the place of hope, which was the Church, they saw the church as fragmented, so where would they turn to find any kind of hope?

In addition to that, we are living in a time when things are rapidly changing. I was reading a book by Bob Dale, who’s written perhaps over 40 books on leadership, and one of his essays, Bob begins to lay out the rapid change of culture over the ages. He began by saying that for thousands of years, culture was a hunter and gatherer sort of culture. That is, you had to hunt for your food, you gathered your food, and for thousands of years, that’s the way it was. Then, that began to change, and of course, farming became

the norm, and we lived in an agricultural age. From the agricultural age, which was much shorter than the hunter-gatherer age, we entered into the Industrial age. And of course, through the 30's and 40's, here in America, the Industrial age exploded. The town that I'm from, Pittsburg, PA, had for miles and miles along one river, nothing but steel mills. They're all gone now. And so this industrial age impacted not only the cultural in general but it impacted the church, and so we saw the church as governed by boards, the official boards, the deacon board, the trustee board, terms that we use from the corporate setting that now came into the church. The church was structured hierarchically where there was a board and now the pastor began to speak authoritatively and that information came down to the people and the peons at the bottom just had to fall in line. That was sort of an industrial mindset. But now, we're living in what's called the Information Age. And at the Information Age, although already much shorter than the Agricultural Age, is cresting right now and is expected to decline somewhere around 2020. That doesn't mean that information won't be important after that, that does mean that all the emphasis that all the emphasis on information as we're experiencing it right now won't have the same kind of influence. But there's a new age emerging called the Experiential Age, at least that's Bob Dale's terminology. The Experiential Age where the new generation that follows behind really doesn't care that much about social structures, they really don't care that much about church structures, they want to experience life. They want to feel the rush. They don't want to play the video game, they want to be in the video game. And, so now we have virtual reality. They don't want to just play sports, they want to engage in extreme sports. So they're surfboarding, jumping out of airplanes on surfboards. And so they want to feel the rush, they want to

experience something, they could care less about denominationalism, they're not religious at all but they are very, very spiritual. How do we, then, begin to construct a new paradigm that addresses not only those of our current culture and those of the past but this emerging generation that really is not that concerned with theological thinking, they're not that concerned with the great theologians, they're not that concerned with some of the issues that we think are important, but what they are interested in is a new way of being. How are we, then, going to leave a legacy for them that's going to create a framework in which they can live and thrive and create that so-called utopia that was mentioned earlier? I don't know if that's really possible but certainly there's a new way of looking at eschatology in such a way that there is hope for the future.

I believe that one of the things that we must consider, first of all, is what did Jesus do. Everybody's asking the question "What would Jesus do?" What did he do? The Gospel, while we have made it very complicated, is really quite simple. Jesus declared, in Luke Chapter 4, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon on, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, set the captives free, recover sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord's favor." Very simple. So simple that we have a hard time grasping it. So simple that we battle over it. So simple that we've taken out of the hands of Christ and now we have somehow turned it into something else that looks very foreign and very strange to the world. How do we then get back to what Jesus had intended from the very beginning? I believe one of the things we must do is be honest and true to ourselves. To thine own self be true. That we have to be honest about our own thoughts, our own biases, our own prejudices. As we sit in

this room, while we're all here, ready to sing Kumbaya, the fact of the matter is there are some in this room who have problems racially, ethnically, and in terms of gender. And there are some in this room who would not like the fact that Dr. Liz Emery is the pastor of a church. That there some who believe that women should not be pastors of churches. I'm sure that there are some in this room who are willing to shake hands with one another but deep down inside find those of us of a darker hue as somewhat, a little bit more inferior. I'm sure there are some in this room that are of my hue that will look at those who are white and say that they are all thinking that they're superior, that they're better than everyone else, and that none of them can be trusted. If any change is going to take place, before we change a community, we've got to change ourselves. We've got to be honest with ourselves. If you don't like someone else, admit your own bias to yourself and ask God to help you to change your own bias so you can be effective. One of the things that irritates me the most is when I go to a group and someone shakes my hand and says, "You know, I don't even notice that you're black. We're one in Jesus Christ." And I'm saying, "How can you not notice that I'm black? Or at least something other than white?" Some people get confused and think I'm Indian, you know, Hispanic or whatever, but something other than white. That's offensive to me. Notice what God has made me to be. I would prefer that they would say to me, "You know what, I don't like you, Nigger." At least now I know where you stand and we can enter into dialogue honestly and maybe through our dialogue we can share together and he might learn that I'm actually human and I might not further my preconceived notion that you're not just a racist, maybe you're just ignorant. But if we're shaking hands and hugging each other like we love one another, nothing is going to change. And so we have to first and



foremost be honest with ourselves. Who are we, who do we want to be. As we're doing that, God has given us an opportunity, though projects like this, to then begin to impact the community, that people groups can be honest with themselves. That we can be honest and say, as a University, we don't like the people of the community, we think that they're beneath us. The community can be honest and say the people of the University cannot be trusted. That the wealthy can say the fact of the matter is that we want to control the community, we want to control the wealth, and we don't want to share power. Whatever the assumptions are, at least now, we can start from an honest basis. We were talking about racial reconciliation earlier, and on Thursday, and I don't know that racial reconciliation will be possible until we can be honest with ourselves. Until we can face the true horror of slavery, until we can be honest as groups that whites must look at the true horror of slavery and not rewrite history. But blacks have to be honest and have to stop blaming white folks for everything. That we have to be honest that there were black folks here in Virginia that owned slaves. That we have to be honest about history and face it, head on. That we have to begin to find ways to find common unity. I was sharing, sort of informally yesterday, after one of the presentations, I was saying that those who are the wealthiest are the most powerful in this nation, really are not that concerned about race, are not that concerned about culture, are not that concerned about sexism, because they have the wealth and the power. As long as those who don't have the wealth and the power are at odds with one another, then they will continue to maintain the status quo. In other words, those who are upper middle class and below, they're not really that concerned about us, because they know that as long as black and white don't get along, as long as they know Asian and Hispanic don't get along, as long

as they know that upper middle class and the poor don't get along, as long as cities are building highways around poor neighborhoods so that they don't have to see the devastation of the poor, then they will continue to maintain their power. It's not until we decide that we are going to come together under common unity, sharing our differences, the gifts of God, that I believe that we're going to be able to impact, and make substantive change in this nation and in this culture. And so, for me, this project has been helpful, it's been interesting, but my prayer is that it's not just an informational conversation that we've had over the course over a few days. That we do come up with a new framework. That we do come up with a new paradigm. That we will make a commitment to not just go back to our corners after this conference, but that we will reach out, that we will seek to understand, and that we will try to make a difference. That's my prayer, and I'm just foolish enough to believe that it's possible. Thank you.