



A Reflection from YOUTH 2023
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Our journey to BOLD began on Monday, July 24th, 2023. Myself, three other adults, and twelve students entering their freshmen and sophomore year of high school were about to gather with about 3000 other teens from the United Methodist Church in Daytona Beach, Florida. The students gathering there would represent 44 of the US states and five different countries.

The drive from Rehoboth UMC (Gallatin) to Daytona Beach is approximately twelve hours so we left a day before the event began and spent the night at Reach Nazarene Church in Warner Robins, GA. Tuesday morning we completed the second half of the drive. We attempted to make a quick stop in Saint Augustine (only about an hour north of Daytona) but were hit on by hard rain when we tried to go and get a bite to eat.

When we arrived at our Hotel we checked in, got everyone situated in their rooms and took the kids out for Pizza and Ice Cream before attending our first worship gathering of the week. Worship throughout the week was led by a Christian Band called FRVR FREE, the songs they played that night carried a theme that led into our first speaker's message: **BE BOLD: Christ is our Firm Foundation!**

Rachel Billups, Lead Pastor of New Albany UMC in Ohio, was our first speaker. Her recent 2019 book *Be Bold: Finding Your Fierce* is what created the theme for this event (I was fortunate to pick up a copy while at the event). She shared with us why we had gathered: "that through these students all Heaven will break through." She reminded us not to just accept the labels others throw at us but to build our identity on the bedrock of Jesus: *Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall*

because it was firmly set on bedrock (Matthew 7:24-25). Her opening message set a tone, that this week we are invited to explore how to build our life on Jesus and that in doing so we can learn to become BOLD.

After Rachel's sermon, we heard from missionaries in Guatemala. Their testimony and work served as an example of living boldly in Christ. Their ministry, the Association of Creativity & Development of Guatemala, serves children and family throughout the rural and lower-income areas of the country. The most memorable and powerful moment of their talk was when they were asked: "What would happen if your presence and action was not there?" One of the speakers said: "Some of the children would quit school to provide for their family as early as ten, some would begin to seek refuge with a stranger as early as five, and some would have fates much worse." This moment was to focus on that standing firm on Christ's foundation, is not just for our own self-esteem, but as Rachel said, "that all Heaven can break through."

Our Tuesday evening ended with giving our students their first feel of the ocean for the week before sending them to bed.

On Wednesday Morning we heard from two speakers. First, Bishop Hector A. Burgos Nunez of the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference shared his testimony of faith when he was fifteen years old. He spoke about how he tried to live two lives, a Christian life at church and secular life at school. He described it as having two full time jobs and the stress that many young people go through when trying to please everyone. His message was simple: pursue being your God authentic self.

Then we heard from Rev. Victor Cyrus-Franklin, who is the Lead Pastor of Inglewood First UMC and Grace UMC both in the Los Angeles area. For our group of students his message this morning was by far their favorite. His message was centered around two scripture passages: Hebrews 12:1, *So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up,* and John 1:45-46, *Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth." Nathanael responded, "Can anything from Nazareth be good? Philip said, "Come and see."*

Nazareth was a place of poor reputation, viewed as a low place, where nothing good could come from. Rev. Victor said, the reason God chose to live and go through Nazareth is so that you could go and face your Nazareth, the areas of our lives that are viewed as poor, low, or inadequate. Referring back to Hebrews 12:1, when you face the struggles in your life you can **BE BOLD: You Are Not Alone!** We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who came before us. Those who have supported us throughout our life stand with us along with all the examples of

men and women of faith that transcend borders, race, culture, gender, and so on. We stand on the back of many who have gone through their own “Nazareth” and we today lean into the love, wisdom, and guidance passed down to us. We are not alone, Christ and the communion saints are with us!

After our morning worship session, students attended different workshops to their specific interest before returning to the hotel. In between our morning conference and evening worship most students spent their time on the beach enjoying the beautiful city hosting our event. I had an opportunity to walk around the local shops with a smaller group of the kids. Afterwards everyone got cleaned up for dinner before returning for our Wednesday Night worship gathering.

That night after worship, our first speaker was Dale Cancio, who serves in the office of Young People’s Ministry in the United Methodist Church of the Philippines. He read Romans 8:28, *We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.* He shared his testimony of struggling with self doubt and introduced the evening's theme **BE BOLD: We Have Been Called!**

From there we heard from Rev. Kevin Kosh Jr., who served on the National Network of Young Adults in The United Methodist Church and an organization called Strengthening Black Churches for the 21st Century. His message continued the theme of calling. He started off by reading 1 Samuel 3:9-10, *So Eli said to Samuel, “Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD. Your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down where he’d been. Then the LORD came and stood there, calling just as before, “Samuel, Samuel!” Samuel said, “Speak. Your servant is listening.”* Rev. Kosh explained that the word for listening here comes from a Hebrew word pronounced “shema” which means to listen with respect or obedience. He told us to seek after what God is calling us to do, to ignore our self doubt that tells us we can't, and that when we walk in holy obedience we become the hands and feet of Jesus. He closed by asking a question to challenge us with: If we don't do the right thing, who will?

After the evening worship session the students spent some time hanging outside their hotel rooms in the hallway before heading off the bed to prepare for another day in Daytona.

Thursday was our final day in Daytona, I made a Dunkin Donuts run for the kids then myself and one of the students did a two mile run on the beach. At the morning worship session we heard from Rev. Tripp Gullede pastor of Highland Park UMC in Dallas, Texas. The most notable thing about this speaker was that he was blind. He shared a testimony and message from 1st Corinthians 12 and that the body of Christ must be built up of different parts. “Different isn't bad, it's just different. Not better or worse.” His testimony gave us our bold theme for the morning, **BE BOLD: Embrace our Differences.**

Rev. Victor from Los Angeles spoke again that morning. He continued the topic of the needs of our different spiritual gifts and roles we can play. Teaching from the story of Jesus feeding the 5000, he said: “Bring your boldness, and God will multiply! Show up with the gifts and “fruits” that you have. Fix your eyes on Jesus because He loves you, and know there is nothing you can do about it so be bold and be who God has made you.”

To close that morning session we heard from Cesar Lodiha Akoka, a Methodist Deacon in the West Congo Annual Conference. He shared much about his ministry in Africa and reminded us that “Being bold is being a good samaritan! It is bringing love into action for the transformation of the world.” With these final words our morning worship came to an end.

During our free time that day, we did some arts & crafts. I took two of our students Go-Karting, and then a number of us dug a sand moat from the ocean to a large hole we made while the others swam. It did begin to rain that day so we regrouped inside. It was nice to get some rest and slow down during this time. The students got together to play Super Smash Bros. and Mario Kart before getting dinner and our final session of the trip.

Our first speaker of the final night was Armindo Mapoissa who serves in a number of different roles throughout the Mozambique Episcopal Annual Conference. He shared about his role serving with Youth Ministry in Africa. He kicked off the final theme of the trip, **BE BOLD: Say Yes to God**, and He can change the world.

Rev. Jeff Campbell, from Nolensville First UMC in Tennessee, was another really loved speaker. (This is actually the second time my students have heard from him because he was also one of the speakers at our Fall Retreat in 2022 in Nashville). His message made reference to a lot of pop culture such as Taylor Swifts’ song *Anti-Hero* (the #1 played song in 2022), and movies like Disney’s *Moana* (2016) and Marvel’s *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The core of his message came from a quote that is attributed to Mark Twain: “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” He ended by encouraging us saying, “You can say yes to God, you are His handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good things.”

Our final speaker we heard from was Iyana ‘YaNi’ Davis, a Christian Rapper, Spoken Word Artist, and Author of *Love Poems for Peace* (2014). Saying yes to God begins with trusting in Jesus, and so she read John 3:16-17, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

At the end of our last night in Florida, a Youth Choir who had been practicing throughout the week led in closing worship. The whole auditorium joined together for the final moment, singing

the chorus of a song: *“All we need is love, love and love.”* When we left the students had one more chance to swim in the ocean.

Friday morning we gathered the students for communion on the beach with a call to the Great Commission to go and share the love and grace they have received while here. After that we walked from there to IHOP for breakfast before hitting the road. Our drive that day was long, we drove through rain, Atlanta traffic, and took more bathroom stops than I wish but that night we arrived at Waleska UMC in Georgia. We got the students settled, took them out for Chinese food, and then I had my favorite moment of the entire trip. Before bed I sat in a side room at the church and invited the students to come join me in groups of two. There I had the honor of listening to the students about whatever they wished to share and pray for their school year. Saturday morning was the final part of our drive, we stopped in Chattanooga, TN for lunch then returned to Rehoboth at 3PM.

What does it mean to be BOLD?

- To be BOLD is to know who you are and whose you are. [2 Corinthians 5:17]
- To be BOLD is to celebrate with worship, fellowship and discipleship. [Colossians 3:16-17]
- To be BOLD is to walk alongside others during difficult times. [Galatians 6:2]
- To be BOLD is to recognize the great cloud of witnesses that preceded you. [Hebrews 12:1]
- To be BOLD is to actively throw off the things that interfere with our ability to persevere in our lifelong journey of faith. [Hebrews 12:1; James 1:25]
- To be BOLD is to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. [Micah 6:8]
- To be BOLD is to know that all belong to the family of God. [Galatians 3:28]

