



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

As our nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we are invited to reflect on liberty, belonging, and our shared responsibilities.

I believe anniversaries invite more than celebration – though celebration is warranted. Anniversaries also invite gratitude, truth-telling, and discernment. They ask us to remember where we have come from, honestly assess where we are, and consider what kind of future we hope to build together.

Writing to God's people in exile, the prophet Jeremiah offered this instruction:

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you ... for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7)

The Hebrew word translated as "welfare" is *shalom*: peace, wholeness, flourishing, justice, and well-being.

These words were spoken not to citizens, but to exiles. Their commitment to the common good flowed not from status or power, but from their identity as God's people.

That vision speaks powerfully into our own moment.

Some of us trace our family stories to the First Nations peoples who have stewarded these lands since time immemorial. Some descend from those who crossed oceans seeking opportunity and refuge. Some are descendants of those brought here against their will. Some arrived recently. Some are citizens. Some are permanent residents. Some are still seeking a place to call home.

Yet all of us are neighbors, and all of us are bound together in one another's flourishing.

As we tell the story of our nation, we must also tell it truthfully. We remember Indigenous communities who experienced the loss of land, language, and culture; African men, women, and children who were enslaved while others proclaimed freedom; and generations of immigrants and laborers who endured hardship in pursuit of belonging.

These stories do not diminish our nation. They deepen our understanding of it.

The Christian faith teaches that healing begins with truth. Confession is not the opposite of hope; it is often the doorway to hope.

The Apostle Paul reminds us: "Our citizenship is in heaven." (Philippians 3:20)

Christians live with a kind of dual citizenship. We belong to the communities and nations in which we live, yet our deepest identity is found in the Kingdom of God. That citizenship shapes every other loyalty and reminds us that no earthly power can claim the devotion that belongs to God alone.

In every generation, Christians face the temptation to confuse love of country with devotion to God. The Church serves the nation best not when it becomes the chaplain of power, but when it remains faithful to Jesus Christ.

In the Wesleyan tradition, freedom is not merely freedom *from* something. It is freedom *for* something: loving God, loving neighbor, pursuing mercy and justice, and participating in God's healing work in the world.

Jesus expressed this calling simply:

"You are the salt of the earth."

"You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13-14)

Which brings us to another enduring symbol: the torch of the Statue of Liberty.

A torch provides light. It helps people find their way.

The Statue of Liberty lifts her light toward the horizon. The Church carries another light: the light of Christ.

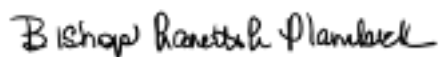
As we approach this anniversary, may we resist both cynicism and nostalgia. May we seek the *shalom* of the places where God has planted us. May we welcome the stranger, pursue justice, build peace, and love our neighbors.

Every generation receives the torch of liberty.

The question is how we will carry it.

May we carry it with humility, courage, compassion, and hope.

Whether citizen or newcomer, native-born or newly arrived, may we seek together the flourishing of our communities and all God's children.



Bishop Lanette Plambeck

Resident Bishop

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