

Good Evening. Let me begin with a word of thanks for the invitation to be here with you today and for your very kind hospitality and welcome. I am honored to be here and hope that our conversation will be of benefit to you and in some way enlightening.

I bring greetings on behalf of Rev. Dr. John Thomas, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, and from two of my colleagues in the national setting who relate closely to our partnership with the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany: Dr. Peter Makari from our Global Ministries, and Rev. Lydia Veliko, ecumenical officer for the United Church of Christ, have asked me to convey their warmest regards to friends and colleagues in the church in Baden, in thanksgiving and gratitude for the commitment you have shown to our Partnership.

Since the formal beginning of the United Church of Christ's relationship with what was then the Evangelical Church of the Union in 1981, we have been so blessed through both the national partnership and the many regional relationships which have grown deeper every year. The partnership you in Baden now share with the Kansas Oklahoma Conference is among the newest and most creative, and we hear very often from our colleagues in the Conference about how much they cherish the friendships they have developed with you. They also speak of the opportunity they feel they have been given to deepen their own faith and witness as a result of what they learn from you as faithful Christians in Germany. They express much gratitude for the gifts of the spirit they have, even in this short time, received from you. For that, and for the ways that your relationship will continue to grow, we give you our deepest thanks.

Both of our churches have been through a great many changes since we began Kirchengemeinschaft, and yet our partnership and solidarity persist. We have learned so much from you about how to be a church committed to justice and peace. For that, we give thanks to God, and

look for the many ways we will deepen both in our relationship and in our faithful witness to God in the years ahead.

When we on the national staff of the United Church of Christ first realized that Senator Barak Obama -- a member of one of our congregations in Chicago -- would be a serious contender for the Presidency of the United States, we were, frankly, quite panicked.

We were faced with the prospect not only of one of our members becoming one of the most powerful people in the world but -- during what promised to be a highly contentious political season -- we could look forward to our beliefs, our commitments and our sense of prophetic witness being held up for close scrutiny -- and perhaps criticism and derision -- by the press and by the American people. What would it mean that we in the United Church of Christ -- as a matter not of political, but of theological conviction -- believe that a woman had the right to reproductive choice? That gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people deserved equal rights? What would it mean for those of us in the progressive church community -- many of whom had criticized the so-called "religious right" for their involvement in past political campaigns -- to be thrust into the political fray ourselves, not as protestors -- our usual place -- but as the "establishment?"

Our angst was compounded when the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of our largest congregation and Senator Obama's pastor, was found to have made statements over the course of a long ministry that many outside and some inside the United Church of Christ found to be at best misunderstood, at worst abhorrent. Was the criticism of Dr. Wright a reflection of the racism in our society, a rejection of prophetic witness and the speaking of truth to power, or just partisan politics? As network news shows repeatedly aired videos of Reverend Wright continually across our television screens, we kept asking ourselves: what is our role? How were we to respond?

One more complication to all of this . . . The leadership of the United Church of Christ had invited Senator Obama to speak at our General Synod in June last year; not as a candidate for President, but as a member of our church who often spoke eloquently about his faith, and the role that it played in his public life, and that it should play in the life of our country. As a result, the national taxation agency in the United States -- the Internal Revenue Service -- began an investigation into whether or not our tax-exempt status (allowing our members to deduct their contributions from their federal taxes) should be revoked because of an inappropriate and unlawful intrusion by the church into *partisan* political affairs. How, then, -- we asked ourselves -- might the church be involved in public affairs, recognizing its call to prophetic witness, but within American law which -- ambiguously -- calls for the separation of church and state?

As we looked to answer these specific questions, we realized that there was a more important and overarching question that we needed to consider -- what is God calling us, a relatively small denomination US to be and do in the public arena in these times?

Since the founding of the United Church of Christ in 1957 and in the histories of the bodies that formed that union, our Church has sought to be in the forefront of progressive social and cultural movements. The changing cultural, social and political climate in the United States today offers us opportunities for continuing that leadership -- represented in many ways by the questions that come out of the fact of and reaction to Senator Obama's candidacy -- but in ways we struggle to clearly see.

In the last few decades, our Church has *not* for the most part been at the center of the debate about faith and public and social policy to some degree. We have been proud of the distance we have travelled from a past when we were widely recognized as people of privilege and power to what some among us considered a more authentically Christian

posture of close identification with those on the margins of society. But aggressively living out our core commitments – to be a United and Uniting Church, to be a church with a passion for justice, to be a church committed to peace, and a radically inclusive church – have resulted historically in an influence in American social and cultural issues far beyond our numbers, and impelled us to claim leadership on important issues in these times and for the future.

I'd like to talk today about each of those commitments and how we, through them, have had – and I believe will continue to have -- an impact on the American landscape. But first some words on the context in which we find ourselves.

As we explore the impact that the United Church of Christ is having on American society, it is important to consider the changing religious context in which we work.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, an initiative funded by a large philanthropic foundation in the US, has just completed an exhaustive study of the American religious landscape, including shifts in religious affiliation and the social and political views of various religious groups.

Some of the findings of the Pew study:

Twenty-eight percent (28%) of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all. About 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.

The number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith is 16% -- more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion. Another recent survey, however, indicates that 80% -- yes 80% -- of adults under age 25 have never been in a church sanctuary.

Eighteen percent (18%) of American adults consider themselves to be “mainline Protestants” and point 5 percent (0.5%) identify themselves as members of the United Church of Christ.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, 60% to 65% of respondents described themselves as Protestant. In the early 1990s, the proportion of adults identifying as Protestant began a steady decline. BY 2006, the General Social Surveys (conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago) registered Protestant affiliation at 50%.

The proportion of the population identifying with the large mainline Protestant denominations has declined significantly in recent decades, while the proportion of Protestants identifying with the large evangelical denominations has increased.

These statistics show a fluid religious context in which relationships and loyalties cannot be taken for granted. It means that our task as a church – both in terms of those who are currently members of the United Church of Christ and those who might join us – is to articulate clearly our distinctive understanding of the gospel values, and to project an unambiguous vision for how those values are brought to life in today’s world.

A second important contextual issue relates to the political landscape and the progressive view of the relationship of religion and politics. Since the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for the Presidency in the 1950s and 1960s, the predominate view among religious progressives has been for total separation of Church and State. Listen to these words by candidate Kennedy in a famous speech on religion in 1960 where he describes:

"what kind of America I believe in ... where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the President - should he be a Catholic - how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or from the people who might elect him."

Contrast this with the words of Barak Obama in a speech as he began his campaign:

"Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering in the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King – indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history – were not only motivated by faith but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. To say that men and women should not inject their “personal morality” into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.”

This shift offers both a challenge and an opportunity. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, members of the United Church of Christ were disturbed by the domination of the political landscape by religious fundamentalists and conservatives. Our response to that domination was to go back to the Kennedy mantra of religion as essentially a private, not a public affair. Obama challenges us – using the example of many of the heroes of the progressive movement – to clearly articulate and implement the values that we hold dear.

In that context then, let's talk about those values and commitments that are central to the life of the United Church of Christ:

First . . . we seek to be a Church with a Passion for Justice – The area where the United Church of Christ has undoubtedly had the greatest impact on the social fabric of the United States and for which it is well known is in the area of promoting social justice. This commitment dates from the earliest days of the denomination, beginning with the defense of slaves imprisoned for revolting and seeking their freedom from slavery, through the continuing battle for human rights today. The Amistad Incident is one of the legendary stories of the Congregational church and its successor, the United Church of Christ.

In 1839, a group of enslaved Africans revolted against their Portuguese captors during transit to the American continent. Eventually landing in Connecticut, the Africans were arrested and tried for their rebellion. These slaves from the ship called the Amistad were defended by a group whose later incarnation was the American Missionary Association.

The American Missionary Association was formed in 1846 by Congregationalists and is known among historians for its infusion of antislavery sentiment into the foreign mission movement, its educational mission to formerly enslaved African Americans in the South after the Civil War, and its later work with racial memories and

immigrants. Listen to these words from American Missionary Association magazine in an anti-slavery article called “The Duty of the Church:”

No more apologies for national transgressions. No more opposition to moral reforms. No more persecution of church members for praying or speaking against the abominations of slavery. No more silence under oppressive acts. No more wresting of the Scriptures to sustain iniquity. No more silence in the pulpit, and ecclesiastical bodies and prayer-meetings, when legislatures and governments are acting as allies of Satan. No more mutilation of publications to please or propitiate slaveholders. No more dread of political parties that inscribe upon their banners: “The Constitution for this world, and the Bible for the next.” No more base subservience to artful demagogues, aspiring politicians and unprincipled statesmen. No more contempt poured upon honest and outspoken anti-slavery men. No more suffering of the padlock on the lips of ministers and church-members under the influence of the senseless cry; “Religion has nothing to do with politics.”

Today, we aspire to that same sense of urgency and the zeal that is evident in this passage.

Between 1847 and 1865, the American Missionary Association, founded and/or supported 285 antislavery churches and commissioned 45 abolitionists as itinerant ministers in the United States. During and after the Civil War, the Association established hundreds of schools for freed slaves, including numerous institutions of higher education, many of which continue to be leaders in the education of African Americans. These institutions include Fisk University, LeMoyne-Owen College, Atlanta University, Tougaloo College, Talladega College and Howard

University all of which are widely recognized for their excellence and the prominence and leadership of their graduates.

Since those anti-slavery days, the United Church of Christ has continued its work in social justice on a variety of fronts. I wish that I could say to you that there was leadership by the UCC in the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans during the 1960s, but there was not -- many American denominations were torn by that movement and we were not an exception. The Church did create the Commission on Racial Justice in 1969 which participated in many struggles for equal rights in the 1970s and beyond, and has worked to lead our church – which is more than 90% white – to a commitment to be a multiracial, multicultural church. But more on that commitment later . . .

An integral part of the justice work of the United Church of Christ is due in large measure to a precious gift from the church here in Germany. The Evangelical Synod, one of the predecessor bodies of our Church, created the Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis in 1889 to provide medical care for the poor among new immigrants. The Society was modeled after the work of deaconesses going back to the 1830s in Kaiserswerth here in Germany. In the first one hundred years of the St. Louis Society, nearly five hundred deaconess sisters were trained and many tens of thousands of individuals were served in hospitals, local congregations and schools. The American deaconesses were pioneers among professional women, the creators of the modern nursing profession, and leaders in forging roles for women in the Church, leading to the acceptance of women as ordained pastors in many of our church families.

Creating the seeds of a women's movement was not the only way in which the deaconess movement had a profound impact on the American landscape. Over 350 institutions that are the successors to those founded by the deaconesses view healing ministry as an urgent question of God's mission and today provide care to thousands of

individuals not simply as a question of charity, but as a means of achieving justice for the poor, needy and oppressed.

Our justice work today is coordinated by the national Justice and Witness Ministries unit which is recognized across church life in the United States for its effectiveness in public policy development and mobilization; civil rights; anti-racism; immigration; and environmental justice. Let me share with you an illustration of our approach to the work, and the impact that it is having.

Over the past ten years, immigration – particularly from Mexico to the United States -- has become a highly divisive political and social issue. Because it is intimately tied to questions of race, culture and economics, the discussion has been a difficult one both inside the United Church of Christ and in the wider society.

For many years, the public policy office of the United Church of Christ in Washington has worked with our elected representatives on immigration and related issues, and that work continues. But we realize that a new strategy is necessary in these times: being right on an issue is a necessary but not sufficient condition for having the impact that we seek. Our Justice and Witness staff realizes that we must educate and mobilize members of the Church to work in their own communities to affect lasting change on immigration and the whole array of justice issues facing our country. This is a very significant change of paradigm for us, in a sense returning to a previous time when social activism was closely tied to our understanding of discipleship. . . .A previous pastor of mine once remarked that Americans had gotten in the habit of paying others to do mission for them, rather than making a personal commitment of time and energy as well as financial resources to mission.

The Daniel Romero Center – named for one of our longtime United Church of Christ executives who for many personifies the Church's

commitment to justice – is an attempt to provide members of our church with an opportunity for such an investment. It is designed to

Promote understanding of the migratory realities between Latin America and the United States;

Provide immersion and educational opportunities in a Mexican city along the US border;

Enable participants to enhance their political, socio-economic, and cultural views of the forces that are shaping the lives of many countries and families throughout the Continent; and

Reflect theologically on the constant migratory exchanges between both sides of the border and related issues of class, culture and race.

The goal of the Romero Center is to create a cadre of informed, zealous activists who can – in their communities and nationally – reform the conversation about immigration and, like the Amistad committee so many years ago, create a lasting legacy of discipleship and action in public life for our church and for American society as a whole.

The second commitment I'd like to speak to is our desire to be a United and Uniting Church – The vision of the church of Jesus Christ as one body is an essential and core value of the United Church of Christ. We strive -- in the words of the World Council of Churches constitution -- for “unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and common life in Christ . . . in order that the world may believe.”

Our commitment to unity and ecumenism can be further described in three statements taken from three foundational UCC documents:

We are a church that seeks to portray in its life and witness the unity and koinonia of the Holy Trinity, the Trinity whose diverse persons become an icon for the unity and diversity the ecumenical movement hopes to embody.

We believe that God gives the Church its unity and, by the Holy Spirit, leads and empowers the Church to manifest that unity.

The longing for Christian unity is at the core of our identity. We lose it at our peril.

The United Church of Christ itself is the product of a uniting spirit in each of its predecessor families. In 1934, two German immigrant churches -- the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America -- came together to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The successors in America of the Radical reform movement in England -- the Congregationalists and the members of the Christian Church, also merged in the 1930s and eventually -- believing in the words of historian Louis Gunemann that it was "Christ's will and the believer's duty" -- came together in 1957 with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches to form the United Church of Christ.

This commitment today is evident in partnerships, dialogues, and relationships with churches, denominations and councils. As many of you know, our President John Thomas takes a particular interest in these issues since, before assuming his current role, he served as Ecumenical Officer, a role now carried forward by the Reverend Lydia Veliko in partnership with Dr. Peter Makari, our Executive for Europe and the Middle East in our Global Ministries unit.

In the United States, there are three denominational partnerships that are central to our uniting work. The most formal of these is our relationship with the Disciples of Christ, a denomination with which we are in full partnership. While this partnership manifests itself in various ways, the most visible and influential way is in the work of the Common Global Ministries Board, the vehicle whereby our two denominations -- in the words of the Global Ministries mission statement -- "commit ourselves to a shared life in Christ and to an ecumenical global sharing of resources and prophetic vision of a just and peaceful world order, joining with God's concern for the poor and oppressed and to reflect in common decision-making for mission program which will visibly witness to the oneness of mission in and through the Church of Jesus Christ."

This groundbreaking work -- the only instance in the Church in the United States where two denominations so fully share global missions work -- is the result of votes by the UCC General Synod and Disciples General Assembly in 1989 to establish an "Ecumenical Partnership" between the two communions, and the formal establishment of the organizational structures of the Board in 1996. The significance of this work goes beyond the organizational to the missional, however, through our commitment to critical presence -- the focusing of resources in the areas of greatest need and opportunity -- and to developing strong, post-colonial partnerships with indigenous church organizations -- Common Global Ministries is currently involved with over 270 partners with churches in over 70 countries. This work has gone far in redefining for the American church as a whole the nature of global missions.

In addition to our partnership with the UEK here in Germany, there are three significant partnerships that are at the center for the ecumenical work of the UCC: Our relations with what we call our Formula of Agreement partners -- inaugurated in 1998 and encompassing the Reformed Church in American, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America and the Presbyterian Church USA; a partnership with the Alliance of Baptists – a group formed by progressives who decided to leave the increasingly conservative Southern Baptist Convention; and our participation in the Roman Catholic – Reformed Church Dialogue. In addition, we are intimately involved in the work of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the US and the World Council of Churches.

These are, of course, difficult days in terms of Church unity. As eminent UCC historian Barbara Brown Zikmund has written, “ as Christian history has unfolded, the church was often more preoccupied with preserving its orthodoxy than with reconciling the world.” This is evident globally in the apparent imminent break-up of the Anglican communion over issues of sexuality, what is perceived as continuing colonialism and biblical interpretation; and in the United States with the struggles of many church families over many of these same issues. The United Church of Christ is not immune to these issues; for us, an important challenge to Church unity came with the General Synod resolution in 2005 to support marriage equality for same gender couples. As a result of that action, over 60 churches decided to leave the denomination.

We – as a church, and in the currently political environment, as a nation -- struggle with the notion of being able to disagree but remain at the same table. But we also understand that the realignment is important in terms of clarifying the values that inform our common life, and our ability to articulate a vision for the future of God’s mission. – our commitment to justice will not allow us to shy away from the difficult questions, even if we have to work harder for church unity as a result. While we sometimes lose churches from our fellowship as a result of our stances on issues, other communities seek to join us BECAUSE of those stances.

Another critical issue in understanding the role of the UCC in the American landscape is our commitment to be a multicultural, multiracial church and one that is open and affirming and accessible to all. Historian Zikmund talks about this in terms of an ecumenical vision based not on unity related to faith and order, or on unity through shared life and work, but one “rooted in who makes up the church, not in what it confesses or what it does.” I would amend those sentiments to say that church unity in the United Church of Christ these days is certainly a question of who makes up the church, but also the values we uphold . . . our identity.

The issue of church unity is therefore intimately related to our quest to be a radically inclusive church. Despite tremendous progress over the decades since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, American society continues to struggle with what it means to be an inclusive society, respectful of diversity, and celebrating the richness of what peoples of different races, cultures, sexual orientations and abilities, in addition to recognizing rights under the law. We seek to be a church that, as called for in our General Synod pronouncement of 1993, “confesses and acts out its faith in the one sovereign God who through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities and cultures” and that “embodies these diversities as gifts to the human family and rejoices in the variety of God’s grace.”

You may have heard something of the Stillspeaking Initiative that the United Church of Christ inaugurated in 2003. The initiative was and is designed to reach out to individuals – inside and outside the Church – with two basic messages: 1) that we in these times have a responsibility to hear the voice of a God that speaks to us even today, making the faith our own for our times, and 2) that the infinite nature of God’s grace calls us to welcome all into the church of Jesus Christ.

By the way, the centerpiece of the early phase of the Stillspeaking campaign was a series of television advertisements that made these two

points. We expected some controversy, but we were surprised when two of the major American television networks refused to air the ads because they considered them “too controversial.” The controversy centered on the inclusion in the ad of a same-gender couple in the advertisement during a time when the President of the United States, George W. Bush, had proposed a constitutional amendment that would have banned same-gender marriage. The result of the refusal was outrage not only among those who opposed such an amendment, but among many who saw an inappropriate and troubling attempt at censorship of religious thought.

The Stillspeaking Initiative represents a continuation of our historic commitment to issues of inclusion and to equal rights – both inside the Church and in civil society – for all. The United Church of Christ was the first of mainline denominations in the United States to ordain a woman (Antoinette Brown in 1853), and the first to ordain an openly gay man (William Johnson in 1973). An increasing number of our churches have declared themselves to be “open and affirming” making a public statement of their commitment to radical inclusivity.

Finally, let me speak to our commitment to being a Church Committed to Peace – Earlier this year in a talk to a local UCC congregation, John Thomas quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous sermon on racism and the war in Vietnam.

“We are faced,” Dr. King said, “with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men” does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled

residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late." There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records the vigilance of our neglect. We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co annihilation. This may be [humankind's] last chance to choose between chaos and community."

As with the Civil Rights movement, we must confess as a church that we did not on the whole provide the sort of prophetic leadership and sense of urgency that Dr. King called for in this speech at Riverside Church in New York, a speech that – at the time – was highly controversial. We have, however, responded forcefully and without equivocation to the war in Iraq. The Collegium of Officers, in the days following the events of September 11th and as it became clear that the Bush administration was intent on war in both Afghanistan and Iraq as the way of confronting the terrorist threat, asked our Churches and our partners around the world to provide leadership in resisting the temptation to violence in the face of anger and hurt. At our General Synod in 2007, The Collegium offered a pastoral letter on the way in Iraq that said in part:

We confess that too often the church has been little more than a silent witness to evil deeds. We have prayed without protest. We have recoiled from the horror this war has unleashed without resisting the arrogance and folly at its heart. We have been more afraid of conflict in our churches than outraged over the deceptions that have killed thousands. We have confused patriotism with self-interest. As citizens of this land we have been made complicit in the bloodshed and the cries: Lord, have mercy upon us.

As a result of this letter over 100,000 individuals signed a petition to members of Congress and the President asking for end to American involvement in Iraq, or make a financial contribution to caring for Iraqi

refugees, the largest number of individuals mobilized for such an effort in our history. It is clear that, together with our leadership, a large number of Americans are eager to play a role in building a peaceful world.

The letter from the Collegium concludes with a clear call to the church to “join protest to prayer, support ministries of compassion for victims, cast off the fear that has made us accept the way of violence, and return again to the way of Jesus. Thus may bloodshed end and cries be transformed to the harmonies of justice and the melodies of peace. For this we yearn, for this we pray, and toward this end we rededicate ourselves as children of a loving God who gives ‘light to those who sit in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.’”

So what does all this mean for The United Church of Christ ?

We are a church family that is proud of the many times that we have been first among denominations in the United States to go beyond what the society has expected and even sometimes accepted. It is clear from the political situation in the country that Americans are hungry for change . . . a change from the divisive politics that have characterized our life for many decades (starting actually with the campaign and Presidency of Richard Nixon in 1968); a change from the social policies of exclusion and demonization of those considered on the margin of our society – of women; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, of immigrants, and poor people; a change from a foreign policy that sees war as an acceptable first response to conflict and change.

Our church throughout its history has risen to the challenge of its times; we have always believed that God continues to speak to us, and to demand from us not just theological integrity, but discipleship – activism that is about changing and transforming the world in which we

live into one of peace, justice, unity and one that appreciates the radically inclusive nature of God's grace.

Many of you know that Barak Obama made the decision to resign his membership in Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago in response to comments made by Rev. Jeremiah Wright at a press conference in Washington (We can talk about that in some detail if you'd like during our discussion period . . .) There are many of us in the United Church of Christ who believe – despite our rule that the only way one can be a member of the UCC is through membership in a local congregation – that Obama remains a member of our Church – because he believes in and works to realize the values that are at the center of the life of our Church, and we believe of all Christian movements.

No matter who becomes President of the United States, the United Church of Christ will continue to work on its historic and timely commitments. It would certainly be nice to have “one of us” in one of the most powerful positions in the world, but we believe in any case that the political, social and economic realities of our country provide the opening for and indeed demand the leadership that we have proven time and again that we can offer. Our prayer is that, with God's help, we live up to the awesome calling that is before us.

Thank you.