Between the Altar and the General Assembly Hall

Restoring Trust, Managing Transformation, and the Things That Make for Peace

Sacred Reflection and Keynote at the 2026 Annual Interfaith Prayer Service for the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly

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Excellencies, friends, colleagues, fellow pilgrims in the work of peace,

We gather in this sacred space on the eve of another United Nations General Assembly for the annual Interfaith Prayer Service. Across the street stands an institution that remains humanity's most ambitious experiment in international cooperation. Wrapped around this altar table are the words of scripture:

"Would that you knew the things that make for peace."

It seems fitting that those words encircle this altar in a chapel situated between prayer and policy, between worship and public life, between the altar and the UN General Assembly Hall.

Those words are not merely an ancient longing. They are a question addressed to every generation. They ask whether we still know the things that make for peace.

This year's General Assembly theme invites us to reflect on "Restoring trust, managing transformation: A United Nations that delivers for all."

Beneath these aspirations lies a profoundly moral and spiritual challenge.

For the crises confronting our world today are, in many respects, crises of trust.

Trust among nations. Trust between peoples. Trust in institutions. Trust in law. Trust in truth. Trust that cooperation is still possible.

We find ourselves living in a world in surplus of fear and in deficit of hope.

Fear narrows moral concern. Fear hardens borders. Fear deepens suspicion. Fear persuades us that security can be achieved without solidarity.

Yet without trust there can be no diplomacy. Without trust there can be no cooperation. Without trust there can be no multilateralism. Without trust there can be no peace.

The United Nations was born from the conviction that, despite our differences, humanity could pursue a common future. Emerging from the devastation of war, nations chose dialogue over division, law over force, cooperation over despair.

Earlier this year, Methodist Central Hall Westminster in London hosted a Service of Thanksgiving commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the inaugural meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, which convened in its Great Hall on January 10, 1946. Under the theme "Building Our Future Together," the commemoration recalled that extraordinary moment when a place built for worship became a place where the world could begin imagining a common future after the devastation of war.

A beautifully produced commemorative video recalled how a church building became a place for humanity to gather.

As the video tells it, “The church stepped aside. Pews turned into desks. A prayer space turned into a negotiating space. A quiet but deliberate act of service.”

The video continues: “A church moved out. The world moved in. And for a moment, history leaned toward peace.”

What a remarkable description of public faith: A prayer space turned into a negotiating space!

Not because faith surrendered its convictions, but because it understood that service to humanity is itself a sacred calling.

Perhaps that is why this story feels so familiar to us gathered here today. We meet in a chapel across the street from the United Nations, between the altar and the UN General Assembly Hall.

For three decades now, I have had the privilege of working in this place where Tillman Chapel, the Church Center for the UN (another Methodist facility), and the United Nations stand in enduring conversation with one another. Over those years, I have come to see that the journey between this altar and the General Assembly Hall is much shorter than the distance across First Avenue. It is a public vocation.

Here, prayer seeks public expression. Here, conscience encounters policy. Here, moral imagination accompanies diplomacy, and faith, civil society, and international public service become partners in the difficult work of peace.

Methodist Central Hall made room for the world's gathering eighty years ago. The Church Center for the UN, another Methodist facility, continues that same ministry of accompaniment today.

Both remind us that the things that make for peace require places where ethical conviction and public responsibility can meet.

Not withdrawal from the world, but engagement with it. Not indifference, but hospitality. Not certainty about the future, but confidence that humanity could build something together greater than its fears.

At its heart, that moment was an act of trust: trust that cooperation could succeed where conflict had failed, trust that law could prevail over force, and trust that human dignity could help order international life.

Today, eighty years later, that trust is being tested.

Human dignity, human rights, and international law are under mounting pressure. Skepticism toward multilateral cooperation is growing precisely when global challenges require deeper collaboration.

The United Nations requires reform and renewal. Every human institution does.

But transformation must never become a pretext for diminishment. Renewal is not abandonment.

A world undergoing profound technological, ecological, political, and social transformation needs more ethical cooperation, not less.

More dialogue, not less. More commitment to shared responsibility, not less.

Transformation is already underway. The question is whether it will be guided by ethical purpose.

Whether it will advance human dignity. Whether it will strengthen justice.

Whether it will help humanity and the planet flourish together. Whether it will truly deliver *for all*.

Those last words deserve our attention. FOR ALL.

Not merely for the powerful or the prosperous, nor only for those whose voices are already heard. But for all.

For peoples living under the shadow of war. For migrants and refugees searching for safety and belonging. For communities burdened by poverty and inequality. For future generations whose inheritance is being shaped by decisions made today. And for the Earth itself, our common home.

Ethical multilateralism begins with this conviction: that institutions exist not for themselves but for peoples; not for power but for purpose; not for privilege but for human dignity and planetary flourishing.

This remains one of faith communities' enduring responsibilities: Not to govern. Not to dominate. Not to sanctify political agendas. But to enlarge the circle of moral concern.

To remind the world that every human being possesses inherent dignity, that peace is inseparable from justice, and that another world remains possible.

Today, perhaps we are called to enlarge our understanding of belonging itself.

We remain citizens of nations.

Increasingly, we are citizens of a global community.

Yet our moment also calls us toward planetary citizenship.

We inhabit one Earth.

We share one future.

We are connected not only through treaties and technologies, markets and migrations, but through increasingly intricate networks of human embrace as much as neural networks.

Connectedness has become a fact.

Solidarity remains a choice.

And the future of humanity may well depend on our willingness to make that choice.

Let us therefore commit ourselves to restoring trust where fear has taken root.

Let us manage transformation with wisdom, courage, and compassion.

Let us strengthen a United Nations that delivers for all.

For generations, and in my own experience over three decades in this place, this work has been lived daily in the space between the altar and the General Assembly Hall.

It is where hope seeks public expression. It is where conscience encounters power. It is where the things that make for peace must move beyond aspiration and become our common responsibility.

For this is not merely an institutional task. It is a spiritual vocation. It is not merely a diplomatic aspiration. It is a moral imperative.

I invite us now to assume a prayerful posture.

May the God of peace strengthen all who labor for justice, reconciliation, and human dignity.

Grant wisdom to diplomats, perseverance to civil society, and courage to faith communities.

May the staff of the United Nations, who often serve far from recognition and sometimes at personal risk, be sustained in their vocation of service to peoples and the planet.

May those who suffer war, displacement, poverty, hunger, and ecological devastation find protection, dignity, and hope.

As the United Nations selects its next Secretary-General, may wisdom guide that discernment, and may leadership emerge marked by integrity, courage, compassion, vision, and commitment to the common good.

And may all of us become more faithful stewards of the things that make for peace.

For the sake of all peoples. For the sake of all nations. For the flourishing of our common home. And for generations yet to come.

Amen.

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