



In his address to the 2023 Annual Meeting, Conference Minister Franz Rigert borrowed from Stephanie Spellers' book "The Church Cracked Open (Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for the Beloved Community)" to explore the meeting theme, "Changing Church: Following Jesus Forward." Spellers likens the church to the cracked-open jar of perfume used to anoint Jesus in the 14th chapter in the Gospel of Mark. The following is an excerpt of his speech.

For years, it seems, the cracks in this alabaster jar have been widening – decades of decline, Sunday sports eclipsing Sunday school, soaring cynicism toward institutional religion. Then came the perfect storm – the trifecta of COVID, the brutal murder of George Floyd and a tumultuous fall election followed by the attack on the Capitol.

Suddenly, there was no gradual loosening of the lid, no slow flow from the alabaster jar. God's Church had split right open.

Shocked and shattered, we were forced to reckon with the reality of all those darned “D” words: **discord, disruption, displacement** from sanctuaries to screens, **decentering** from a place of prominence to marginal relevance, and perhaps the very beginnings of the **disentangling** of the Church from the notion of empire.

Changing Church? No question! But the real question is: “Are we ready to **follow Jesus forward**?” Are we willing to go back to the basics and anchor everything we say and do in love? Are we able to accept a calling that looks more like a small band of apostles ready to lead a grass-roots movement by following the Spirit of the risen Christ? Are we ready in our minds and willing in our hearts to see this broken-open Church as more than dripping with grief? Can we see ourselves as blessing the world with this ointment of grace, not as preparation for burial but as inspiration for resurrection?

I want to share the amazing love that flows throughout this cracked-open Wisconsin Conference. A love that flows into our congregations and then spills out into community life, extending droplets of grace to a world in need of healing and reconciliation.

The contributions of our congregation to OCWM Basic Support help support congregations across the state as they navigate this “church cracked open” moment. Together, we follow Jesus forward as part of the Wisconsin Conference.

*Learn more about the Wisconsin Conference UCC at
www.wcucc.org*