

Monthly Update

July 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This month's edition of the Update contains the first of the reports on the individual annual conferences held across our United Methodist Church – both in this nation and from around the world. Again, we ask that you pray for what happens in these assemblies as they elect delegates for next year's General Conference in Portland.

This July 4th please think about our country and the rich heritage we share. I offer a bit of history that shows ours, as President Reagan had said, is a nation that is a beacon of light.

“Darkness enveloped the whole American armada. Not a pinpoint of light showed from those hundreds of ships as they surged on through the night toward their destiny, carrying across the ageless and indifferent sea tens of thousands of young men, fighting for ... for, well, at least each other.”

“Journalist Ernie Pyle wrote these words in 1944 to describe the beginning of the Normandy invasion. For Americans, these words paint an image of the fear and confusion that soldiers experienced on the eve of battle written by those with the benefit of hindsight. Yet, they also impart the sense of determination those young men must have felt. Through his words, Ernie Pyle invokes our patriotism, a pride & understanding of who we are and how we came to be a nation.... could anything be more contradictory than the lives of our military members? They love America, so they spend long years in foreign lands far from her shores. They revere freedom, sacrificing their own so we may be free. They defend our right to live as individuals, yet yield their individuality in that cause. Perhaps most paradoxical of all, they value life and bravely prepare themselves to die in the service of our country.

The compelling words of philosopher John Stuart Mill said it best:

‘War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing is worth war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing he cares more about than his own personal safety; is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free....’

“At the heart of America is freedom and for those that are willing to fight for it....the price is high, but freedom is a wealth that no debt can encumber.” (LTC C.J. Bryant).

All of us here at Concerned Methodists wish you a happy, safe, joyous Fourth of July celebrating the freedoms which are to us so dear. And don't forget to thank the veterans you know for their service to our country. After all, if it were not for the brave, there would be no land of the free.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

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July 2015 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by... – Robert Frost

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The Good Stuff

+ *The Appointment.* It was a busy morning, about 8:30, when an elderly gentleman in his 80's arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 am.

I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him. I saw him looking at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. On exam, it was well healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies to remove his sutures and redress his wound. While taking care of his wound, I asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry. The gentleman told me no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's Disease.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. I was surprised, and asked him, "And you still go every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?"

He smiled as he patted my hand and said, "She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is."

I had to hold back tears as he left, I had goose bumps on my arm, and thought, "That is the kind of love I want in my life."

– Received from a nurse.

+ *Matthew 25: The Parable of the Ten Virgins.*

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

"Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

This might surprise you ... but of all the things that hinder – or even derail your spiritual growth today – worry leads the list. The Bible says as much in Luke 8:14. But the truth is it's natural to worry. You and I both worry about good things ... our children and grandchildren ... a friend or loved one battling an illness ... the direction of our country....In fact, everyone feels this way. The world is plagued with anxiety. But God never intended His children to be overtaken by it.

[Note: This is a problem that I tend to have. I know that it reflects a lack of faith and work on it. We need to remember that, regardless of what happens, God is in control. We belong to Him; we need to submit ourselves to His will. – AOM]

– God bless you, Dr. Robert Jeffress; received by e-mail.

Of Interest. *Ministry with Poor Church Threatened with Fines for Taking in Homeless.* McMinnville Cooperative Ministries welcomes homeless people to camp on campus. “I’ve never been more sure that we’re moving in the right direction, mission-wise,” said the Rev. Courtney McHill, co-pastor of the church, which is a joint effort of UMs and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. But the city of McMinnville, Ore., has had complaints from the church’s neighbors and wants the homeless encampment closed by Mar. 31. If the church doesn’t meet the deadline, it will get a court summons. It could be fined up to \$500 a day for violating zoning ordinances that restrict temporary housing, said Martha Meeker, city manager of McMinnville, 35 miles southwest of Portland.

McHill said the church isn’t equipped to be a permanent place for the homeless but doesn’t want to close the encampment until a good alternative is found. “The waiting list for anything [in shelters or public housing] right now is huge,” she said. McMinnville Community Ministries is host to more than two dozen 12-Step program meetings a week, along with worship and other activities. The church had regularly kept its doors open until 10 p.m., offering shelter, as well as coffee and snacks, to people who had nowhere else to go. But once doors were shut, someone from the church would patrol the campus, making sure everyone had left. Last spring, McMinnville Cooperative Ministries saw an influx of homeless people and took to calling the regulars the “Everyday Congregation.” The church council decided that telling people to move along once the doors were closed was inconsistent with the church’s commitment to love and serve all.

By June, a homeless person had pitched a tent. Then others did. McHill said the church built or solidified relationships with those camping out and came to understand better how limited the homeless services were in McMinnville. But neighbors complained to the city about noise in general and one particular incident of fighting. In the 10 months since the encampment began, police have had 60 calls for service at “The Co-Op,” as the church is known in McMinnville, and made eight arrests, Meeker said. McHill believes complaints have dwindled as the church has made adjustments, including moving the encampment farther from the road and planting shrubs as screens for the handful of tents. The church now requires those staying there to abide by rules, including keeping the noise down, refraining from use of alcohol or drugs on campus and doing chores to help maintain the property. But the city wrote the church in December and again last month warning about ordinance violations and finally setting the Mar. 31 deadline. The first letter prompted a Dec. 22 candlelight prayer vigil by McMinnville Cooperative Ministries and its supporters.

[Note: “Social justice” must be balanced with obeying the law. It is often confused with a political agenda. – AOM]

– Sam Hodges, *UMNS*

(UM) Bishops. The United Methodist Council of Bishops is asking General Conference delegates to support full communion with the Northern and Southern provinces of the Moravian Church in North America. Full communion means each church acknowledges the other as partner in the Christian faith, recognizes the validity of each other’s baptism and Eucharist and commits to work together in ministry. Such an agreement also means Moravians and United Methodists can share clergy. The provinces will vote on the question of full communion in 2018.

European United Methodists, starting in Germany, have already signed similar agreements with the European Province of the Moravian Church. In some ways, such agreements make official the connection that already exists among United Methodists and Moravians. “We concluded we have never been out of communion,” said Glen Alton Messer II, associate ecumenical staff officer with the United Methodist Office on Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships. He was part of the church’s dialogue with Moravians. “Wesley and Zinzendorf had their differences, but ... we never said, ‘We are not Christian brothers and sisters.’ We never rejected each other.”

The worldwide Moravian Church, formally known as the Unity, consists of a federation of more than 20 semi-autonomous provinces. Altogether, there are more than 1 million Moravians worldwide. More than half live in Tanzania.

– By Heather Hahn, Herrenhut, Germany (*UMNS*); May 15, 2015.

(UM) General Conference – 2016.

+ ***Commission on the General Conference.*** Portland, Ore.: The Commission on the General Conference gave the go-ahead for an alternative process of discernment for dealing with legislative petitions that may benefit from discussion in small groups. The process would have to be voted on and approved by delegates at the 2016 General Conference in order to take effect. The Commission plans to request that this process be used for dealing with petitions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity at the 2016 General Conference, but it could also apply to other legislation at the option of the legislative body. The Commission adopted a tentative process and authorized the executive committee to further refine the specifics of the plan, whereby General Conference delegates will have the opportunity to discuss selected legislation in small groups. The small groups will give reports of their discussions to a facilitation team of delegates, who would be elected near the start of General Conference. The facilitation team would compile the information, look for trends and directions, develop a report to the plenary and craft a petition or petitions which will then come to the plenary for consideration according to the current rules of the General Conference. The plan will be shared once fully developed.

The 2012 General Conference requested the Commission look at possible ways to move the General Conference debate from issues of governance towards building consensus on ministry. In addition, the Connectional Table requested a change in the process and rules for dealing with all legislation regarding homosexuality in small groups –instead of in legislative committees – to be discerned "through the lens of the values of centrality of mission, unity for the sake of mission, and our identity as Christians and as United Methodists." Earlier in the week, the Commission invited representatives of Good News, MFSA, Love Prevails, Reconciling Ministries, and The Confessing Movement to participate in listening sessions so they might hear various perspectives that would help them move forward with preparations for General Conference and identify common aspirations and goals.

[**Note:** We very much oppose this “alternate discernment process” especially as it relates to sexuality issues. There is really little reason to continue the discussion on these areas. The Bible has spoken very clearly if we will only read it and believe what it says. We are concerned that this continued discussion of these areas is only a ruse designed to break down objections that people who have traditional moral views in these areas will be persuaded to accept new ideas. – AOM]

– By Diane Degnan (*UMNS*); April 26, 2015.

+ ***How technology could help General Conference delegates Share via Email Print.*** For United Methodists from outside the United States, one of the biggest challenges of going to General Conference is simply getting ready. Too often, delegates receive volumes of proposed legislation only days before their departure for The United Methodist Church’s top lawmaking assembly. The bulk of those volumes can make it difficult to know what to pack. “We have to start weighing what clothes we would bring to make room for the materials ... the weight of the materials takes up almost all our weight allowance,” said the Rev. Damião Elias of Mozambique through an interpreter. He has attended two General Conference sessions.

Delegates from central conferences – church regions in Africa, Asia and Europe – do everything their U.S. counterparts do – despite language barriers, poor Internet access and far less time to study legislation that could affect the church for years to come.

The Commission on General Conference has started a pilot project that members hope will overcome some of these obstacles, including the packing conundrum. For the next two years, nine commission members from the central conferences are testing e-tablets. The tablets include a Bible app, Skype and the 2012 Book of Discipline, the denomination’s law book. The plan is for the tablets ultimately to contain

the proposed legislation months in advance of the next General Conference, which is scheduled May 10-20, 2016, in Portland, Oregon. Commission members have agreed to personally donate or raise \$8,000 to buy the tablets for General Conference delegates, particularly heads of delegations from Africa and the Philippines.

The 2012 General Conference charged the commission with exploring how technology could improve future gatherings but allotted no funds to support that work, said the Rev. L. Fitzgerald “Gere” Reist II, secretary of General Conference. The benefits and cost of technology. The commission members are using Samsung Galaxy Tab 4 devices for the pilot project. United Methodist Communications recommended them because they work with a variety of carriers and are relatively easy to use. Each costs about \$300 with a case and SIM card to store contacts. The tablets are not gifts but remain the property of the general church through the commission. The commission also is working with United Methodist Communications to develop a message board exclusively for delegates. United Methodist Communications plans to [also] set up the tablets to use a text-messaging system that does not depend on the Internet. Often, poor roads and unreliable Internet service means African delegations can’t confer with each other before the big assembly. “We’re trying to work out a number of issues,” Reist told United Methodist News Service. “The fundamental thing is people have to have access to the technology or none of it works.”

Of the 864 delegates allotted for the 2016 General Conference, 350 delegates – nearly 42 percent – will come from outside the United States. Thirty percent will come from Africa alone.

Providing all central conference delegates in 2016 with tablets would cost about \$105,000, Reist said.

Commission member Bill Haden of the Oregon-Idaho Conference suggested the commission look for ways to purchase tablets for all the central conference delegates who need them. “In the grand scheme of things, \$100,000 is both a great deal of money and not that much if you take it in the context that we will spend in this quadrennium the better part of \$12 million to put together General Conference,” Haden said. He is the chair of the 2016 General Conference host committee.

In previous years, the Advance Daily Christian Advocate – the volumes that include proposed legislation — was available digitally in PDF. But users can’t make notes on PDFs and depending on their device, the documents can be difficult to read and search. In 2016, the Advance Daily Christian Advocate will be available in the EPUB (electronic publication) format, which allows copious digital note taking for anyone with a tablet. The United Methodist Publishing House does provide copies of proposed legislation at General Conference. But Reist noted that people often want to bring the copies they have already heavily annotated.

Commission members participating in the pilot project are enthusiastic about the tablets’ potential to help them deliberate on legislation and lighten their suitcases. “This will help facilitate our communication and it will facilitate documentations,” Elias of Mozambique said through an interpreter. “With the training I received here, I am going to share that with delegates.”

– By Heather Hahn (*UMNS*); Lake Junaluska, N.C.; Oct. 14, 2014.

(UM) Women/Women’s Issues. While women now fill more seats than men in UM seminaries, the number of women of color in those chairs is still small. The lack of women of color faculty at UM seminaries and theological schools is even more apparent. “There were no women of color professors in my seminary education,” said Dr. Rosetta Ross, professor of Religion at Spelman College and chair of the Women of Color Mentoring Committee. 65 people gathered in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the UM Women of Color Scholars scholarship and mentoring program. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) created the Woman of Color Scholars program in 1989 to address the absence of women of color faculty in theological education in the U. S. by providing scholarships/mentoring to women pursuing higher theological education.

[Note: We are “straining out a gnat” here. At some point, we need to get past a preoccupation with skin color and “whether or not we are being treated fairly” in discerning what is really important. Many of us

have been treated unfairly in the past, but it is not good to wallow in self-pity nor to go around looking for reasons to be offended. I can think of several federal agencies where people from “ethnic” groups are hired in disproportionately larger numbers than their representative portion of the population. Also, in professional sports more “ethnic” minorities play. This is seen as a waste of apportionment money given into the general church funds by the faithful people sitting in the pews. – AOM]

– Susan Naslund, Cal.-Pacific Annual Conference, for GBHEM, as reported in UMNewscope; Vol. 42, Issue 50; December 17, 2014

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Cast down your bucket where you are.... – Booker T. Washington

Global Outlook

Opportunities never come a second time, nor do they wait for our leisure. – Booker T. Washington

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Zimbabwe. *African Summit brings together Evangelists.* African countries have their own cultures, their own way of worship and the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) is responding to the changing needs of the African church and its missional outreach. In Feb., GBGM brought together evangelists from 28 African countries and 13 episcopal areas for a summit on evangelism at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe, to discuss how The UMC in Africa could continue to play a leading role in incorporating African cultural traditions and a holistic approach to mission. “African leaders gathered at Africa University to share and discuss models and insights regarding the growth of the church in Africa,” said George Howard, Deputy General Secretary for Mission and Evangelism at GBGM. Bishop Eben K. Nhwatiwa of the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area set the tone during the opening worship, ensuring the summit was grounded in the African experience, said Howard. The event was designed to equip evangelists and Africa University students and faculty members in evangelism and to begin development of a new theology of mission for The UMC in a changing Africa. During the summit a new resource, *Evangelization and Church Growth in the African Context* was launched. GBGM partnered with key African evangelists and Discipleship Ministries to create the resource. The summit provided leadership with resources necessary for strengthening the Wesleyan tradition and promoting a church that works for social transformation, said the Rev. Mande Muyombo, of GBGM. Topics discussed include making Christian worship relevant to African culture, connectional support for The UMC in Africa while remaining faithful to the Wesleyan tradition and the global UMC; the need for commitment to evangelism; and the growth of the church in Africa and maintaining the denomination's growth.

– Sandra Brands for GBGM; (*UMNS*).

Annual Conference Reports

Austria Provisional Annual Conference. Vienna, Austria. The 86th Annual Conference gathering opened with a worship service focusing on the conference theme, “And he taught them.” The Rev. Michael Chalupka, director of Diakonie Austria, emphasized in his sermon that Christian action is always a response to hearing the Word of God. In his report, Superintendent the Rev. Lothar Pöll acknowledged the good cooperation of the Protestant Churches in Austria and particularly mentioned the Protestant “Year of Education” 2015 as an important step towards the Reformation Jubilee 2017. There is a special website with information on activities, events and offers related to “Year of Education.” The Diakonie Zentrum Spattstrasse (www.spattstrasse.at), a social institution of the UMC, is active in many different areas. The annual report particularly mentioned the new mission statement, the continuing education program for employees, the expansion of the program for girls with eating disorders and the renovation of the kindergarten. Pöll is currently chairperson of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria, which took a clear stand on various socio-political themes – for instance on the refugee policy in

Austria and the EU, on the situation of the Christians in the Middle East, and on the Armenian genocide, 100 years ago. Since the Christian churches spoke with one voice, political authorities and media paid attention to their message. There was a joint statement of the recognized churches and religious institutions condemning violence justified by religion.

One highlight of the Annual Conference was the opening service of the Long Night of the Churches on Friday evening with representatives of other churches, members of the Annual Conference and brothers and sisters from the UMC. The festive service included a sermon by Bishop Patrick Streiff, and a discussion on “educational justice” with various experts participating.

In regard to the Reformation Jubilee 2017, the Protestant churches are challenged with the question, “What does it mean to be Protestant?” There was a survey in which almost all local churches of the UMC in Austria participated. The local churches were encouraged to offer a faith course in 2017/2018 in order to get into a conversation on faith issues. The Children and Youth Committee presented a new concept, which led to a lively discussion on the essentials of the ministry with teenagers and youth.

Many visitors from other local churches participated in the closing service. Referring to a poem of Charles Wesley, Bishop Streiff illustrated the importance of the connection between “knowledge and vital piety” for education in a broader sense. The hope of John and Charles Wesley is also the hope of the UMC today, he said. When people are willing to be called into discipleship and to learn from Jesus, the most important process of education is beginning – to grow into the image of God.

– By the Rev. Martin Siegrist and Rev. Anke Neuenfeldt; May 28-31.

Bulgaria-Romania Provisional Annual Conference. The meeting made obvious that the relationships between the members from Romania (where there are currently three local churches) and from Bulgaria further deepened. The encounters and conversations were thus marked by a joyful openness and friendship. Since all Romanian members and the guests from abroad were English-speaking, the whole Conference was bi-lingual (Bulgarian/English), and the reports were available in both languages, as well.

In his report, Superintendent Daniel Topalski expressed his gratefulness for the tremendous financial support, which the UMC in Bulgaria had received from abroad since the end of the communist era. Furthermore Daniel Topalski identified the problem that the local churches would often lack a clear vision. It would not be sufficient if the church was visible as a building only. «We should accept church as a verb rather than a noun.» This would help to make church (not the building!) perceptible, and it would offer an opportunity to enter in a dialogue with people from outside the church and to establish relationships. A third point referred to (continuing) education of pastors, which is still a priority. Rares Calugar from Cluj, who served as Local Pastor so far, was accepted as probationary member with the aim to be ordained elder in the future. Mariyana Genova from Tsenovo (Bulgaria), who served as lay preacher so far, now received a part-time appointment as Local Pastor. Mihail Stevanov (clergy) and Dessislava Todorova (lay) were elected delegates to General Conference 2016. Üllas Tankler shared some very interesting and inspiring thoughts on «Church in a Modern World» with the members and guests of the conference. To witness Christ would often be an interaction of three factors: to be present, to be active and to confess one’s faith. However, these factors can be given more or less weight depending on the respective situation. Questions, worth considering: Which people visit our churches? What gifts and talents do they bring with them? How could we help them to find a place among us and to further develop? – Martine Isenring, delegate of Switzerland-France-North Africa UMC

Hungary Provisional Annual Conference. April 23-26 in Budakeszi, Hungary church planting was the main theme of this year’s meeting of Hungary Provisional Conference on April 23-26. For the first time, the conference delegates members spent half a day discussing a specific theme. In the past 25 years, two new churches have been established in the region of Budapest – Óbuda and Budakeszi. Additionally, house groups in Kürtöszpuszta (Roma church), Debrecen, and Sopron have developed into beginnings of local churches. At other places, groups of United Methodist churches started missionary activities, quite

often in Roma settlements. At all these places the leaders experienced hope and disappointments. People joined the new groups – and left them. Over and over, the most important elements proved to be reliable personal relationships between Methodists and people not belonging to the church, endurance, a strong hope that the love of Christ changes the lives of people, and a readiness to leave one's own comfort zone and to take a missionary chance. In addition, every new church has its own history and its specific environment. People are therefore required to be flexible in order to remain open to God's new and sometimes surprising ways.

The UMC in Hungary is still small in numbers; however, there is a slow but steady increase in membership. The reliability and the astonishing commitment of pastors and lay people as well as the willingness to live discipleship of Jesus Christ in a very practical way.

The church is facing a change of generations. This year the first pastor of the older generation retired. Next year Superintendent István Csernák will follow. Bishop Patrick Streiff has announced already this year that László Khaled will be his successor. The following delegates will participate in General Conference 2016: László Khaled (clergy) and István Ambrusz (lay). The next meeting of Hungary Provisional Annual Conference will be April 14-17, 2016, in Óbuda. – Central and Southern Europe Bishop Patrick Streiff.

Liberia Annual Conference. Divorced clergy barred from nomination as bishop in Liberia. Efforts to overturn a long-standing provision barring divorced clergy nomination for bishop in The United Methodist Church in Liberia were rejected by conference delegates on April 18. United Methodists who wanted the ban lifted picketed with homemade signs and sang, halting one afternoon session of the conference. During the 182nd Session of the Liberia Conference, delegates voted 433 to 24 to affirm the rule barring divorced clergy persons from the episcopal office. Six delegates abstained from the voting process. Those opposed to the bar argued the provision violated the rights of individuals who wanted to run for the episcopal office, since the bar is not in the Book of Discipline. After petitioners disrupted the afternoon session on April 16, they requested and received a preliminary injunction against Bishop John G. Innis and conference officers, as well as heads of committees and boards of The United Methodist Church in Liberia. The injunction, issued by the Sixth Judicial Civil Law Court for Montserrado County after Friday's annual conference session had ended, barred the bishop and officials from participating in or conducting the conference. However, the order was vacated by the court Saturday morning, so it did not delay proceedings. Cletus Sieh, one of the opponents of the bar to divorced clergy, told conference delegates that in a connectional church, the denomination in Liberia should not adopt rules or policies that are contrary to the Book of Discipline's provisions. –

Julu Swen, Gardnersville, Liberia; (*UMNS*); April 21, 2015.

Minnesota. "It is time to take and pass the final exam—it is time to do something." That was the message (Matthew 25:44). "The final exam is whether you and I will fully, sacrificially, extravagantly engage in Christ's mission to transform the world," Ough said. God is calling us to build bridges out of poverty, to be externally focused,... The theme of the 2015 conference session was "God's Vision, Our Mission—Unleashed." The Rev. Anita Phillips, executive director of the United Methodist Church's Native American Comprehensive Plan, reminded attendees through a Bible study that God calls us to reach out to the strangers among us and that we are united in Christ with brothers and sisters of all ancestries and geographies. She talked about repentance toward indigenous peoples as a process that's ongoing. [Note: When will this be final? – AOM] Phillips' message about reaching out to strangers was reinforced when members worshiped with two congregations in Vietnam through an online connection. The three groups sang together and celebrated that we are brothers and sisters serving one Lord. The Minnesota Conference recently formed a partnership with missionaries in Vietnam to help expand Grace Children's Center in Ho Chi Minh City.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Jorge Acevedo, lead pastor at the multi-site Grace Church in southwest Florida, led two teaching sessions on faithfulness and fruitfulness. “Our lack of fruitfulness is the direct result of our lack of faithfulness,” he said. “You cannot give what you do not have.” “There are 7.3 billion people on this planet who are crazy about Jesus, and about 5 billion of them don’t know it yet,” Acevedo said.

The 2014 Minnesota Annual Conference session marked the formal launch of a congregational development initiative to start new churches and grow existing churches. Members of the 2015 conference session voted to approve a 2016 apportioned budget totaling \$6,120,770. With an “uncollectible contingency” of \$605,000, the total amount to be apportioned in 2016 is \$6,725,770. During the legislative session, members voted unanimously in favor of nominating and endorsing the Rev. David Bard for the office of bishop. The nomination will be forwarded to the North Central Jurisdictional Conference, July 13-16, 2016 in Peoria.

Members also discussed and debated six petitions for the 2016 General Conference: avoiding investments in petroleum, coal, and natural gas; renewing a resolution that goes on record as opposing the introduction of faith-based theories (like creationism or intelligent design) in public schools; and calling on the nation of Israel to provide access to water and electricity in the West Bank and to recognize land titles that Palestinians hold in the West Bank. Membership as of the end of 2014 was 66,286, down 1,326.

– Christa Meland, Director of Communications, Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church

Serbia-Macedonia Provisional Annual Conference. April 17-19 in Monospitovo, Macedonia. For the first time in 26 years, the meeting of the Serbia-Macedonia Provisional Annual Conference took place in Monospitovo, a farm town in Macedonia’s Strumica Valley. Several United Methodist congregations exist in the Strumica Valley, which is one of the most fertile agricultural areas of Macedonia. Most residents are farmers, and young people often return home after their studies, due to the challenge of finding non-farm employment. On the other hand, salaries in Macedonia are so low that some international companies are using the country for low-cost manufacturing. The Annual Conference covers both Macedonia and Serbia, and the reports often referred to a renewed cooperation between the two districts. In the conversations during the conference the mutual appreciation also became visible. The young people particularly look forward to the joint youth camp in summer 2015 (with participants from Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia). Two delegates from Albania reported on the latest developments of churches in Bishnica, Elbasan, Pogradec, and Tirana.

The next Annual Conference will be April 7-10, 2016, in Padina, Serbia. The elected delegates to General Conference 2016 are Emil Zaev (president of the church council in Macedonia, lay) and Daniel Sjanta (pastor in Kovacica, Serbia).

– Central and Southern Europe Bishop Patrick Streiff.

Sierra Leone Conference meets amid Ebola restrictions. Because of the Ebola crisis, the United Methodist Sierra Leone Annual Conference that ended April 26, conducted its business in two days rather than five. Delegates meeting in Bo had just one day – Saturday – to discuss serious business, the church body elected 20 clergy and lay delegates to the 2016 West Africa Central Conference and 12 to General Conference, the denomination’s top legislative body. Many other normal conference agenda items were removed to save time to attend to priority matters. “By now, you all would have noticed that this conference is much different from the others over the years,” Resident Bishop John Yambasu told the gathering. “This is because of the prevailing Ebola epidemic in the country.” The bishop said he was grateful to God that the conference, postponed from early March, had happened at all. “...those of us who have survived Ebola and are alive to see each other’s face have every reason to be thankful ...to God Almighty for sparing our lives to witness yet another annual gathering of United Methodists from across the country.” A traditional march of United Methodist organizations and institutions, led by the bishop

and clergy and accompanied by music from brass bands, which usually heralds the start of annual conference, was cancelled. Annual reports were not discussed but archived into the preconference journal that delegates would read at home. Though the request to permit United Methodist clergy to hold a ministerial session on Friday initially was turned down, a compromised position was agreed after further deliberations with Bo government officials.

Ban on public gathering. Although new Ebola infection rates have been significantly reduced to single digits in the past three weeks, a government ban on public gatherings remains in effect. Delegates were cut to a minimum of 146 – compared to more than 750 at last year’s annual conference — in an attempt to persuade The Sierra Leone government to approve the gathering of a reasonable number.

The usual talent shows featuring youth and children from the various districts of the conference competing in singing, drama and debates were cancelled due to the state of emergency in the country that forbids all entertainments at night.

Conference time is often an occasion for evangelism and outreach in the communities hosting the conference. Those in youth and young adult ministries, in collaboration with the evangelism ministry, usually organize outdoor crusades with preaching and singing through a public address system. That did not happen due to Sierra Leone’s Ebola restrictions.

A bishop’s words of hope. In his episcopal address Saturday, Yambasu thanked God for granting United Methodists the opportunity to witness the 2015 annual conference, which had looked very unlikely. “In the almost one year since the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease, many people had wondered whether they would ever live to see this day,” he said. “For nearly one year, we all have lived in fear, pain and frustration. “We have lived each day as though in the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ as we witness our loved ones die of the deadly Ebola virus day by day. Indeed, it is the grace of God that has brought us thus far, and I believe that God is going to do something... wonderful...”

Citing the 2015 conference theme, “Together, We Can Make A Difference,” Yambasu declared that togetherness is a strong administrative pillar that any leader must use to foster development. He said great strides have been made in his past six years of administration because togetherness has been used to harness all the organs of conference for growth and development. That growth includes the repair or building of schools, churches and new congregations. Equipping hospitals and clinics to provide accessible and affordable health care has helped make the Kissy Hospital maternity complex among the best in the country, he said. The conference also has complied with the new government policy of paying a minimum monthly wage of LE 500,000 – an equivalence of \$100. “Together, we continue to be actively involved in providing a leading role in the fight to eradicate the two major killer diseases — malaria and Ebola – that continue to decimate our population,” the bishop said.

– By Phileas Jusu, BO, Sierra Leone; May 4, 2015. *Jusu, director of communications, The United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone.

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William Barclay wrote, "Not even the Day of Atonement could avail for a man unless he was first reconciled to his neighbor. The breach between man and God can not be healed until the breach between man is healed". Grudges and resentment are game changers. Do all in your power to mend broken relationships. Remember that we all once rebelled against Jesus and through His ultimate sacrifice, He made all things right. Our world today is in dire need of healing and reconciliation. As Christians, it's our calling to make the first move.

Bottom Line: You can't be right with God and not right with your brother.