

Monthly Update

October 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This Update gives the last of the reports from the annual conferences held across our Church earlier this year. As we can see – we are greatly divided across our connection.

Over the years we have discussed the steady drift of our United Methodist Church into liberal theological belief and practices. This has been an ongoing battle since long before I was born, as I have traced in chapter 5 “Operative Theology through the Years” of the book *The Issues @ Hand*. This has manifested itself in the increasing incidence of “pastors” and other clergy who support and, indeed, perform “marriages” of same-sex “couples” in defiance of the United Methodist Book of Discipline, our governing document in the beliefs and polity of our denomination. This has recently been manifested in the “consecration” of Karen Oliveto as bishop by a vote in the recently-held meeting of the Western Jurisdiction. This poses serious threats to our connection.

I went on the Western Jurisdiction’s website and read, not only her statement after she had been elected, but also comments by others. Just two of these include past bishops of the United Methodist Church. These are the posts that I copied:

Bishop Judith Craig on July 20, 2016 at 8:29 am –

You go girl! Bishop Oliveto I welcome you as an episcopal sister with much joy. I pray God will shield you from harm and expand your already generous spirit. Go well, dear Sister. Faithful is God who calls you and will not fail you. Bishop Judy Craig

Melvin Talbert on July 20, 2016 at 3:15 pm

I’m proud my Western Jurisdiction chose to do the right thing by electing Bishop Karen Oliveto. She is a loving and caring person. She will be a great spiritual leader.

Both retired bishops erred in what they had posted. Bishop Craig’s “Faithful is God who calls you”; God did not call her. God is not a God of confusion and disorder. Then Bishop Talbert’s “She will be a great spiritual leader”; no, she cannot if her life does not reflect Christian morality. These phrases show how deeply we are divided.

On October 7th many of us will be meeting in Chicago, Illinois at the Wesleyan Covenant Association Conference to discuss these great problems and how we can move forward into the future with integrity for our denomination. I ask that you keep us in prayer as we explore our courses of action. Attending: Allen Morris

Last month, I had asked, “Do you believe in miracles?” I do. That is why I ask that you continue to pray for our United Methodist Church and for our country’s future.

Remember, as I had also stated, I do believe in miracles – and God is still at work.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

October 2016 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

You cannot go forward when you continue to look in the rear view mirror.

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The Good Stuff

+ ***Billy Graham's Prayer for Our Nation @ 95 years old:*** “Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says, “Woe to those who call evil good,” but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem. We have abused power and called it politics. We have coveted our neighbor’s possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Search us, Oh God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from sin and set us free. Amen!”

+ ***Taking a knee.*** There’s been a lot of talk in the media lately about sports figures taking a knee in protest. I’m encouraged to see people taking a knee, not in protest, but in prayer. North Carolina State Troopers were seen kneeling in prayer before going in to do their jobs in the riots and demonstrations [recently] in Charlotte. Prayer does make a difference. God’s Word tells us, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). I’m thankful for the men and women trying to bring order and an end to the violence and unrest. – Received by e-mail.

+ ***“Nobody” is Just an English Word, and Does not Explain You!*** The fun and complexity of life is something to cherish. On a daily basis we are confronting radical to warm and passionate sentiments. The reality of life is unexplained, especially since life is defined by us. I hear people complaining about the unfairness of life and concur without hesitation, despite knowing that unfairness is a situation for a dedicated period. When I was growing up there were some kids who we always taunt because of their appearance or some unexplainable condition besetting them. In truth we made their lives miserable leading to some ditching school forever. Our actions defined them as “nobody’s” in society and bullying and harassment was the order of the day. Today when I think about those situations of unfairness, I realize on this planet there are nobody’s, every human being deserves respect and good treatment. We cannot continue to apply the misinformation that all people are equal, but some are more equal than others. Are we trying to say those who are not “more equal” should then be referred to as “nobody’s”? Let us try to unbundle the meaning of ‘nobody’ as it has many interpretations. In literal English it means a person of no importance or authority. The Best Answer: Being a nobody REALLY means that you can do things without someone watching over your shoulders. i.e. you can even make mistakes and no one would notice or care, compared with someone prominent, the slightest crease on his/her clothes would invoke a comment or the slightest slip of the tongue would make the headlines. Therefore, today why would you want to be referred to as a nobody? Why then would I be content with being labeled a nobody? Note that you are not a nobody under His vista...

The word nobody means zilch if your vision is not clouded by what they say about you. I once wrote that your future on this planet is not determined by what they say about you, but by how you see yourself. I have never on this planet in my travels met a nobody and I’m still searching and I believe my search is just a futile exercise leading to nowhere. When you think of reverting to a nobody status, remember these words: “a person of no

importance, influence, or power with reference to a person who does not exist'. In the final analysis I present steps to overcome being a nobody:

(a) First things first: Stop thinking you are a nobody. This is by far your biggest obstacle. You are somebody. You always have been; you always will be. Measuring your self-worth with things like family background, academic credentials, salary, and socio/economic status will always make you feel like you're "in the gutter." You are more than that.

(b) Make a big move: There is nothing like a big move to get you noticed and that move should be calculated and not detrimental to your stature. Remember that move is not determined by others or driven by the zest to satisfy others, it is your move and yours alone.

(c) Take risks: This is hit and miss, but in life, certain risks pay off. There are too many examples of things you can do, so I'm not going to waste my time listing them, but just remember that very rarely do guys like Harry "The Boring Office Clerk" make it big.

(d) Be kind to yourself: Accept that you will make mistakes and that success will take time. It's trite, but I'll say it: Rome wasn't built in a day. Pace yourself.

(e) Stop being a loser: You are more than a conqueror and the sooner you recognize [that] the better

– Good stuff from Steve Stewart, Treasurer of the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Men; Sep 5, 2016.

Of Interest.

+ *Large, Fast Growing UM Church Decides to Withhold Apportionments*. Evangelical United Methodist Church (EUMC), one of the denomination's fastest growing large churches, has decided to withhold paying its annual conference and general church apportionments. The Greenville, Ohio, congregation reached its decision in late August. "The open defiance by annual conferences to ignore the Book of Discipline and defy the Word of God, and the Western Jurisdiction's decision to elect a gay bishop compelled us to act," said Matt Hamilton, chairman of the congregation's leadership board."

According to the blogger Len Wilson, in 2014 the West Ohio church was the third fastest growing UM congregation with worship attendance over 1,000. It now averages approximately 1,200 to 1,300 people in attendance at five weekend worship services in a rural community with a population of just over 13,000. "In the layperson's workplace, if you sign a contract stating you'll fulfill a certain job within a corporation, and then you fail to uphold your duties, you'd be terminated," said Jill Steinbrunner, another member of the congregation's leadership board. "EUMC is looking for the bishops to display clear and definitive support of biblical truths ... and holding clergy accountable to their ordination vows and our Book of Discipline."

Over the past several years the West Ohio Annual Conference, like many others, has witnessed challenges to the denomination's sexual ethics and its teachings on same-sex marriage. In 2010, on a very narrow vote (948 to 920), the conference elected an openly gay man as its conference treasurer. He has been re-appointed to the post every year since. And earlier this year, just three days before the convening of General Conference, UM Pastor David Meredith made statewide news when he married his male partner at Broad Street UM Church in Columbus, Ohio. A complaint was filed in the case, but to date there has been no word of its resolution. "EUMC has been increasingly alarmed at the way UM leaders have chosen to disregard the tenets of our church," said Steinbrunner. "It has put more emphasis on maintaining unity than on teaching biblical truth and saving souls."

The church recently joined a diverse mix of 20 other congregations in Darke County, Ohio, in an effort to share the Gospel with unchurched people. The initiative, called Time to Revive, has resulted in over 500 people making decisions for Christ. “I am excited,” said Steinbrunner, “that the church is not only growing in the number of attendees, but more importantly, we’re seeing people growing in their depth of faith and knowledge of Christ. We’ve had dozens of people volunteer to meet one-on-one with people who have recently become Christians. It’s very exciting to witness.”

The congregation has a history of paying 100 percent of its apportionments, and both Steinbrunner and Hamilton said the board reached its decision reluctantly and after months of discussion and prayer. According to Hamilton, the leadership team decided it could no longer, in good conscience, support a conference and general church that is failing to abide by its own polity and teachings. He explained that the leadership team unanimously voted to withhold the apportionments. It then held a church-wide membership meeting to solicit feedback before moving forward. “Members were overwhelmingly supportive of our decision,” he said. “If the bishops would enforce the Book of Discipline we could begin paying apportionments again,” he added. “But right now the general church is in chaos. In fact, our people feel like the bishops’ inability to maintain good order in the general church makes it more difficult for us to do our ministry. We’ll continue to do what we’ve been doing, but the bishops aren’t helping.”

– By Walter B. Fenton, Good News. Walter Fenton is a United Methodist clergy person and an analyst for Good News.

+ ***United Methodist Schism & Local Churches*** by Mark Tooley. Since the small Western Jurisdiction of United Methodism elected an openly lesbian bishop in defiance of church law, there’s been renewed conversation about schism. Some predict it with regret while some hope it would end decades of controversy between conservatives and liberals. Typically schism talk does not focus on the likely impact of a denominational division on the local church. That impact almost certainly would not be pretty. United Methodism’s over 40 year debate on Christian sexual teaching has afflicted every General Conference (meeting every four years), some local annual conference meetings, some church agency board meetings, seminaries, and in recent years is a favorite topic for Internet discourse. Typically it is not openly addressed in local churches. Most United Methodists likely are largely unaware there’s a denominational debate on sex. Most pastors do not discuss it lest there be unwanted controversy. If there ever is a formal schism, many church members will be very surprised and not pleased about the need for choosing sides in their local church.

Local church controversies almost never end happily. No major local church controversy, once begun, will neatly follow an expected course. There are always surprises, usually unpleasant. People you’ve known for years will not behave as you expect, and will not conform to the beliefs long ascribed to them. In a debate over sex, some presumed conservatives will turn out to be something other, and the same for presumed liberals. Some will adopt a position at odds with their beliefs for a myriad of complex reasons, most of them not theological or spiritual. A local church debate may begin over one presenting issue but quickly expand into a wider conflict involving countless other long simmering disputes unrelated to the main topic. A vote over sex may ultimately for some congregations actually become a poll of the pastor’s popularity, or a plebiscite on the pastor’s spouse, or a referendum on the last building program, fundraising campaign, new organ purchase, choir director hire, or new carpet color for the sanctuary.

To the extent the presenting issue is actually addressed, there in many cases, probably most cases, will not be careful theological conversation about church teaching on marriage and sex, for which very few United Methodists have been catechized. Instead, it will be a vote for a “pro-gay” or “anti-gay” church. The debate will mostly rely on American political categories, not Christian ways of thinking. In most local church controversies, nobody ends up really happy, not even the “winners.” In every serious congregation’s controversy, some members end up leaving the church, including some “winners,” who remain upset over the resulting ill will. Such

controversies often require years of congregational recovery. Sometimes there is no recovery, as the stench of the controversy lingers indefinitely.

A debate in over 30,000 local United Methodist congregations about sex will be the mother of all ecclesial battles, exceeding in rancor and venom all previous controversies.

I've spent nearly all my half century of life in United Methodism, 30 years involved in issues beyond the local church, involving interaction with thousands of individual United Methodists and some direct knowledge of hundreds of congregations. I know of only a handful that are so uniformly liberal or conservative that a debate over sex would not seriously divide and disrupt those congregations, in many cases irreparably. Some United Methodists have over the years told me their congregation is "ready" for a split. Or sometimes they acknowledge their own church isn't ready but cite some mythical large church that is ready and will lead the way. Count me skeptical. Nobody is really ready.

In our current American culture there is widespread distaste for, distrust of, and impatience with longstanding institutions. Smash it, blow it up, it can't get worse, some commonly say, confident that whatever replaces the destroyed institution must be better. But nearly all human experience recalls that institutions constructed across generations, once smashed, in fact are not easily replaced by an improvement. Instead, their demise is often followed by a vacuum, or confusion. That a formal United Methodist schism, forcing thousands of local congregations effectively to choose sides, would be chaotic and destructive does not of course mean it won't happen. And maybe, from the perspective of purity, such division must happen, before there can be renewal and new life, some firmly believe.

But whatever happens, United Methodist schism should not be romanticized as the gracious alternative to further church debate. There would be very little gracious about it, especially for local churches.

– "United Methodist Schism & Local Churches" by Mark Tooley; July 26, 2016. Received by e-mail from an associate.

<https://juicyecumenism.com/author/marktooley/>

Comments on Mark's thoughts:

David F. Miller • 2 months ago: As a long time member of the UMC I have wanted to avoid schism; but I also believe it is important to remain true to the Bible and the teachings of the historic church. What the progressives are doing this year is lawlessness. They are willing to break the church to have their way. In the local church I attend we have deliberately avoided the whole controversy. Our Pastors have never once discussed the problem. At the same time our conference (New York Annual Conference) has ordained gay clergy and announced that the general conference does not speak for them. This puts the local church in a difficult place. Members fear retribution if we take a stand counter to the NYAC and most simply do not know of the conflict. It is time for people to speak the truth, to defend the teachings of the Church and the Bible. The issue is not simply sexuality but on the inspiration of the Bible. Many progressives think it a book written by humans with their biases included not the word of God. This belief allows for a great deal of mischief. As a lay member I...waited for clergy to speak in defense of Scripture but have heard little. I am disappointed and frustrated.

Jeff Gill: Watching over the last decade and more of how outright schism as worked out for The Episcopal Church, I think Mark's discussion here is exactly on point. Schism is not going to play out the way those pushing for it think, whether the wish is from the "left" or the "right," the permissive or the restrictive. ...The point about general American distrust of institutions is even more trenchant in the current electoral environment, and I most appreciate the remark "The debate will mostly rely on American political categories, not Christian ways of

thinking.” Those categories really don’t translate into the wider life of Christian church bodies, I believe, and the fit is even worse when you look at it from the perspective of local church life. Thank you for this essay.

Tony Seel: Good piece, Mark. Having gone through the schism in the Episcopal Church, I believe you're spot on.

Mike: I left the UMC years ago because I found that the pastors/leaders that I knew spiritualized the Bible, especially the miracles. I recently engaged with a UMC minister who is close to this...lesbian bishop. I shared my concerns about “disbelief/unbelief/rebellion” amongst UMC leadership. His response was consistent with the ministers of years ago -- but more openly hostile to the belief in a trustworthy and authoritative Scripture. If the foundation is bad, the whole building is compromised. God holds UMC leadership accountable for disbelief, for keeping their people in ignorance and in leading many away from the only Savior of the world. If the UMC members (including its leaders) do not repent of their disbelief and rebellion against God, then this once large denomination should rightly be downsized. I found a faithful church home in the PCA (a conservative breakoff from the disbelieving PCUSA).....

Namyriah: Congratulations on making the move from UM to PCA. I made that same move many years ago, after working for 4 yrs for the UM Board of Discipleship in Nashville, where I saw liberal church bureaucrats up close and ugly. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, once a church gets rid of the belief in individual salvation, it has to find some justification for even existing, so it convinces itself that liberal politics is a useful substitute for salvation. I can’t see into people’s souls, but my impression of the staff members at BOD, most of whom were ordained clergy, is that they were agnostics or atheists –or, at best, deists. If they believed in God, it certainly was not the God of the Bible. If they saw that the political causes they were backing were making headway, they would claim that “God” was at work. The Jesus they worshipped was essentially a mirror image of themselves.

– Received by e-mail from an associate. Jul 30, 2016. <https://juicyecumenism.com/2016/07/26/united-methodist-schism-local-churches>

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A leader is a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don’t want to do, and like it. – Harry Truman

Global Outlook

“I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you...and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear [from] all of us soon.” – Former President George W. Bush’s iconic words inspired the nation just days after the 9/11 attacks.

Israel. Politicians in general are vilifying the constituents who express support for [Israel]. Jews have historically turned to prayer. Join over 1 million Jews in prayer. <http://dayofjewishunity.com/> – Received by e-mail.

Venezuela. The opposition governor of Venezuela’s second-largest state has declared an emergency over the lack of food for public schools, blaming the socialist government’s misguided policies. – Presidential Prayer Team e-mail alert

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2016 Annual Conference Reports

Below are the last of the 61 annual conferences reports continued from last month's edition of the Update.

Michigan Area Annual Conference. An historic combined gathering brought the Detroit Annual Conference (DC) and the West Michigan Annual Conference (WMC) together June 8-13, 2016 at East Lansing, Michigan, campus of Michigan State University, with Bishop Deborah Lieder Kiesey officiating. [Michigan's two annual conferences will be uniting.] Bishop Deborah Lieder Kiesey will retire after four years leading the Michigan Area. **Resolutions adopted by the conference:** DC and WMC committed to long-term support for those affected by the Flint water crisis, DC and WMC denounced anti-Islam discrimination and stereotyping, DC and WMC spoke in favor of gun-free zones in churches and ministries, DC supported reasonable gun control measures, DC called for reduction in Mass Incarceration, WMC committed to engage in Holy Conferencing toward witness of authentic unity (through conversations among conservative & liberal, clergy & lay, LGBTQI & straight), WMC eliminated a conference rule that World Service apportionments be paid at 100 percent, and WMC denounced the idolatry of hand-guns and rapid-fire weapons

Statistics: DC membership, 81,036, down 2%; DC worship attendance, 36,926, down 3%; WM membership, 54,816, down 4%; WM worship attendance, 31,724 down 5%; WM professions or reaffirmations of faith, 1,122, up 9%. – As reported by the UMNS.

Minnesota Annual Conference. The theme of the 2016 conference session, which took place June 21-23 in St. Cloud, was “Living Generously–Unleashing God’s Gifts” with Bishop Bruce R. Ough presiding at the 162nd session of the Minnesota Annual Conference, in which he reflected on the plan for living generously set forth by Jesus in Luke 13:6-9. In this parable, a gardener pleads with the owner of a vineyard not to cut down a fig tree that hadn't produced any fruit for three years.

During legislative session–after much discussion and several alternate proposals–conference members approved a resolution in response to the recent Pulse nightclub shootings in Orlando, Florida. The resolution is a commitment to repent for ways that our words and United Methodist Church positions toward LGBTQ people have been used to discriminate, to find timely avenues toward resolution, to practice humility and gentle conversation with those whose convictions differ, and to pray for Bishop Ough in his new role as president of the Council of Bishops. Members of the 2016 conference session voted to approve a 2017 apportioned budget totaling \$6,106,460. That's roughly \$14,300 less than the 2016 apportioned budget but \$109,549. With an “uncollectible contingency” of \$725,000, the amount to be apportioned in 2017 is \$6,831,460 – which anticipates shortfalls in apportionment payments.

Statistics: Membership at the end of 2015 was 64,262, down 3%. Average weekly worship attendance was 28,967, down 2%.

– Christa Meland, Director of Communications, Minnesota Annual Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Mississippi Annual Conference. Officiating bishop: Bishop James E. Swanson, Sr. Resolutions included one urging state leaders to adopt a new state flag, one that removes emblems many find offensive. Reports received by the conference included one called “Voice Against Extremism.” The conference launched an Imagine No Malaria campaign.

Statistics: 13 people ordained; membership is 175,194, down 1,361; worship attendance is 66,198, down 1,250; church school attendance is 28,988, down 640. – As reported by the UMNS.

Missouri Annual Conference. Officiating bishop: Robert Schnase. Guest speakers: At Bishop Robert Schnase's request, since this was his last year, all speakers were from Missouri United Methodist churches, and included the Revs. Bob Farr, Lynn Dyke, et. al.

Statistics: 10 ordained; 24; membership is 157,782, down 3,256; worship attendance is 74,879, down 2,405; church school attendance is 22,790, down 1,782. – Fred Koenig, publications editor, Missouri Annual Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

New England Annual Conference. Officiating bishop: Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar. Of interest: Rather than deliver his planned episcopal address, Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar gave a personal witness around the issues of human sexuality facing the church and the June 12 shooting at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, Florida. “But for now, I am putting it aside. Tonight, I don't want to give an address; I want to talk with you. These are not ordinary times, and I think we need to deviate from our typical routine ...” “We are deeply divided by how we look at human sexuality. These are hard days, but I need to be the bishop for all people, and I want us to be the church and to be defined as a powerful Christian witness in our conference and beyond. Friends, at this point, will you allow me to share my story? I would be most grateful to you. ...” “How can any child of God be called ‘incompatible with Christian teaching’? We are all made in God's image.”- Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, “episcopal witness”

[Note: Yes, we are all created in God's image – and in the Bible we are given His plan for our lives, a roadmap. Repeated instances of disobedience were what brought God's judgment on Israel in the Old Testament time after time. God has given instructions for living out our lives – and we go against His instructions at our peril. In the Bible, from Genesis to Jude, every reference to the practice of homosexuality is negative or condemning. While we all mourn the tragic shooting at the Orlando night club, we should not lose sight of two things: 1) The shooter was an avowed Islamic terrorist, and 2) this should not be used as an excuse to attack those who have a Biblical position on human sexuality. Bishop Devadhar should know better than to publicly oppose our church doctrine. – AOM]

In one action, the New England Conference Board of Ordained Ministry made public on June 16 its policy not to consider sexual orientation or gender identity when recommending people to ordained ministry. Board co-chairs, Yoo-Yun Cho-Chang and Peter Hey, announced “our policy is to be guided by the Holy Spirit as we seek to judge the readiness of those called to lay ministry, the ministry of local pastors, associate membership....”

[Note: This action may be guided by a “spirit” – but it is not the Holy Spirit. – AOM]

16-217 A Resolution to Support the Council of Bishops' Proposal: A Way Forward. By the NEAC Methodist Federation for Social Action.

16-218 – Ending Harm to LGBTQI Communities. Brought by Sean Delmore, equalization member.

16-219 – New England Annual Conference Membership in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Brought by Rev. Rebecca Girrell, pastor at Lebanon UMC in New Hampshire and chair of the Conference Board of Church and Society.

16-220 – Action of Non-Conformity with the General Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Statistics: Membership is 84,190 down 2.6%; worship attendance is 28,308 down 3.9%; worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 10,528 up from 9,508 in 2014. – Beth Dicocco, director of communications, New England Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

New Mexico Annual Conference. Location of conference gathering was Roswell, New Mexico, from June 2-4, 2016, with Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe officiating. The session began with an Act of Repentance. The Rev. Jon Moore moved that the churches of the New Mexico Conference be challenged to raise and give to the conference office \$5 per average worship attender for participation in annual conference by Four Corners Native American Ministries churches. Motion seconded and passed. The Rev. Matt Bridges committed First United Methodist Church, Lovington to fully funding the cost of one person from Four Corners Native American Ministries to come to the 2017 Annual Conference. The proposal was accepted. In other conference action, three churches were discontinued.

Statistics: Membership is 32,404, down 1,037; worship attendance is 12,214, down 857; church school attendance is 4,293, down 42.

– Alli J. Costello, communications director; as reported by the UMNS.

New York Annual Conference. The NYAC commissioned/ordained 27 at Hofstra University in what Bishop Jane Allen Middleton called an “historic ordination service.” Five others were recognized as licensed local pastors...on the final day of the 217th annual meeting from June 8-11. 4 of the candidates seeking commissioning or ordination had come out as gay in an open letter to The United Methodist Church just days before the 2016 General Conference in May. All 33 individuals were affirmed during the clergy session on June 8, where an associate clergy member raised questions about the work of the Board of Ordained Ministry and the eligibility of 4 of the candidates to be ordained or commissioned. A decision on a question of law was requested from Bishop Middleton. Middleton responded on June 10 that it would be improper for her as bishop to make any substantive decisions of law on the questions.

[Note: The decision on a question of law requested from Bishop Middleton was properly before her; she should have responded – and then it could have been appealed to the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church. – AOM]

Bishop Minerva Carcaño, preaching in the ordination service: “The UMC does go out into the world in the name of Jesus,” she said. “It’s a major issue whether LGBTQI people should be a part of the church, but it’s not the only issue,” Carcaño said. “Some people are not all that sure that racial-ethnic people belong in the church either.” She admitted that she sometimes doubts if the UMC can really go out and follow the path of Jesus to make new disciples for the transformation of the world.

[Note: How can she know? Bishop Carcaño is also in the forefront of the illegal immigration issue. Here she is confusing racial differences of people with those people engaged in sexual sin – as taught by the Bible; “LGBTQI” does not equate to “racial.” – AOM]

In other action, petitions accepted on the consent calendar included: calling for criminal justice reform to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 18 in New York State and eliminate deeply rooted racial and economic injustices in sentencing; the NYAC become a member of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and designate \$1,000 as the first investment in its work; Increased individual advocacy in the NYAC on “immigration reform”, recognize the contributions of immigrants, increase the number of Syrian refugees to the U.S., and monitor state laws and policies [Note: Support of illegal immigration. – AOM]; A moratorium on the “initiation and processing of complaints and the initiation of investigations and trials based upon the sexual orientation or marital status of faithful United Methodists or involving clergy for conducting same-sex weddings.”; A resolution calling on the NYAC to “declare its passionate opposition to continued distinctions of church law that restrict the rights and privileges of LGBTQI people in The United Methodist Church.”; and a petition calling on the NYAC and United Methodist Frontier Foundation to screen its investments from companies whose core business is the production of petroleum or natural gas. [Note: “Green theology” = “petroleum is evil.” – AOM]

Statistics: Membership 99,027, down 4,171. – Joanne Utley, New York Conference, communications; as reported by the UMNS.

North Alabama Conference. The North Alabama Conference gathered in Huntsville from June 5-7, 2016, for a 48-hour worship service by Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett. The conference focused on the theme of "Harvest: Sharing Christ" based on John 15:4-5.

Of especial interest: Throughout the conference, special guest Rev. Jorge Acevedo, lead pastor at Grace Church, a multi-site United Methodist congregation in Southwest Florida, challenged participants on faithfulness and fruitfulness. He began by asking, "Could it be that our lack of fruitfulness in The United Methodist Church is a direct result of our lack of faithfulness?"

Bishop Young Jin Cho of the Virginia Annual Conference led a prayer experience each morning. Bishop Cho noted, "You have to pray in order to learn how to pray." On Tuesday he underlined the importance of spiritual growth in church leaders and congregations noting, "Leadership has two important component: servant leadership and spiritual leadership." He urged each person to spend at least one hour a day practicing the spiritual disciplines. The conference accepted his suggestion with a symbolic, affirmative vote.

In other action, the conference adopted three resolutions: a Resolution Concerning Climate Change, a Resolution Concerning Closure of DMV Offices in Alabama and a Resolution Concerning Refugees. Nine churches were closed this year. It adopted a new Conference Budget Funding Method in which each local church will be asked to give a tithe (10 percent) of its unrestricted receipts. Adopted a Conference Budget for 2017 of \$10,155,717. This is a 0 percent increase over the current year's budget.

Statistics: Membership is 131,229 down 2,466; worship attendance is 64,679 down 1,328; church school attendance is 28,756 down 2,079; professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 was 2,294 down 354; adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 was 72,559 up by 3,347; worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 39,048, up by 5,719.

– Danette Clifton, director of Communication, North Alabama Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

North Carolina Annual Conference. The North Carolina Annual Conference gathered June 16-18 at the Greenville Convention Center in Greenville. A total of 1,373 registrants represented 807 churches within eight districts; Bishop Hope Morgan Ward presided. The Conference celebrated the 111,287 lives saved as over \$1.11 million was raised for Imagine No Malaria – exceeding the conference goal of \$1 million. In conference action, the members officially endorsed the Rev. Leonard Fairley as an episcopal nominee for the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference (he was later elected at the Jurisdictional Conference); re-elected James "Jerry" Bryan as Conference Secretary, Christine Dodson as Conference Treasurer, and George Speake as the Conference Statistician; approved \$21,908,352 for the 2018 annual conference budget; celebrated six new faith communities to be started in the coming year; passed resolutions offering support to public education and giving thanks for Dr. Dewey Clark and North Carolina Wesleyan College, et. al.

The 2017 North Carolina Annual Conference will be held June 16-18 at the Greenville Convention Center.

Statistics: Membership is 228,611, down 1,101; average worship attendance for 2015 was 74,450, down 2,446; church school attendance for 2015 was 23,658, down 2,009; # of professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 was 2,579, down 553; # of adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 was 33,214, down 1,303; and # of worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 was 48,187, up 9,549 from 2014.

– As reported by the UMNS.

North Georgia Annual Conference. The 2016 North Georgia Annual Conference session was held June 7-9 at The Classic Center in Athens, Ga. With a theme of "Bound for Greater Things," based on John 14:12-14, the North Georgia Conference marked its 150th session. Bishop B. Michael Watson presided over his ninth session of the conference, and his last before his upcoming retirement.

Of especial interest: Guest preacher Bishop Bill McAlilly of the Nashville Area brought messages of hope and encouragement at opening worship...He reminded those assembled that we are to place our trust in Jesus, not in an institution, preacher, bank account or a bishop. "God is going to do something mighty if [we] will let God do something," he said. "There are enough Methodists in this room to change the world," he concluded.... In other action, Mathew Pinson, delegation chair and conference lay leader, gave a General Conference 2016 report. He moved that the annual conference affirm Rev. Sharma Lewis as the North Georgia Conference episcopal nominee. She was later elected bishop at the S.E. Jurisdictional conference). The Conference passed a budget of \$22,134,096 for 2017. The 2017 North Georgia Annual Conference will be held June 13-15, 2017 at The Classic Center in Athens.

Statistics: Membership is 361,503, up slightly. Worship attendance is 117,845 and church school attendance is 46,988. Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 are 5,120. – Sybil Davidson, Conference Communicator; as reported by the UMNS.

North Texas Annual Conference. Officiating bishop: Bishop Michael McKee. Legislative items included the adoption of the 2017 budget, the closing of four churches and the merger of two, and establishing a covenant relationship between Methodist Children's Home and the North Texas Annual Conference.

Youth member from First Rowlett, Anna Shipley was called into action after the December 26, 2015, tornadoes devastated parts of her town. Early one day, after Anna dragged herself up, when she might otherwise slept in on Christmas break, a 6-year-old boy arrived at the center with his piggy bank. His own house "had left" that night in the storms, as he put it. Despite his misfortune, he said, "I want you to give these quarters so people can wash clothes with them." Anna was awestruck by his generosity.

The Rev. Mitchell Boone, pastor of White Rock UMC, presented a North Texas Conference resolution on the Council of Bishops Statement. The Rev. Stan Copeland added an amendment to it, after which NTC members passed the resolution. "The resolution stems from a place where we realized that we are living in a broken, strained relationship with one another," Boone said. "We were hoping to create unity around the diversity of theological opinion, contexts of where pastors feel God is calling them. We were grateful that the resolution passed overwhelmingly." He is convinced that the resolution "allows us to aspire to be better than we are currently, to look toward the future, to look at one another in clergy circles as colleagues who offer grace and love to one another regardless of where we are on this issue. It allows laity to know that this conference is committed to maintaining diversity in thought and in practice. I hope it begins really intentional conversation as we face some difficult decisions at a General Conference level."

Statistics: Number of people ordained, commissioned or received into associate membership: 19; # of people retired: 14; membership is 138,904, down 2,923; worship attendance is 56,139, down 669; church school attendance is 24,643, down 822; professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015: down from 2014; adults and young adults in small groups for 2015: , up from 2014; worshippers engaged in mission for 2015: up from 2014: 5,986.

– Sheron Patterson, North Texas Annual Conference Communication Officer; as reported by the UMNS.

Northern Illinois Conference Annual Conference. More than 1,000 clergy and laity gathered at the 177th session from June 5-7, 2016 in St. Charles, Illinois. During the clergy session, the Rev. Scott Field asked for a ruling of law on a failed motion that he made addressing the Northern Illinois Conference Board of Ordained

Ministry's recent statement on its policy giving LGBTQ candidates equal consideration and protection in the candidacy process. Bishop Sally Dyck has 30 days to respond. Her response is then sent to the Judicial Council, which is expected to make a final ruling this fall. In other action, A 2017 budget of \$6,626,961 was approved, a \$121,000 decrease from 2016. Approved included: the discontinuation of First United Methodist Church in Westmont....

Statistics: Membership is 84,803, down 1,373; worship attendance is 31,486, or down 579; Sunday school attendance is 8,397, down 281. – Anne Marie Gerhardt, director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

Northwest Texas Conference. The Northwest Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church met June 9-11 in Lubbock, Texas. Officiating Bishop: Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe. Guest Speakers: Rev. Olu Brown. The conference adopted a resolution for closing four local churches and another ending support for the death penalty in Texas. Two people were ordained as elders.

Statistics: Membership: 59,314; Worship: 17,807. – Leia Williams for the Northwest Texas Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Oklahoma Annual Conference. The conference of 1,200 people met at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum and at St. Luke's United Methodist Church from May 30-June 2 in Oklahoma City. Bishop Robert E. Hayes Jr. will retire Aug. 31 after 12 years leading the Oklahoma Area. Among firsts at this conference, Alan Nagel and Tiffany Nagel Monroe became the first father and daughter ordained together in the denomination, according to United Methodist Communications. 3 churches were closed.

Statistics: Membership is 231,776, down 1,261; worship attendance was 49,013, down by 1,666; professions or reaffirmations of faith were 1,820, down 253. – Mary Holly McCray, Communications Ministry, the Oklahoma Annual Conference; reported by the UMNS.

Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference. The OIM Conference met at Northeast Region Center, Preston, OK, from June 9 – 13. Officiating bishop: Bishop Robert E. Hayes Jr. The conference approved a budget of \$1,215,294. In other action, annual conference clergy and laity had a chance to sit together and discuss issues facing the church and the conference.

Statistics: Membership is 6077, down 48; worship is 2012, down 33. – As reported by the UMNS.

Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference. Keeping Sabbath: Resting, Rejoicing, Returning was the theme of the 48th Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference Session – the 48th gathering since merger of the Oregon and Idaho Conferences in 1969. Bishop Grant J. Hagiya presided of the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area presided. In conference actions, the body reaffirmed its standing resolutions that support the confrontation of heterosexism in society, protection of rights for children of same-gender relationships, comprehensive immigration reform, national health care reform, and ending gun violence. The conference heard a report that called for divestment from market funds that include Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions; three companies that have been identified as benefiting from the Israeli occupation of Palestine. [This from the Holy Land Task Force, Committee on F& A, Foundation, and Board of Pensions]

The conference board of ordained ministry, meeting before the annual conference, adopted a statement that...they do not take sexual orientation or gender identity into their consideration of candidates. In response to the General Conference, two actions were taken by the annual conference: passed a resolution supporting the work of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and they voted to join the coalition, and supported "A Way Forward," the plan by the Council of Bishops for a commission to review

[Note: This is an interesting array of actions – supportive and bring forth a proposal for the church to resolve its differences over human sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion. of humanistic, non-Christian, anti-American, anti-Israeli causes. – AOM]

Statistics: Membership is 25,308, down 716. – Greg Nelson, Oregon-Idaho Conference; as reported by UMNS.

Northwest Annual Conference. The 143rd session of the PNWAC took place at the Washington State Fairgrounds in Puyallup, Wash., June 19-22, with Bishop Grant J. Hagiya of the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area officiating bishop. After much debate, legislation, titled “Action of Non-Conformity with The General Conference of The United Methodist Church,” was affirmed with a vote of 315 in favor, 74 against, and six abstentions. It was modeled after similar actions of nonconformity previously taken in the New England, Desert Southwest and California-Pacific annual conferences. The conference also...signed on to a campaign to raise the minimum wage in Washington to \$13.50 by 2020, and supported full civil and ecclesiastical rights of all including LGBT people, approved a petition to rejoin the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, support that was withdrawn by the GC-2016, approved a “lament” that GC-2016 continued to invest in fossil fuels while also resolving to divest from investments of the same by January 1, 2018, and approved a smaller budget, reducing it by 1.79 percent to \$5,316,227. Membership is 42,876, down 1,724.

– Patrick Scriven, dir. of communications, and PNW Sessions Secretary Rev. Shirley DeLarme; as reported by UMNS.

Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference. The 232nd session of the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference was held at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, June 9-11, 2016, with Bishop Peggy Johnson presiding. Recognition of the bicentennial of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; supported repeal of the death penalty in Delaware; a resolution supported local churches as gun free zones was tabled; voted down resolution to create study materials on LGBTQ issues. Membership is 78,284, down 1,615; worship attendance is 30,403, up 400.– Doug Lanter, comm. coordinator, Peninsula-Delaware Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Red Bird Missionary Conference. The 48th gathering of the Red Bird Missionary Conference occurred April 30 at Booneville UMC and Family Life Center in Booneville, Kentucky, with Bishop G. Lindsey Davis presiding in his final session of Annual Conference. Members also learned of the restart of United Methodist Men and the Annual Volunteer In Mission trip in February, where the team went to South Carolina to help with the recovery from last year’s storms. Statistics: No statistics are available at this time.

– The Rev. Robert Amundsen, Conference Secretary; as reported by the UMNS.

Río Texas Annual Conference. Dates of conference gathering: June, 9-12, with Bishop Robert Schnase presiding. The Rio Texas Outreach Vitality Office is engaged in a process adopting the “In Mission Together” model as a foundational approach to ministry.

Statistics: Membership is 119,765, down 3,904; worship attendance is 44,937, down 2,568; church school attendance is 16, 219, down 680. – Will Rice, director of communications and media support, Rio Texas Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Rocky Mountain Annual Conference. Met June 19-12 at the Westin Hotel, Westminster, Colorado, with Bishop Elaine J. W. Stanovsky officiating. Actions: Affirmed Membership in the Colorado Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; approved petitions to close four churches; resolution adopted by the conference to Support the Council of Bishops’ Proposal: A Way Forward.

Statistics: Membership is 58,490, down 1,072; worship attendance is 27,055, down 1,203.

– Charmaine Robledo, director of communications, Mountain Sky Area; as reported by the UMNS.

Serbia-Macedonia Provisional Annual Conference. The Serbia-Macedonia Annual Conference met from April 7 to 10, 2016, in Padina (Serbia) with Bishop Patrick Streiff officiating. Padina United Methodist Church had completed the works on an extension building shortly before the opening of the annual conference – and the gathering could not have taken place without this huge commitment of both people from Padina and from neighboring Kovacica United Methodist Church. But it was worth the venture, and the invitation to host this year’s annual conference meeting proved to be a complete success. On Sunday, the sanctuary as well as the adjoining room and the lobby were too small to accommodate all people who were present. Once again there were official guests from the missionary area in Albania – and they were welcomed with joy. Particularly among the younger generation, many friendships have developed as a result of the recent regional Balkans-Camp with participants from Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia. A one-day-excursion from the Macedonian to the Albanian side of Lake Ohrid had tremendously contributed towards overcoming prejudices and fears on the Serbian side. In his report, Superintendent the Rev. Wilfried Nausner (Macedonia/Albania) reminded the annual conference members of the fact that there are still huge tensions in regard to the Kosovo area.

In a moving celebration, Bishop Patrick Streiff had the joy to commission the first local pastor of The United Methodist Church in Albania: Mustafa Isufi from Pogradec. In addition to his work as principal of a school — and serving as a part-time lay worker – Mustafa Isufi had helped to develop and lead Pogradec United Methodist Church until the end of 2015. He had also started extra occupational theological studies with the Church of the Nazarene. Since the beginning of 2016, he is a full-time worker with The United Methodist Church in Albania, but he is still continuing his studies. There are three more lay preachers in Albania: Florian Cela (Elbasan) as well as Rigels Kasmollari and Gjergji Lushka (both Tirana). The Albanian guests invited the annual conference members to visit the United Methodist congregations in Albania. Representatives from all three countries expressed their hope that the United Methodists in Serbia, Macedonia and Albania would further develop and intensify their spiritual connection and their cooperation.

The next meeting of Serbia-Macedonia Provisional Annual Conference will take place from April 6 to 9, 2017, in Macedonia.

– Bishop Patrick Streiff, Zurich; as reported by the UMNS.

Sierra Leone Annual Conference. March 18, 2016 | Freetown, Sierra Leone (UMNS): The first sessions of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference since the Ebola outbreak began with marching brass bands that brought together about 2,000 United Methodists. But the shadow of the deadly disease was still present in the memorial service honoring those who died. The popular “march past” cultural celebrations, in which marchers process through the streets, were banned during Ebola. The processions included United Methodists from Sierra Leone as well as invited guests from Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Germany, Norway & the US.

The 136th session of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference with the theme “Claiming God’s Divine Promise” (Exodus 33:1) opened on March 10. Five brass bands played while marchers sang and processed about two miles from and back to the host, Brown Memorial United Methodist Church. “We are slowly returning to normal ways,” said Isatu Conteh, a street trader who abandoned her wares to join the group of onlookers watching the throng of United Methodists march past. In a sermon during opening worship, the Rev. Karsten Mohr, an elder from the United Methodist Church in Germany, said that when the church comes together, United Methodists experience fellowship across borders. Mohr gave numerous examples of the goodness God intends for humanity and urged the faithful to stay hopeful even in the face of deprivation, unemployment, disease and other elements of abject poverty. The conference held a memorial service to celebrate those who lost their lives during the Ebola epidemic, including 11 medical doctors and more than 200 health workers. Nearly 4,000 people died in Sierra

Leone during the Ebola outbreak. UM women and several other denominational groups participate in the “march past” marking the beginning of the 136th session of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference.

Focus on the future. In his episcopal address, Bishop John K. Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Area said, “Someone told me that the most important thing we ever have to do is always ahead of us and not behind us. So at this conference, I would like to focus our attention to the most important missional priorities ahead of us.” He listed church unity, evangelism and church growth, innovative and life-changing ministries, intentional leadership development and aggressive fundraising as key goals.

Bishop Jane Allen Middleton, interim episcopal leader of the New York Conference, spoke about the sexuality debate expected at the 2016 General Conference. “Can we be strong enough in our unity in Jesus Christ to find our common ground in him?” she asked. Middleton said Christians pray and discern God’s will and believe they are being faithful; “yet, they have opposite opinions.” The New York Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry announced March 1 that it would not consider sexual orientation in evaluating a clergy candidate, even if that individual has a spouse of the same gender. For his part, Yambasu said the denomination’s attempt to deal with the issue of human sexuality is becoming complex. “Many years on,” he said, “our long and painful journey towards integration suffered a setback when the now much divisive issue of homosexuality showed its ugly head.” The bishop said that while many United Methodists thought the sexuality issue would “soon pass away,” it has become, in St. Paul’s words, “a thorn in our flesh” of the global church. Yambasu said many delegates are approaching the 2016 General Conference with great apprehension because some conferences in the U.S. are more accepting of gay candidates for ordination. “We continue to pray for our United Methodist Church so that God will save our denomination from collapse,” he said. “Without Scriptural faithfulness, we cannot effectively carry out lifesaving and soul-winning evangelical outreach ministries.” Liberian Bishop John G. Innis also expressed hope that the issue of human sexuality would not break down the unity of The United Methodist Church. “The basis of our discussion on this issue should be the Holy Bible and the denomination’s Book of Discipline,” he said.

– By Phileas Jusu and E. Julu Swen; as reported by Vicki Brown at the UMNS. Jusu is a communicator for The United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone. Swen is communicator for United Methodist Church in Liberia.

South Carolina Annual Conference. Held June 5-8, this year’s conference focused on celebrating and developing new ways to let God use us to further His Kingdom on earth. Bishop Jonathan Holston officiated. The conference approved a \$16.79 million ministry budget for 2017 June 8 as the four-day conference wrapped to a close, just \$272 more than the 2016 budget passed last year. Resolution to Oppose Discrimination Against Transgender People (Passed): The committee recommended concurrence on this resolution, which asks the conference to vow, as churches and people of faith, to no longer be silent about the value of each and every life; to categorically oppose discrimination against transgender people in all its forms and, in the spirit of advocating for safe sanctuary, to respond to acts of discrimination against transgender people with acts of compassion; and to take a public stand against speeches of hate, exclusion, harassment and acts of intimidation and violence filled with long-held prejudices. In a vote too close for a raised ballot, Bishop Jonathan Holston called for a second, standing vote. The resolution was approved. [Note: Christians should act in love. “Transgenderism” is a recognized psychological disorder. At times, the truth hurts – but we are called to witness to the truth. – AOM]

Rev. Wendy Hudson-Jacoby, pastor of North Charleston UMC, North Charleston, on her motion that the UMCSC engage in dialogue and conversations on human sexuality at the local level: “Our General Conference through the Council of Bishops is engaging in important and essential conversation regarding sexuality, Scriptures and the church. We believe we are called to engage in important conversations on the local level in our districts and churches. These conversations are already taking place in our society, and we want to be ... with them.” [Note: We oppose further discussions as proposed here, at GC2016, and in other conference

sessions. Why do we need to discuss this when we know that the Bible calls it sin, our sin nature, and the redemption offered by Jesus Christ? – AOM]

Statistics: Membership is 229,482, down 2255. – Jessica Brodie, editor, South Carolina Advocate; as reported by the UMNS.

South Georgia Annual Conference. The 2016 SG Annual Conference session was held June 8-11 at the UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center in Tifton, Georgia, with Bishop James R. King Jr., presiding. Members heard an inspiring sermon by Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett, episcopal leader of the Birmingham (Alabama) area to “Journey to the One who is our savior and redeemer. And as you journey frequently to Jesus, you will have many reasons to testify.” AC2016 ended with Bishop King encouraged people: “You can’t grow a Christ-like world by being a settler. We must do all that we can for as long as we can to grow a Christ-like world.”

Of especial interest: One motion passed during the four-day conference requested that Bishop King convey to the Council of Bishops a request that a previous quadrennial study on human sexuality ordered by a previous General Conference be read, studied, and evaluated by the members of the Council of Bishops before any new study is ordered, a committee appointed as ordered by the 2016 General Conference, or a called General Conference is undertaken. Another motion asked that the resident bishop of the South Georgia Conference not receive, for appointment or transfer, clergy who have publicly stated their intent to disregard the current language of the Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality. In other action, members approved a \$10,493,427 million budget for mission and ministry for 2017. The 2017 Annual Conference session will be held June 4-7 on Jekyll Island.

Statistics: Membership is 116,733, down 2,111; worship attendance is 49,424, down 854; church school attendance is 33,398, down 1.

– Kara Witherow and Kelly Roberson of the South Georgia Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Susquehanna Annual Conference. Officiating bishop: Jeremiah J. Park. Guest speaker: Bishop Ernest Lyght. Adopted a resolution for the discontinuance of Forest Emmanuel Church; adopted a resolution called the Dream Care Initiative that lists The Susquehanna Conference as an endorser to expand Pennsylvania's CHIP program to provide health care to all children. Membership is 146,171, down 4,265. – Gerald (Jerry) Wolgemuth, director of Communications, Susquehanna Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Tennessee Annual Conference. The Tennessee Conference of the UMC met June 12-15 at Brentwood UMC in Brentwood, Tennessee, with Bishop William “Bill” McAilly officiating. Memorable quote: “Grace is the absolutely free gift of God that costs me and you nothing but demands everything from us.” – Bishop Mike McKee. Actions: a Covenant with East Mexico Conference, Mission to the East Congo Annual Conference in July 2017 and approved to study reducing the number of districts from 7 to 5 or 6.

Statistics: Membership is 117,881, down 619.– Amy J. Hurd, director of comm., Tennessee Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Texas Annual Conference. The Texas Annual Conference met at the Hilton Americas, Houston, from May 29 – June 1, 2016, with Bishop Janice Riggle-Huie officiating. Actions: Texas Conference/Justice for Our Neighbors Memorandum of Understanding was approved that affirms this United Methodist hospitality ministry to our immigrant brothers and sisters as an affiliated organization birthed by the Texas Conference. Over \$17,000 was collected in response to the mission focus: Back to School on the Border to help schoolchildren in great need on both the U.S. and Mexico side of the Texas border. Statistics: Membership is 282,139, down 3,507.

– Paula Arnold, director of communications, Texas Annual Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

Upper New York Conference. Officiating: Bishop Mark J. Webb. Resolutions adopted: UNYAC2016.2 – Change District Names, not supported; UNYAC2016.5 – Restoration of Funding of the New York State Council of Churches, not supported; UNYAC2016.6– A Call for Budget Transparency, supported; UNAYC2016.8 – A Resolution to Study and Consider Carbon Pricing, supported; UNYAC2016.9: UNYUMC Responds to Gun Violence, supported. Membership is 156,370, down 4,999; worship attendance 41,884, down 4,270; church school attendance is 10,306, down 406 (3% decline). – As reported by the UMNS.

Virginia Annual Conference. Theme for the 2016 Virginia Annual Conference, held June 17-19 at the Berglund Center in Roanoke, Va., was “Thy Will be Done.” Bishop Young Jin Cho presided over the proceedings for the last time before his retirement. In his episcopal address, Bishop Cho looked back on the accomplishments of the Virginia Conference over the last four years. He highlighted major ministry moments including the Imagine No Malaria initiative in which the conference raised more than \$1 million in 15 months. He said he commissioned a task force to review and evaluate the strategic plan of All Things New-Equipping Vital Congregations adopted in 2008. Bishop Cho said the task force’s final report will be presented to the new Virginia conference bishop as a guide and a way forward for the conference. In other action, 21 men and women were ordained elders, two were ordained deacons, 14 were commissioned as provisional elders, two were commissioned as provisional deacons and 31 were licensed as local pastors.

Conference mission worship service: The Rev. Eun Pa Hong, pastor of Bupyeong Methodist Church in Incheon, Korea, preached for the mission worship service saying he was thankful for American missionaries who came to Korea and built schools, hospitals and churches. **Conference business:** 10 churches were discontinued in 5 districts; 5 new faith communities and pastors were introduced.

Of especial interest – 2016 General Conference report: Martha Stokes and the Rev. Tom Berlin, the laity and clergy heads of the General Conference delegation, reported on General Conference 2016. Speaking on the issue of human sexuality and the conversations Berlin was a part of during General Conference, he talked about the number of opinions people have on this issue and the weariness people feel over the arguments. But he urged members not to trivialize this debate. “Because even though we are weary with the argument, we’ve got to stick with it because we’re talking about people’s lives,” Berlin said. Berlin said he believes the special commission on human sexuality to be named by the Council of Bishops will do “the most important work in the next decade of The United Methodist Church.” But he reminded members that the real problems facing the denomination are the financial situation of the church and the decline of U.S. membership just as churches in Asia and Africa are growing rapidly. He emphasized the U.S. denomination is at a “pivotal, critical moment” and he asked members “to get down on your knees with us.”

Statistics: Members approved a 2017 budget of \$32,000,000, down 0.96% from the 2016 budget. Membership is 327,647, down 1,507; worship attendance is 98,253, down 3,930; reaffirmations of faith are 4,010, down 250; for 2017, there is a 2.2% decrease in apportionments to mission and ministries. – Madeline Pillow, editor of *The Advocate*, Virginia Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

West Ohio Annual Conference. The West Ohio Conference met June 5- June 8, at Lakeside Chautauqua, with Bishop Gregory V. Palmer presiding. Attendance totaled: 2,278 (956 clergy, 892 laity). Budget passed: \$22.3 million. Dr. David Watson, Academic Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs, as well as an Associate Professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary, was the guest speaker for both the laity and clergy session. Watson spoke openly about ministry with people with disabilities and shared his own story of how the incarnation and nature of God have been revealed through his son Sean, who was diagnosed just after birth with Down Syndrome. The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Jones, Executive Vice President and Provost at Baylor University, was the guest speaker on Monday and developed a theme of how Christians, and The United Methodist Church,

have lost sight of our mission to be spiritual innovators, fueled by the fire of the Holy Spirit to renew the world by the power of God. Rev. Jones lifted up a deep Wesleyan and United Methodist history of social holiness and social outreach and called the church to be leaders of change for the better in our world once again. + Celebrated raising \$3,663,128 for Imagine No Malaria

· Bishop Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda Ntambo of the North Katanga Conference was present throughout annual conference and West Ohio was privileged to help honor his retirement. Bishop Palmer and the Rev. Dee Stickley-Miner recognized him for his long partnership with West Ohio and historical and life-changing contributions to the lives of the people of the North Katanga area in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There was a reception for Bishop Ntambo on Tuesday evening; several times in annual conference, the body expressed its respect and love for Bishop Ntambo through standing ovations.

Statistics: 40 retirees with 870 years' service; commissioned 4 provisional deacons & 14 provisional elders; participated in courtesy commissioning of a Provisional Member of the Manila Annual Conference; ordained 18 Elders. – As reported by the UMNS.

West Virginia Annual Conference. The 48th session of the West Virginia Annual Conference met June 9-12 at West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon, WV. In conference action: A resolution in response to the Council of Bishops plan, "A Way Forward," was tabled; the conference passed a resolution urging holiness, civility, and respect in conversation; Judi Kenaston received the Susannah Wesley award from the United Methodist Men.

In other action, a budget of \$12,278,989 was approved for 2017, an increase of \$119,798, or .990% from the 2016 budget.

Statistics: 32 clergy retired; 6 commissioned elder; 1 for deacon; 7 elders and 2 deacons were ordained; the conference recognized 2 people as associate members; 21 people completed licensing school; 5 completed course of study; membership is 95,832, down 1,531; worship attendance rose from 40,563 to 42,309; professions of faith rose 10.16% from 1,024 to 1,128; enrollment in confirmation class rose from 476 to 648, increase of 172 or 36.13%. – Whitney Cherry, WVUMC Communications; as reported by the UMNS.

Western North Carolina Conference. The Western North Carolina Conference gathered at Lake Junaluska Conference & Retreat Center in Lake Junaluska, N. C. from June 15-19, 2016. The theme for this conference was "Go Light Your World" (Matthew 5:14), with Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster officiating.

In other action, the WNCC heard a report from General Conference from the heads of the delegation; passed a budget for 2017 of \$16,404,655 dollars, a slight decrease from the 2016 budget; heard reports from the laity of the conference and especially from United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women; WNCC organization of UMM was recognized as the top group in the country in March and were recognized before the body; UMW continue to lead in the nation- #1 in Mission Giving for 15th consecutive year and #1 in Legacy Giving; Celebrated the retirement of Bishop Larry Goodpaster for his 8 years of service to WNC throughout the conference.

The 2017 Annual Conference is scheduled for June 23-25, 2017 at Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center.

Statistics: 14 newly commissioned clergy; 27 newly ordained clergy; 7 deacons ordained; 25 clergy retired with a total of 955 years of active service; membership is 282,755, down 1,033; worship attendance is 105,406 down 5,759; church school attendance is 43,935 down 2,698; professions/reaffirmations of faith were 3,850, down 434; adults and young adults in small groups were 76,040, up 1,609; worshippers engaged in mission were 78,663, up 8,383.

– Michael Rich, Western North Carolina Conference, web & communications manager; as reported by the UMNS.

Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference. The Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference was held at Grove City College, Grove City, PA from June 9-12 with Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton Officiating ; a Day of Preparation with Phil Maynard entitled From Membership to Discipleship, a prayer walk and healing service were held on June 8. Memorable point by speakers:

Bishop Bickerton: In both the opening worship service and his State of the Church address, Bishop Bickerton talked about the discord and divisions in politics, the church and the world. He offered familiar words from the prophet Micah to help point the way through these turbulent times: “Do justice; Love kindness and Walk Humbly with our God.” In the State of the Church address, he noted that those on the extremes are calling for a split in the denomination. He called on any present who are working toward a separation to stop and instead work “to preserve our greatest witness – an outward expression of an inward and deeply spiritual grace that honors our diversity, loves all of God’s created children equally, and longs for unity at all costs in the body of Christ!”

“Our role is to lead the church in times of worship, study, discernment, confession and prayer for God’s guidance rather than our own,” he said. “We must preach, teach, and live as a demonstration of the unity that is only possible through Jesus Christ our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst!”

Adam Hamilton: “The approach the generation coming up is most likely to respond to is the Wesleyan approach to the Gospel,” Hamilton said. He explained that young adults are looking for authenticity and for opportunities to make a difference, put beliefs into action and be part of something greater than themselves. Leaders, Hamilton said, set the tone for the organization. Their role is not to manage, but to inspire and lead. Churches should regularly conduct 360 evaluations and see how to improve. “Leaders don’t give up,” if something doesn’t work. But church leaders must “change, innovate, improve or die.” It’s important for leaders to know and show their people what a disciple looks like, then figure out how we are going to help them get there, Hamilton said. “Be willing to do whatever it takes to accommodate needs.” Hamilton offered five ways to connect with people through preaching: Teach them something they didn’t know before; Inspire them; speak to their hearts; Issue a call to action; Make lessons relevant to their daily life. Take practical everyday things and relate them to the spiritual; Preaching has to be biblical and relate to the human condition.

“There is power in preaching when you get out of the way and let God work,” he said.

In other action, members of the conference approved an apportionment budget of \$9.68 million for 2017. An additional action charged the Connectional Leadership Team, in consultation with the Personnel Committee, to complete a study of Conference staffing structure to address its efficacy, sustainability and utilization of the staff and Cabinet members’ gifts to benefit the local church.

Statistics: 6 elders were ordained; 1 received from another denomination; 22 provisional members commissioned; 1 associate member received; people retired: 27, representing 763 years of service; membership is 168,185, down 3,157; worship attendance is 54,085, down 1,968; church school attendance is 15,960, down 302; professions or reaffirmations of faith 2,244, down 410; adults and young adults in small groups: 25,466, up 464; worshippers engaged in mission: 11,288, up 3,756. – As reported by the UMNS.

Wisconsin Annual Conference. The Wisconsin Conference held their annual session at the Madison Marriott on June 10-13, with Bishop Hee-Soo Jung officiating. Throughout the weekend, conference leaders reflected on the positive effects of redistricting the conference from eight to five districts. Bishop Jung said in his State of the Church, “We have finished a full year with five new districts, each with its own district superintendent. Already, we are feeling the benefits of improved relationships. We are focusing on leadership and leadership development

for new ministries, for emerging ministries, and for existing ministries.” In her Cabinet Address, District Superintendent and Dean of the Cabinet, the Rev. Deborah Thompson, added, “We are seeing an increase of time that District Superintendents are spending with our churches,” she said. In other action, during plenary sessions, all action items presented were approved, including some that were amended. The 32 approved action items included a 2017 Budget of \$ 7,032,028, a Call for Repentance Actions, a Native American Partnership Agreement, a Feasibility Study for a Major Financial Campaign, a Call to Observe United Methodist Children’s Services Sunday, a Call to Observe a Sunday to Pray for Persecuted Christians, et. al.

Bishop Jung announced in a press release a resolution to a charge against retired clergy Rev. Janet Ellinger. A complaint was reported earlier this year because she conducted two same-sex marriage ceremonies. According to Bishop Jung, the Wisconsin UMC sought a just resolution that witnessed to mercy, grace, justice and an affirmation of the years of faithful service by the clergy person, as well as the extent to which she has effectively upheld the spirit of *The Book of Discipline*. It was agreed that fairness and a just resolution would not demand the surrender of credentials, and jointly agreed by the complainant & respondent that both would abide by the decision of the bishop. During a private clergy session at the annual meeting of the Wisconsin Conference, Ellinger addressed the clergy and expressed her admission and regret for offending anyone. [Note: In other words, no effective action was taken. – AOM] Statistics: None are available. – Michele Virnig, Wisconsin Conference director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

The Yellowstone Annual Conference. The Yellowstone Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church met June 16-18 at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Helena, Montana with Bishop Elaine J. W. Stanovsky officiating.

In other action, approved petition on Mission Shaped Future to realign conference boundaries (sent to Western Jurisdictional Conference); adopted petition to Establish Disability Awareness Sunday as a special Sunday in the Yellowstone Conference; adopted 2017 Yellowstone Conference budget; approved petition to discontinue Lemhi United Methodist Church. Resolutions adopted by the conference: A Resolution to Support the Council of Bishops’ Proposal A Way Forward; Resolution for Non-Discrimination in Episcopal Election; Resolution to Support Planned Parenthood of Montana and Planned Parenthood of Wyoming.

Statistics: Number of people ordained, commissioned: 0; number of people retired: 3.

– Charmaine Robledo, director of Communications, Mountain Sky Area; as reported by the UMNS.

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Of concluding interest: *New Orthodox Organization Creates Conversation.*

The creation of the Wesleyan Covenant Association continues to stir interest across The United Methodist Church. In an extensive article for the United Methodist News Service, reporter Heather Hahn interviewed organizers and cited detractors of the new organization. “This group was not formed to be the start of a new denomination,” the Rev. Jeff Greenway told Hahn. “It was formed to provide a new, broader voice and encouragement to persons who are dedicated to the very best of scriptural Christianity in our Wesleyan, evangelical, orthodox tradition within The United Methodist Church.” Greenway, the lead pastor of Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church in Ohio, was among nearly 50 United Methodists who met in Houston to give shape and guidance to the organization.

The association is planning a major launch event on Friday, October 7 in Chicago that is open to all United Methodist laity and clergy. The organization reported that registration for the conference is now open. Hahn reported that Bishop Bruce Ough, president of the Council of Bishops, identified the “emergence” of the association as one of the “recent moves that have ‘fanned the fears of schism.’” Ough lumped the organization’s

creation with annual “conferences voting noncompliance with restrictions related to homosexuality and the election of the denomination’s first openly gay episcopal leader, Bishop Karen Oliveto.”

According to Hahn, Greenway took issue with Ough’s claim. The “group organizers are loyal United Methodists who have kept their ordination vows, paid church apportionments, and worked to keep fellow evangelicals from leaving the denomination.” In a gracious, but pointed blog post, Dr. Kevin Watson, a theologian at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, argued that Ough’s comparing the association’s creation with obvious acts of ecclesial disobedience is “misleading.”

Hahn also reported that the Rev. Carolyn Moore, another association organizer, referenced the impending work of the Council of Bishops’ Special Commission that will bring recommendations on the future of the church to a called General Conference scheduled for 2018. Moore, pastor of Mosaic UM Church in Evans, Georgia, told Hahn, “We want to give folks a place to land while we wait for the commission to perform its function. We are doing our level best to cooperate with the will of the General Conference, and hope that by banding together we will help others to wait and watch the Lord work, too.”

– Received by e-mail. Received by e-mail from an associate; Good News Media Service

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For those who are interested in making known your opposition to the election of Karen Oliveto, a self-professed lesbian, as bishop in the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, you may go to this website: <http://methodistcrossroads.org/> I encourage you to sign the statement, and share this information with everyone you know who is concerned about our church and encourage them to sign as well. [Received from an associate.]

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Live for something – rather than die for nothing. – George Patton, General, United States Army