

# Monthly Update

September 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This Update presents the first of the reports from the annual conferences held across our United Methodist Church earlier this summer; the other reports will be included in our next Update. It is interesting to read them to see what the thinking is of the church from across our connection. The reports give a cursory view of all that was covered; if you want more information on your particular conference, please contact me and I can provide you a more detailed report.

Do you believe in miracles? In the 1970s I was a young officer serving in the Army in Germany. For over four years, I saw how we would practice fighting against the combined strength of the Warsaw Pact forces that we faced across the border of the “Iron Curtain” as Sir Winston Churchill had so eloquently coined the phrase in 1946. To prepare for this, we would engage in endless field training exercises where we would go through war games – exploring the different tactics that we thought the enemy might use – and how we would counter them.

Having studied communist tactics, doctrine, and strategies since I was a teenager (as a hobby), I had an all-too-realistic view of what we were up against. Through intelligence reports and my own studies, I knew that we faced overwhelming odds, what the ratios were in terms of troops, tanks, artillery pieces, and planes. I firmly believed that if “the balloon went up” and hostilities with them started, I would one day die under the treads of a Soviet tank. Along with the other American, German, British, and French forces, I lived with this possibility daily. Our unit, the 26<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion had even formed a partnership with two allied units: the German Luftlandfermeldebataillon 9 (German 9<sup>th</sup> Airborne Signal Battalion) and the French 42<sup>e</sup> Regiment du Transmissions (French 42<sup>nd</sup> Signal Regiment). Our unit would train with them and work out how we would go into combat as allies. I learned a great deal from both units. Our unit would have different alerts and participate in “Reforger” exercises and other operations.

Then one day something happened. I was not a Christian at that time, but still what I had heard commanded my attention. In 1978, I learned that a Polish Roman Catholic cardinal had been elected Pope. My immediate thought was, “This has possibilities.” There were two things I knew about the Polish People: they were very “Roman Catholic” and they were very determined (call it “hard-headed” if you wish). I knew that no longer could the Soviet Union depend on the unquestioning loyalty of the Polish Army; this was like a “chink” in the solidarity of the Warsaw Pact forces. As history would prove, my beliefs were correct: Pope John Paul II became a moral force that would, along with the deliberate strategy of President Ronald Reagan, undermine the foundations of the Soviet Empire. At the time I was preparing for Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the communist empire collapsed – without our firing a shot in anger.

Earlier I had asked, “Do you believe in miracles?” I do. God is still in the “miracle business” and He can do them today. That is why I ask that you continue to pray for our United Methodist Church and for the United States of America, that there would be a move of the Holy Spirit across both so that every single person would have a life-changing experience with Jesus Christ. Also, I ask that you continue to open your bibles to Psalm 91 and pray it out loud as a hedge of protection. Am I superstitious? No, but I do believe in miracles – and God is still at work.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,

Executive Director

## September 2016 Update

### **Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church**

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

– Martin Luther [included in the book “The Issues @ Hand”]

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The Good Stuff**

#### **+ *Local Heroes Create “Cajun Navy” to Find and Rescue Louisiana Flood Victims: “These People Need Us”***

A group of Louisiana natives, some of them flood victims themselves, have banded together to form the “Cajun Navy” – an armada of volunteers who set sail every morning to rescue neighbors, friends, strangers and pets trapped by the historic Louisiana floodwaters. “We’re just out here trying to help,” Warren Holmes of Ascension Parish told the *Times Picayune*. Holmes and his wife Shannon had spent the weekend rescuing people and pets from 7-foot deep water. “What are we supposed to do: Let them die?” Another volunteer, Kyle Page, lost his home in Denham Springs over the weekend. Since then, he’s put aside his own suffering to help those in need. “I’ve got to do something,” he told the newspaper, “though I would like to see if I have anything left.” Each day, these brave volunteers navigate through streets floating on a mixture of floodwater, gasoline and sewage trying to help any person or animal they can find. “Nothing prepares you for this, but you’ve got to do something,” Shannon Holmes said. “These people need us.” On Sunday, three men in a boat saved a woman and her dog from her car that was sinking in to the floodwaters.

Over 30 inches of rain fell in southern Louisiana over the past week; Watson, Louisiana, was hit the worst, with 31.4 inches, according to the National Weather Service. At least 11 people have died in the flooding, Louisiana officials confirmed Tuesday. Gov. John Bel Edwards said that 30,000 people had already been rescued but the state did not know how many more people were missing. “We are still very much in an emergency, search-and-rescue response mode for much of the Florida parishes,” Mr. Edwards said, according to the New York Times. “Saving life is the most important priority that we have. We’re going to dedicate every available response to that effort until it’s no longer required.”

After the news broke that more than 40,000 homes had been damaged hundreds came forward to volunteer their time – and boats – to bring those who may still be trapped in flooded homes to safety. “It’s a good situation when you you’re able to be there. A lot of times tragedies unfold in front of you, and you can’t do anything,” Joe Spinato, who was part of a team that saved more than 600 people stranded in their homes, told the *Times-Picayune*. “I’m just happy I was able to do something.”

– By Tiare Dunllap; People Magazine; Aug 18, 2016. As reported by Max Becherer/AP

+ ***Don’t Hope... Decide!*** While waiting to pick up a friend at the airport in Portland, Oregon, I had one of those life-changing experiences that you hear other people talk about – the kind that sneaks up on you unexpectedly. This one occurred a mere two feet away from me. Straining to locate my friend among the passengers deplaning through the jet way, I noticed a man coming toward me carrying two light bags. He stopped right next to me to greet his family.

First he motioned to his youngest son (maybe six years old) as he laid down his bags. They gave each other a long, loving hug. As they separated enough to look in each other's face, I heard the father say, "It's so good to see you, son. I missed you so much!" His son smiled somewhat shyly, averted his eyes and replied softly, "Me, too, Dad!"

Then the man stood up, gazed in the eyes of his oldest son (maybe nine or ten) and while cupping his son's face in his hands said, "You're already quite the young man. I love you very much, Zach!" They too hugged a most loving, tender hug. While this was happening, a baby girl (perhaps one or one-and-a-half) was squirming excitedly in her mother's arms, never once taking her little eyes off the wonderful sight of her returning father. The man said, "Hi, baby girl!" as he gently took the child from her mother. He quickly kissed her face all over and then held her close to his chest while rocking her from side to side. The little girl instantly relaxed and simply laid her head on his shoulder, motionless in pure contentment. After several moments, he handed his daughter to his oldest son and declared, "I've saved the best for last!" and proceeded to give his wife the longest, most passionate kiss I ever remember seeing. He gazed into her eyes for several seconds and then silently mouthed, "I love you so much!" They stared at each other's eyes, beaming big smiles at one another, while holding both hands.

For an instant they reminded me of newlyweds, but I knew by the age of their kids that they couldn't possibly be. I puzzled about it for a moment then realized how totally engrossed I was in the wonderful display of unconditional love not more than an arm's length away from me. I suddenly felt uncomfortable, as if I was invading something sacred, but was amazed to hear my own voice nervously ask, "Wow! How long have you two been married?"

"Known each other fourteen years total, married twelve of those." he replied, without breaking his gaze from his lovely wife's face.

"Well then, how long have you been away?"

I asked. The man finally turned and looked at me, still beaming his joyous smile. "Two whole days!" Two days? I was stunned. By the intensity of the greeting, I had assumed he'd been gone for at least several weeks – if not months. I know my expression betrayed me.

I said almost offhandedly, hoping to end my intrusion with some semblance of grace (and to get back to searching for my friend), "I hope my marriage is still that passionate after twelve years!"

The man suddenly stopped smiling. He looked me straight in the eye, and with forcefulness that burned right into my soul, he told me something that left me a different person. He told me... "Don't Hope, Friend... Decide!"

Then he flashed me his wonderful smile again, shook my hand and said, "God Bless!"

– By Michael D. Hargrove. Received by e-mail.

**Of Interest.** *10 ways to improve your prayer life.* Moses went to a mountaintop to hear God. Jesus fled to the desert. But for many Christians, their most regular place for praying is whatever pew they sit in on Sundays. Work, children, chores and other duties make stopping for prayer seem a luxury. In today's culture, some even joke that that Charles Wesley's quote "pray and never faint," refers to passing out from an overloaded schedule. "We forget to intentionally make space for prayer," said Betty Kay Hudson of First United Methodist Church in Lancaster, S.C.

That's not the way it's supposed to be. Souls, like vines, tend to grow wild and weak when untended. No matter the season on the church calendar – Advent, Lent, Easter, Pentecost -- or all of the times in between, prayer is the gasoline that fuels Christians. "Prayer is the catalyst," says the Rev. Jeffrey Kersey, a UM minister in

Lexington, S.C. Prayer, like tennis, takes practice to become accomplished. Spiritual guides and sages, pastors and other church members are filled with advice and counsel. Here's some of that wisdom condensed into 10 tips about prayer:

+ You are worthy. Do not feel guilty about the quality of your prayer life, or fall victim to doubts and despair about your worthiness to talk to God. Each of us has a spiritual gift. So remember John Wesley's words: "In Christ we gain more than in Adam we lost."

+ The more you pray, the richer your prayers become. To deepen your prayer life, don't be a slacker. Like anything in life, to become good at prayer you must be disciplined. Just as running is an exercise in physical fitness, prayer is a spiritual discipline.

+ Prayer is active. Prayer involves action; namely being attentive to God's voice in your life. Listening for God means stopping and sitting still. It means paying attention to what God may be saying to you at any point in your life.

+ Prayer should not be an afterthought. Prayer was the backbone of Jesus' ministry. Often, he broke away from his disciples to spend time with God. In the same way, prayer is essential to individual lives and to the life of the church. Break away from your daily routine for quiet time in prayer.

+ Surround yourself with people who are seasoned at praying. People who've established prayer routines have much to teach those wanting to draw closer to God. Seek out those who can help guide and encourage your prayer life.

+ God doesn't require eloquence. Don't worry if you fumble for words when you pray. God is not looking for Toastmaster's graduates, but sincerity (not that you can't have both at once). If the words won't come, God still knows what's in your heart. Lift up that desire.

+ Prayer need not involve words. The great Christian saints all write of prayer as a time of sitting quietly with God. Jesus even went off for 40 days of prayerful solitude. Take a deep breath. Exhale. Follow the breath as it flows in and out of your body. Think of it as the spirit of God breathing life into you. [Note: Does this border on Eastern mysticism? – AOM]

+ Prayer is a time for conversation with a friend: God. Whether you see that friend routinely or just every once in awhile, know that whenever you turn to God, you're turning to someone who loves you.

+ Ask God for help if you get stuck. Maybe you've hit a dry spell. There's no shame in asking God to guide you to pray in a new way.

+ The three Ls of prayer: Listen, listen, listen. Listening for God is central to prayer, according to the great saints. It's so critical that St. Benedict began his famous Rule with this command for monks: "Listen with the ear of your heart."

And remember, prayer can happen anywhere -- it doesn't have to take place in a church.

– By Susan Hogan. Emily Cooper and Jan Surratt of the South Carolina *United Methodist Advocate* did reporting for this story. Hogan is a freelance writer based in Chicago. This story was originally published in 2009. March 18, 2016.

\* \* \* \* \*

If you sacrifice principle trying to please everyone, you end up pleasing no one. – John Wooden

## Global Outlook

The Pope? How many divisions does he have? – Josef Stalin

### **Israel. *Friends of the Israel Defense Forces.***

“Friend, today we stand united in sorrow and solidarity.

On Yom HaZikaron – the Day of Remembrance for the Fallen Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism [August 23, 2016] – the State of Israel and Jewish communities around the world mourn and honor the 23,447 soldiers and 2,576 civilians who have given the ultimate sacrifice for Israel. On this very difficult day, I remember too many faces whose lives were cut tragically short – beautiful faces that will stay forever young. I remember the faces of family members, at the moment they received the most tragic news, creating a gaping hole where once there was a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a parent, a close friend. I remember how all of them were so fiercely dedicated to the defense and protection of the State of Israel and how they all hoped for a more peaceful time ahead.

As we transition from the difficulty of the Day of Remembrance to the exultation of Israel’s 68<sup>th</sup> birthday, we commemorate those brave sons and daughters who shed their very blood to safeguard the freedom and liberty and very existence of the Jewish homeland. We resolve to speak their names, to honor their memories, and to always ensure that their sacrifice was not made in vain.

Remember fallen soldiers and the victims of terrorism. Tomorrow, we celebrate the creation of a state that rose out of the horrific inferno of the Holocaust and the death camps. A free, independent Jewish state that was created in spite of losing one-third of the world’s Jewish population; a state which not only survives, but thrives! We look with pride at Israel’s unprecedented achievements in security, science, culture, literature, education, technology, and medicine – achievements which have offered significant contributions to societies and countries the world over. Those momentous achievements have only been possible due to the courage, resolve, and bravery of Israel’s defenders. For 68 years, the IDF has safeguarded Israel’s independence; without their single-focused service and their sacrifice, Israel would not be the bastion of freedom, liberty, and progress it is today.

We resolve that the sacrifices of those who protect Israel, as well as the losses of those who have been victims of terrorism, will never be in vain. That is why we will always stand united with the soldiers of the IDF in their mission to ensure that Israel remains free and prosperous forever. On the eve of Israel’s 68<sup>th</sup> birthday, we pray for the security of Israel, for the strength and resolve of its citizens and soldiers, for the return of missing soldiers, and for the speedy recovery of wounded soldiers. Today, more than ever, as the instability in the Middle East becomes acute, resulting in increasing challenges that impact Israel, the demands on the soldiers of the IDF are greater than ever. We must stay strong, always having the backs of these brave young men and women, standing unilaterally united behind them, and providing the moral support to keep them relentless in their mission: to safeguard the State of Israel and to ensure our right to exist and live as a free people in Israel and in the world.

May the memories of the fallen always be blessed, and may Israel experience countless birthdays for decades and centuries to come.”

Sincerely,  
Maj. Gen. (Res.) Meir Klifi-Amir  
National Director and CEO  
Friends of the IDF (FIDF)  
– Maj. Gen. Klifi-Amir, Friends of  
the IDF; August 23, 2016.

## 2016 Annual Conference Reports

Below are reports of the main events and happenings from this year's annual conference sessions around the connection. An equal number of clergy and lay members attend sessions for worship, fellowship, and to conduct business. Sessions include reports of past and ongoing work; adoption of future goals, programs and budgets; ordination of clergy as deacons and elders; and election of delegates to Jurisdictional and General Conferences (every 4 years). The bishop presides over these meetings. — United Methodist News Service (UMNS)

**Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference.** The 2016 Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference was held June 12-15 in Montgomery, Alabama, with the theme, "The Great Commission: Sending Disciples." Bishop Paul L. Leeland, presiding over his eighth annual conference session since becoming the resident bishop, welcomed clergy and lay members to Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery. Alabama-West Florida Disaster Response & Recovery Ministry is the beneficiary of the 2016 missional offering. Churches from within the conference collected money and presented their offerings at opening worship. The Rev. Michael Lawler delivered the offertory prayer. Lawler is the pastor of Elba First United Methodist Church in Elba, Alabama, where severe flooding occurred in late December of 2015. He has been active in the flood recovery efforts in the area. He took a moment of personal privilege to express how the love of Christ came to Elba and touched so many lives. Amelia Fletcher, director of this ministry, explained the process of disaster response and recovery and the connectional system at work. She emphasized partnership and the importance of funding to help those in a critical time of need. A total of \$40,356.82 was collected at conference.

Bishop Gregory Palmer of the West Ohio Conference preached the Opening Worship Service based on John 20:19-23 entitled, "The Recovery of Sentness." He said, "You will never have any ministry that is worth anything unless that ministry takes on flesh and blood. Ministry will mean taking on flesh in every situation and every circumstance." Bishop Leeland paused for a moment before the opening prayer to reflect on the tragedy that happened early June 12 in Orlando, Florida. He reminded the conference that we have a rare opportunity to be agents of God's unconditional love in this world.

Thirty clergy and clergy spouses who passed since the 2015 annual conference session were remembered during the Service of Remembrance and Holy Communion. A capacity crowd remembered those who gave many years of service to the conference.

Eighteen clergy were recognized upon their retirement by Dr. Jim Sanders during [the] order of the day. Together, the following clergy have over 400 years of service in our conference. Back by popular demand was the "passing of the torch." McCullough presented a stole to the Rev. Lisa Pierce, who was ordained as a deacon in full connection this evening, signifying new leadership in the conference. The retirees and spouses were honored at a reception after the conclusion of the ceremony.

Bishop Leeland delivered his Episcopal address to the body of the conference on Monday afternoon. He recapped the theme the conference has adopted the past quadrennium, "SEND" (Seek, Engage, Nurture, Deploy). He emphasized that, "every congregation can be invitational and missional regardless of size." Leeland also mentioned the Four Areas of Focus, which guides the work of the conference. Communities of Transformation was recognized for their work with ministry with the poor and he thanked the conference for their dedication to raising \$1 million for Imagine No Malaria. He also invited everyone to a visioning day on October 3, 2016.

Dr. Bryan and Dr. Steve Furr (AWF conference lay leader) summarized General Conference, which was held in Portland, Oregon, on May 10-20, 2016. Bryan and Furr thanked the delegates for their dedication and reviewed legislation that came before the voting body. Furr reported that a petition that came from the AWF 2015 Annual Conference was passed at general conference relating to withdrawing from the Religious Coalition for

Reproductive Choice. Dawn Wiggins Hare, COSROW General Secretary, brought greetings from Chicago and also reported about general conference and challenged the clergy and lay leaders to offer their pulpits to someone who doesn't look like them. She also celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of full inclusion [of female clergy] into The United Methodist Church. After hearing the laity report, Beverly Maddox, the incoming AWF lay leader, honored Dr. Steve Furr for his eight years of service to the conference as lay leader. The conference body applauded his work and dedication.

The Alabama-West Florida Conference celebrated a significant milestone earlier in 2016. The conference raised one million dollars in cash, therefore reaching our goal of saving 100,000 lives for Imagine No Malaria. We celebrated this in the business session.

As a result of a motion from the floor of the 2014 Annual Conference, a task force was formed to explore the number of districts in the Alabama-West Florida Conference. Dr. Shirley Woodie recognized those on the committee and updated the conference that they have examined many factors such as the number of churches and clergy in each district and how many districts are in other conferences. The group obtained systematic and broad-based input from clergy and laity in the conference via an online survey. Early on they concluded that a reduction in districts would not be beneficial for our conference. They also looked at increasing districts to allow superintendents to be chief missional strategists. The conclusion was that eight districts was adequate. Their focus was improving current structure and taking fuller advantage of programs our conference has available.

Three resolutions were presented to the annual conference voting body at annual conference. A Resolution Calling for Death Penalty Reform in Alabama was passed with an amendment. A Resolution Concerning Healthcare for the Poor in Alabama in 2016 was approved. A motion was made to refer A Resolution Supporting Harm Reduction for LGBTQ Teens to the conference Board of Church & Society. This committee invited members of the body to join them in discussions and report back to the 2017 Annual Conference. The conference established a \$10,952,221 million budget for 2017, a 0.4% increase.

Statistics: Membership is 139,871 down 47; worship attendance is 62,646 down 1%; Native American and Hispanic attendance increased by 4% and 5%, respectively. Some areas showing increases were: confirmation preparation participants, small groups, VIM (Volunteers in Mission) teams and participants and persons served by community ministries and outreach. Children, youth & adults in Christian formation increased again this year. There was a 2.86% increase in missional giving, (at its highest level since 2001).

The 2017 session of the AWF Annual Conference will be held June 4-7, 2017, at Frazer Memorial UMC as this year.

– Mary Catherine Phillips, A-WF director of communications; as reported by the United Methodist News Service (UMNS).

**Alaska Conference.** Officiating bishop: Bishop Grant Hagiya. Met at the East Anchorage United Methodist Church. Five new clergy were commissioned in the Alaska Conference (a missionary conference); discontinuation of a church. Guest speaker was Thomas Kemper, executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. Memorable quote: “The central, focal expression of ministry and mission in the name of Christ is found in the local church congregation.” (Lonnie Brooks, from his final Lay Leader’s Report)

Statistics: Number of people ordained, commissioned or received into associate membership, and average age: Five new clergy; people retired: 0; membership stands at 3435, down 104; Worship attendance stands at 1936, down 87; Church school attendance stands at 517, down 110; 2015 professions or reaffirmations of faith 93, up 19; 2015 adults and young adults in small groups 1038, up 62; 2015 worshippers engaged in mission 1,633 up 326.

– Alaska Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Arkansas Annual Conference.** Location of conference gathering: Bank of the Ozarks Arena, Hot Springs, Arkansas. Dates of conference gathering: June 19-22, 2016. Officiating bishop: Bishop Gary Mueller. Memorable points or quotes by speakers: “We need to go to the feet of Jesus, and ask Jesus to wake us up. We cannot wake ourselves.... We need Jesus Christ to wake us. And you know, anything you want to revive, any revival starts at the feet of Jesus. Anything you want to revive starts with prayer.” (The Rev. Jan Davis, incoming senior pastor of Central United Methodist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas, during opening worship)

Members approved a proposal from the Episcopacy Committee and Trustees to sell the episcopal residence. Money from the sale will be invested with the United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas so that it is available if needed for another residence. Interest from that investment will go toward a housing allowance for the bishop. Two resolutions came before the Annual Conference for discussion and vote. The first, a resolution to “Encourage the Formation of Accountable Discipleship Groups in the Local Church,” passed overwhelmingly. A 2<sup>nd</sup> resolution written in support of the Council of Bishops’ proposal approved by General Conference regarding on human sexuality and titled “A Resolution to Support the Council of Bishops’ Proposal, A Way Forward,” prompted more discussion, including time spent in small groups at the direction of the bishop. Speeches against this resolution dealt less with the proposal approved by General Conference and more with the composition of the resolution itself, including that it called for haste when the Holy Spirit cannot be rushed, and the language used may promote disunity. It failed on a written ballot by a vote of 310 to 356.

Statistics: Number retired: 26 with a combined total of 599 years of service; membership is 131,477, down less than 1%; worship attendance is 48,646, down 3%; church school attendance is 19,910, down 4%; churches reported 1,867 professions/reaffirmations of faith for 2015, down 8%; Adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 numbered 30,791, down 3%; churches reported worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 at 26,911, down 4%.  
– Arkansas Annual Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Baltimore-Washington Conference Annual Conference.** Meeting under the theme “You Have the Power,” 1,701 lay and clergy members from 631 churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference gathered at the 232<sup>nd</sup> annual session. The June 1-4 event at the Wardman Park Marriott Hotel in Washington, D.C., was a time of worship, fellowship and holy conferencing; members bid farewell to Bishop Marcus Matthews, their episcopal leader, who is retiring after 42 years of ministry. Matthews was the bishop who united four annual conferences and gaveled the new Upper New York Conference into existence in 2010. In Baltimore-Washington, as an expression of their gratitude, members collected \$300,001 in a love offering to break ground on a fitness center at Africa University in Zimbabwe in Matthews’ name. The bishop, who championed the creation of the pan-African, Methodist-affiliate university, currently serves as the interim chair of its Board of Directors. Lay and clergy members joined in a Bible Study by Bishop Young Jin Cho, who urged those present to focus at least an hour a day on spiritual renewal and prayer; and received a challenge from Bishop Matthews in his sermon to pray each day, bring one person to Christ, and participate in a partnership with a local school.

In another significant action, the BWC clergy, meeting in executive session, voted not to approve Tara “T.C.” Morrow for commissioning as a Deacon in The United Methodist Church. Morrow is married to a woman. Morrow’s candidacy was recommended by the conference’s Board of Ordained Ministry, which is one of four boards throughout the denomination that recently chose to not make the sexual practices of the candidates a determining factor in their decisions about ordination. The denomination’s book of covenant, the Book of Discipline, says that, “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” Morrow narrowly missed the two-thirds margin needed to be commissioned. The result of this vote echoed throughout the conference sessions. During the Ordination Service on June 4, some of the members of Morrow’s commissioning class left an empty space for her at the kneeler and a rainbow stole hung on the altar railing where she would have knelt.



During the plenary session June 2, members endorsed the Rev. Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, superintendent of the Baltimore-Metropolitan District, to be a candidate for the episcopacy. The election of two bishops [was] held at the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference the week of July 10-15 in Lancaster, Pa. Bishop Matthews issued a simple and decisive challenge: “You have the power,” he said. “Keep on loving people in Jesus’ name, keep on tearing down walls that destroy people, and truly, love the hell out of each other.” [Note: I do not believe that is appropriate language, bishop or not. – AOM] The 2017 session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference is scheduled for May 31 – June 3 at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington D.C.

Statistics: In other actions, members ordained 18 as Elders, and one Deacon; 31 retirees together, represented 559 years of service; membership stands at 164,801, down 3,441; worship attendance stands at 59,211, down 2,502; church school attendance stands at 17,253, down 1,048; professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 were 3,074, down 570 from 2014; adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 were 60,828, down 461 from 2014; and worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 was 63,905, up 4,651 from 2014.

– Melissa Lauber, Baltimore-Washington Conference, director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

**Bulgaria-Romania Annual Conference.** “Unity in Diversity” was a theme that ran like a common thread through this year’s meeting of the Bulgaria-Romania Annual Conference, March 31 to April 3 in Varna. Both worship services, topical lectures and the conference reports were an expression of unity in diversity. Choirs and worship groups from the Varna region provided a Bulgarian evening. The wide range of offerings – from a Turkish-speaking band to an old Armenian hymn to a choir and a worship group of the Bulgarian-speaking congregation—made visible how Christ can create a new unity among people. The Romanian evening was led by Sergiu Bolot, a musician of The United Methodist Church in Sibiu. He combined many different music styles having one aim: to praise God.

The first part of the conference was dedicated to the main theme – and ultimately to the question of United Methodist identity. What is, against the background of a rich diversity, the unifying bond among Methodists – in regard to their understanding of the Gospel, in regard to their spiritual life, in regard to further developing the church? Because of the fact that many people join The United Methodist Church with another church background (or no church background at all), it is crucial to discuss this question over and over. It is a vital contribution towards a clarification and sharpening of the church profile. Because of the fact that several changes in the appointments became necessary for summer 2016 already, many church members had, for the first time, to deal with the reality that the pastor of their church will leave them and an unknown new pastor will come. They had not experienced this since they had become members of the church. However, on a conference level, the related discussions, questions and challenges discharged into an expression of Methodist connection: no local church is left to itself with its problems. There is a mutual solidarity, which is sustainable. A student, who will complete his studies soon, was commissioned as part-time local pastor. A Romanian and a Bulgarian local pastor were accepted as pastors on probation given the fact that they had completed their basic theological studies and gained experience in serving various local churches. This is an encouraging expression of the growth of a new generation of pastors.

The next meeting of the conference will take place from March 30 to April 2, 2017. The venue has not been chosen.

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

**California-Nevada Annual Conference.** June 22-25, 2016, Burlingame, California. Addressing more than 1,000 attendees, San Francisco Episcopal Area Bishop Warner H. Brown Jr., told the 168<sup>th</sup> session of the California-Nevada Annual Conference: "Live in hope, live in the possibilities...Love is the power that gives us life and connects us with the God who loves us despite ourselves." This is the third year the annual conference met at the Hyatt in Burlingame, California, near San Francisco. The conference celebrated the chartering of two

new United Methodist churches in California: Peace United Methodist Church, a Vietnamese congregation in San Jose, and Fresno Korean United Methodist Church in Fresno. [Note: It is troubling that members from these two ethnic groups, probably new Christians, will be led into an aberrant doctrine – as evidenced by later conference action. – AOM]

In other action, some of the legislation the conference passed included:

- An aspirational resolution called "Living into a Season of Grace" calling for the Book of Discipline not to be followed as it relates to items concerning LGBTQIA persons and ceasing judicial processes in matters related to prohibitions against LGBTQIA persons;
- Resolution to join both the national Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and the California chapter.
- Resolutions on reducing gun violence and the control of gun violence;
- Endorsed the Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto, senior pastor of Glide United Methodist Church in San Francisco, as the conference's Episcopal nominee to the Western Jurisdiction Conference. [Note: As we know, she was elected bishop and this has caused turbulence in the UMC because she is evidently a practicing lesbian. – AOM]

Statistics: The conference passed a budget of \$6,294,144 for mission and ministry for 2017, membership is 73,283, down 945, worship attendance is 29,928, down 1,206; church school attendance is 6,433, down 306; professions of faith stand at 1,332, up 96; baptisms stand at 751, up 27; and attendance in Christian Formation groups stands at 29,890, down 360.

– Dr. Larry R. Hygh Jr., director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

**California-Pacific Annual Conference.** Opening worship on June 16, 2016, 1,200 gathered as Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño officiated at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Session of the California-Pacific Conference. With the theme, “Therefore, go,” the conference carried forward the focus of General Conference 2016 to proclaim the gospel, lead persons to God,...and send disciples of Jesus Christ into the world.

Bishop Gabriel Unda of the East Congo Conference, shared with those gathered his experience of the great hospitality from throughout the California-Pacific Conference. In particular, he mentioned a challenge from Los Altos United Methodist Church to drink an ounce of pure lemon juice, known as the #lemonface challenge, in order to raise funds for Imagine No Malaria. As Bishop Unda had lost both his wife and one of his daughters to the deadly disease of malaria, he was deeply moved by the efforts of the California-Pacific Conference in the Imagine No Malaria Initiative. In his sermon, Bishop Unda preached to those gathered that God knows each disciple by name and that this very fact ought to encourage all disciples of Jesus Christ. He also shared his experience of being captured by a commander who recognized that Bishop Unda used to be his school teacher and released him. Bishop Unda received an ovation after his sermon and was sent with the love of the California-Pacific Conference back to the East Congo Conference. Bishop Carcaño shared her hope that the California-Pacific Conference would establish a partnership with the East Congo Conference which is the youngest Conference in The United Methodist Church. [Note: This latter wish is troubling in that it is anticipated that the “Cal-Pac” Conference might try to influence the East Congo Conference in pro “LGBT” areas. – AOM]

In other action, major decisions made at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session included the passing of Resolution 16-6, which directs the Conference LGBTQ Task Force to work with leaders in the LGBTQ communities in the California-Pacific region in nurturing environments of care and safety for LGBTQ persons in response to the shooting in Orlando, Florida. The conference passed resolution 16-7, albeit amended for clarity, which calls on local, state, and federal lawmakers to require and enforce gun safety measures including background checks, a ban on assault rifles, and a ban on semi-auto to automatic conversion kits, among other measures. Also passed was Resolution 16-11, which, “urges the Bishop and Cabinet to state publicly they will not deny appointments based on sexual

orientation or gender identity; urges the Board of Ordained Ministry to declare its intention not to consider sexual orientation and gender identity in making decisions in regard to commissioning and ordination; urges trial boards not to convict for chargeable offenses pertaining to being ‘a self-avowed, practicing homosexual,’ as well as for those clergy who officiate at weddings for couples regardless of the gender of the partners, and that these matters would be addressed through ‘Just Resolution.’”

**Statistics:** The 32<sup>nd</sup> Session approved a Budget of \$12.9 million, a 1% increase from the 2016 Budget. 21 clergy persons retired; they have over 648.5 years of active service as United Methodist clergy. No other statistics were available.

– James J. Kang, director of communications, California-Pacific Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Czech Republic-Slovakia Conference.** From June 3-5, 2016, the members of the Czech Republic-Slovakia Annual Conference gathered in Prague. On the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the death of Jerome (Hieronymus) of Prague, a Czech church reformer and co-founder of the Hussite movement, the theme was “The truth of the Lord wins.” About 23 years ago, Czechoslovakia peacefully dissolved, with its constituent states becoming the two independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The United Methodist leaders then decided to remain together as one annual conference but to establish two districts. Because a number of issues only relating to one country are dealt with at the respective district conferences, the annual conference is an opportunity to focus on other priorities. These include fellowship, mutual encouragement/celebration for new churches/preaching places, a positive development of specific ministries, the fruitful ecumenical cooperation, or the admission of a probationary pastor and the ordination of an elder.

The United Methodist Church in the Czech Republic slightly grew last year – despite the fact that there were also a few church splits or departures of members due to conflicts. Such crises are sometimes caused after new people join The United Methodist Church. After a fading of the initial euphoria they realize with a certain disillusionment that The United Methodist Church is a “very normal” church with regulations and rules, as well. Their way does not lead into a stable, sustainable and responsible relationship, but instead they leave the church after a while.

In Slovakia, the number of church members is stable – but one can also observe that, compared to the number of “professing members,” a quite considerable group of people remains in the status of “friends.” It will be an important task of the church to think about how to encourage and promote the step towards becoming a “professing member” and to make the understanding of this commitment a subject of discussion. The pastor of the English-speaking United Methodist church in Prague talks about similar experiences: While an encouraging and hopeful number of students participate in the worship services, they have difficulties in doing a step towards a higher commitment.

During the time of communism, United Methodist pastors were paid by the state. They received a very small salary, which was a means of monitoring, as well. Even today, the state – both in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia – pays part of the salaries. In the Czech Republic, however, the first year has started in which this state support for pastors’ salaries is decreasing according to a mutual agreement. In view of this continuously decreasing and finally ceasing state support, The United Methodist Church is focusing on increasing the sense of responsibility among the church members – not without success, as it seems right now.

In his annual report, Superintendent Pavel Procházka from Slovakia recommended that church employees study theology at a university in order to be able to meet the high expectations of the current knowledge-based society. And in the most general sense, both districts seem to rely and focus on a sound education, that they cultivate a well-conceived liturgy and very good sermons, and that they aim to encourage a spirituality relating to the whole human being.

– Pastor Stephan Johanus, Zurich, and Urs Schweizer, assistant of the bishop, Zurich; as reported by the UMNS.

## **Dakotas Annual Conference.**

Over 600 members and visitors of the Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church gathered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to experience “Living Generously, Unleashing God’s Gifts.” Bishop Bruce R. Ough presided. The Rev. Jim Harnish, author and theologian, led two teaching sessions at this year’s conference. Harnish identified generous living as the issue that will most clearly define who we are as followers of Christ. “Salvation is never just about money,” Harnish said. “But it is never about anything less than money.” The mission of the church, he reminds us, is not to raise money or pay apportionments. It is to make disciples.

The site for annual conference for the next four years was approved as follows: 2017 Bismarck, 2018 Sioux Falls, 2019 Bismarck, 2020 Sioux Falls. In 2017, the conference will spend close to \$727,000 on new churches, revitalization, and leadership development.

**Statistics:** The 2017 budget amount of \$4,361,252 was approved, a slight decrease of -0.05% compared to the 2016 budget total of \$4,365,000. Membership is 36,011, down 179; worship attendance is 22,270, up 417 or 1.9%; church school attendance is 5,464, down 349; professions/reaffirmations of faith for 2015 were 638, down from 788 in 2014; adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 was 8,065, up from 8,026 in 2014; worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 was 4,670, up from 4,417 in 2014.

– Doreen Gosmire, director of communications, Dakotas Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Desert Southwest Annual Conference.** The Desert Southwest Annual Conference took place at the Glendale Renaissance Hotel, 9495 W Coyotes Blvd, Glendale, AZ 85305 on June 16-19, 2016. The officiating bishop was Bishop Robert T. Hoshibata. The Desert Southwest Annual Conference celebrated the achievement of the conference-wide \$2 million goal in support of Imagine No Malaria to save 200,000 lives. The introduction of Abundant Health, the next step in global health, was also a part of this celebration. In other action, resolution adopted: “Resolution for Full Inclusivity”.

**Statistics:** Number of clergy retired: 9. Membership stands at 32,129 down 4.5 percent. Worship attendance stands at 22,241 down 5.4 percent. Church school attendance stands at 3,967 down 5.6 percent. Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 were 966 down from 2014 by 22.3 percent. Adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 were 11,559 down from 2014 by 5.8 percent. Worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 were 11,456 up from 2014 by 1.9 percent.

– Mary Catherine Phillips, Alabama-West Florida director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

**East Ohio Annual Conference.** Bishop Peter Weaver preached “Jesus is calling us out” on Tuesday and Thursday during the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the East Ohio Conference, which convened inside Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside Chautauqua June 13-16, 2016, with 736 clergy and 793 lay delegates participating. The churches closed this year are: Brownsville UMC (Southern Hills District), Delphi UMC (Firelands District), Harmony UMC (Mid-Ohio District), Mingo First UMC (Ohio Valley District), Ocoola UMC (Mid-Ohio District), and Oehlhoff UMC (North Coast District). In other action, Resolution 2016-01: Preparing Clergy to Address Domestic Violence encourages all East Ohio churches to designate a day during the month of October to present an activity to bring awareness about domestic violence. Supported as amended. Resolution 2016-02: Promoting Appointment and Salary Equity for Clergymen and Clergymen This resolution asks that the East Ohio Annual Conference urge that every effort be made to eliminate sex-role stereotypes in activity and portrayal in all aspects of voluntary and compensatory participation including service as clergy. Resolution supported.

**Statistics:** 147,895 – East Ohio Conference membership, down 3,033 from last year; 55,178 – Average weekly worship attendance, down 2,840 from last year; 16,010 – Church school attendance, down 1,145 from last year; 1,988 – Professions of faith, down 283 from last year; and 1,478 – Baptisms, down 191 from last year.

The Conference will return to Lakeside Chautauqua on Monday, June 12, 2017, for the start of the 48<sup>th</sup> annual session.

– Rick Wolcott, director of communications for the East Ohio Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.** Officiating bishop: Peggy Johnson. Resolutions adopted by the conference: A resolution on Radical Welcome that encourages churches to reach out to LGBTQ young people especially--many of whom suffer high rates of family rejection, homelessness and suicide--and to “practice radical welcome in specific and tangible ways.”; A resolution calling for aggressive support of the Pennsylvania Fairness Act, 2 popular but still languishing legislative bills (House Bill 1510 and Senate Bill 974) that would amend the state’s Human Relations Act “to ensure freedom from discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodation based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.”; A resolutions related to undocumented immigrants, urging conference support for the state assembly’s House Bill 1459 that would grant such immigrants legal driver’s licenses.; A resolution supporting the Public Citizens for Children and Youth’s Dream Care Campaign to provide health insurance for all children, including more than 24,000 undocumented, uninsured children.; Resolutions to discontinue 4 churches.

**Statistics:** Membership stands at 102,828 in 2015, down from 105,030 the previous year (2014); Worship attendance stands at 36,661 in 2015, down from 39,905 in 2014; Church school attendance stands at 10,525 in 2015, down from 12,145 in 2014; Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 were 1,588, down from 1,935 in 2014.

– John W. Coleman Jr., director of communications, Eastern Pennsylvania Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Estonia Conference.** The United Methodist Church in Estonia gathered for the 2016 Annual Conference in Tallinn

Methodist Church (Baltic Mission Center) on June 17-19, 2016 under the theme of "Do I see God’s image in my neighbor?" (1 John 4:20). Clergy, lay and guests gathered for discussions, reports, worship and Bible study. One new local pastor and two new probationary members were accepted among the clergy. We are grateful to God for new people who got baptized and joined the congregations. During last year we had many baptisms, the number of new professions of faith was 112. During the Annual Conference we took part in the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary graduation service, where 7 students graduated from the three-year theology program and 17 received the certificate for completing the first year study. We are grateful to God for the various ministries, like Children Centers Lighthouse (day center for the children in Tallinn); the new Sunbeam care center in Jõhvi for disabled children; a new church start in Helsinki Finland for Russian speaking people; two rehabilitation centers for people with drug addictions and adaptation centers to re-socialize persons who have recovered from drug addiction. In August this year six young people will conclude the new program "A Year For God" which is an extensive teaching in evangelism and practical church ministry for Russian-speaking youth. In November, we plan to start a Bible school for Estonian-speaking people as a pilot project. During the Annual Conference session, two new United Methodist Board of Global Ministries missionaries from the U.S. and one volunteer missionary from Zimbabwe were introduced to the conference. They all are serving in Estonia.

The Estonia Annual Conference decided to accept a resolution concerning human sexuality which states the following: As the United Methodist Church in Estonia, we believe God’s Word clearly teaches that expressions of human sexuality belong only within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. We believe that living by the principles God has given in his Word and accepting God’s created order gives the best opportunity for harmony in the family and society. According to the social principles of the United Methodist Church ¶ 161F (BOD 2012) we do not condone the practice of homosexuality. Nor do we accept same-sex marriages or blessings of same sex unions. We do not accept other related sexual practices which are contrary to God’s

created order. We call for our Church to retain its current stance on these issues. We affirm that God offers freedom from sin and healing to all people through grace and repentance and as a Church we are gladly open for ministry to all people in accordance with the Holy Scriptures.

The United Methodist Church in Estonia is also signatory of the common statement of the Estonian Council of Churches re-affirming the traditional Christian view of human sexuality. (Annual Conference of the UMC in Estonia 19 June 2016)

In June 2017 The United Methodist Church in Estonia will celebrate its 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Statistics: The membership compared to the previous year was plus 77, increase of approximately 5%.

– Bishop Christian Alsted, Nordic & Baltic Area, Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference and Taavi Hollman, district superintendent, United Methodist Church in Estonia.; as reported by the UMNS.

**Finland Conference.** The Annual conference of the provisional conference of Finland was held in Suomen Raamattuopisto college in Kauniainen, June 30.–July 3. Theme of the conference was Life. It comes from Jesus' statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Naturally this was also third of our three year conference themes. This year theme focused on the roots. What is really important and who we are. We've handled these themes from the Wesleyan view, how these themes could deepen our Methodist identity.

Discussions and decisions. Conference was presided by Nordic and Baltic area Bishop Christian Alsted. This year on our plenary session we had two specific topics that were much discussed. First one was our new vision for our conference. Main thought in the vision was that we don't have to accept minority identity even we are in minority. Finnish annual conference is rather small; there's about 900 members, baptized children included, while there's over 4 million members in Finnish Lutheran church. In comparison, other Finnish free churches are also small. Only Pentecostal movement and Finnish free church have over 10,000 members. So, even we are small and have been from the start, we don't have to settle for it. We can reach for bigger and better. In our new vision we dream that in the next 10 years we will have ten new churches and have multiplied our membership. And we want to see that growth as God's will, he doesn't want us to be small and insignificant. Proposal for vision was much discussed. In the end we didn't yet accept it but it will be completed with the output from discussions.

Other big topic was a proposal for organizational reformation. Currently we have many councils and committees which have mostly same members. And some of these councils and committees haven't done anything or aren't working properly. Organizational reformation aims to simplify our structure and make work of different areas easier. We also see this as a way to determine different areas and their value and necessity for our church. We discussed much about proposal and it was decided that church council will form a pilot group to study what is the best way to bring plan into use.

There also was concern of finances since many congregations has had difficulties for paying all salaries.

United celebration. We also had much spiritual program at the conference. We started with communion at Thursday evening. Our retired elder, the Rev. Tapani Rajamaa gave a sermon and presided over communion. Friday after we had finished our plenary session, we properly started our weekend celebration. At the evening meeting we had visitor from Russian speaking congregation. Russian speaking congregation is pretty young and it was planted by Estonian Methodists. The Saturday program started by running. Runner group was guiding elder the Rev. Jori Brander who has run many marathons and started recently run ultramarathons.

At the morning meeting were two important events. Bishop Alsted licensed one new local pastor and asked Wesley's historical questions from one ordinate.

After lunch there was free time. There was also some workshops: one for prayer and silence; an introduction of soon to be published guidebook of diacony work; and a panel discussion about God's calling. There was also activities and program for children during free time as well as other meetings. After afternoon coffee we had a concert. Finnish kantele artist Ida Elina performed. Elina plays and sings pop and gospel songs and writes them herself also. This was first time in a long time we had something this kind. Usually we may have some visitors speaking but singers not so often. At the evening meeting we had visitors from our Helsinki congregations English speaking group.

Recent years we've received some immigrants to our congregations. We have worship services for English and Russian speaking people. Also congregation in Tampere has lots of other activities for immigrants. They have language courses, international cafe and some other things.

At Sunday we had our worship in Methodist church of Kauniainen which is part of Swedish speaking annual conference. In Finland we have two conferences even both are small. Division is based on language and there's some cooperation between conferences, we even have one common district superintendent.

In worship Bishop Alsted ordained our latest elder and pastor of our youngest congregation. People attending worship were from both Finnish and Swedish speaking conference so we really had celebration in unity.

Once again our conference was blessed. We're seeing renewal in our congregations, there's new people coming to annual conferences, and we're optimistic for future.

– The Rev. Veli Loponen, Turku United Methodist Church. Editor in Rauhan Sanomia; Nya Budbäraren, Finnish and Finnish Swedish speaking United Methodists' joint magazine.; as reported by the UMNS.

**Florida Annual Conference.** "Leading Like Jesus" was the theme of the 2016 Florida Annual Conference. About 1,700 participants gathered at the Buena Vista Palace Hotel in Orlando June 16-18.

**Support for the June 12 Mass Shootings in Orlando.** The gathering commenced five days after the June 12 mass shooting in Orlando that left 49 dead. On Thursday, Bishop Ken Carter called for a moment of silence for those killed in the June 12 mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando. He read a statement from the bishop and conference cabinet about the tragedy, classified as a hate crime, calling it a "blatant act of mass murder that happened literally in our neighborhood. We are grateful for our connection and the witness of our churches in the greater Orlando area, around the conference, and in the larger connection, in providing a loving response through prayer, counseling, and a variety of practical means." **Prayer Vigil.** Thursday's session concluded with a 9:30 evening prayer vigil for the Orlando shooting victims, held outside the Buena Vista Palace Hotel convention center.

**Conference speakers.** Annual Conference speakers included the Rev. Bill Hybels, the founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, expert on training Christian leaders to transform individuals and their communities through the local church. Texas Conference Bishop Janice Riggle Huie called for United Methodists to recognize that instead of leading change, we are now leading in the midst of change. "If we can imagine ourselves once again being clear about our purpose, engaging in opposable thinking, networking, innovating...that's the role of leaders in a changing world." Huie pointed out that for one thing to flourish, many things must flourish—leading to complex relationships that are diverse, vary in size, sustainable, able to reproduce. "Re-imagine our church as an ecosystem rather than as a corporation," she said. [Note: These are "interesting" ideas. Why not envision it as the church? – AOM]

In other action, the conference passed a resolution entitled "Help End Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,

Questioning Individuals” about the shooting at the “gay” night club [by an admitted “jihadist”] and the bishop and cabinet issued a

statement about the shooting.

Statistics: Ordained: 10 as elders, 3 as deacons; commissioned: 8 as provisional elders, 4 as provisional deacons; licensed as local pastors: 32; # of people retired: 42; church membership was 245,000 in 2015, down 8,000 or 3.2% from 2014; average worship attendance was down 2,000 or 1.5% at 130,000; professions of faith for 2015 – 4,346, down from 5,461.

– Gretchen Hastings, Florida director of communications; as reported by the UMNS.

**Great Plains Conference.** Officiating bishop: Scott J. Jones. Resolutions adopted by the conference:

We passed resolution: seeking to move the complaint process involving the Rev. Cynthia Meyer from the Committee on Investigation back to the bishop’s office, a resolution urging all pastors to educate congregations about the UMC’s long-standing opposition to the death penalty, established a Great Plains Conference disabilities awareness Sunday & form the Committee on Disabilities Concerns, the Great Plains Poverty Initiative, celebrating the laity,....We heard from George Howard from GBGM about models for church growth, particularly in Africa. He challenged attendees to look at what was happening in Africa and to find ways to put those thoughts to use in the United States. We heard from delegations from both Zimbabwe and Nigeria. Both shared how they had seen growth in the church in their respective countries. [Note: Africans accept the Bible as God’s Word and bring people to know Jesus Christ. – AOM]

Statistics: People ordained: 20, commissioned: 5; retired: 37, membership is 215,223 down 3,913, worship attendance (average) is 91,205, down 2,278; church school attendance is 25,686, down 27,285. Professions/reaffirmations of faith for 2015 4,045, down from 2014 total of 4,076. – Todd Seifert, director of communications, Great Plains Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Greater New Jersey Annual Conference.** May 22-24 in Wildwood, New Jersey. Officiating bishop: John R. Schol. In the episcopal address, Bishop John R. Schol led the conference in imagining the church with a God-sized vision. He outlined progress on GNJ’s Strategic Plan and addressed the church’s struggle with disagreements. Memorable quote from Bishop Schol: “Sometimes the church is too familiar with what it is rather than what God is calling it to be.” In other action, the conference passed “initiatives reinforced our mission to call/equip leaders to make disciples and grow vital congregations to transform the world. They also align with our strategic plan 2018 goals to: Increase percentage of churches growing in worship attendance to 51%; Start 90 new faith communities.... et. al.

Statistics: number of people ordained, commissioned or received into associate membership, and average age: 23; number of people retired: 32; membership is 89,224, down 1,494; worship attendance is 43,651, down 1,538; church school attendance is 11,447, down 644; professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015, 2,427, down 111 from in 2014.

– Josh Kinney, editorial manager, Greater New Jersey Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Holston Annual Conference.** The Holston Annual Conference gathered June 5-8 in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, with a membership of 1,962 clergy and laypeople representing 883 churches and 12 districts in east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, and north Georgia. The theme was “Bless,” based on 2 Corinthians 9:8. Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor presided. Celebrating the past year of missions with children in poverty, the annual conference took an offering of \$100,849. The funds will be distributed in the coming year through grants to local churches serving children in their own communities, especially through school partnerships. To encourage new school partnerships, members brought children’s books (seven titles recommended by school librarians) to Lake



Junaluska. The books were assembled into 88 bags and offered to members during a unique altar call, with the goal of using the books to begin conversations with nearby school leaders.

In other action, the HAC received a “State of the Church Report” from Bishop Taylor, who said, “The Holston Conference will honor and keep the Book of Discipline for those of us who are ordained”; received a report from the delegation to General Conference 2016, comprised of 12 members and four alternates. “Our focus is not schism and what divides us, but making disciples for the transformation of the world,” said the Rev. David Graves, delegation leader; approved a \$9.4 million budget for 2017, representing a 14 percent reduction over the last two years; learned the episcopal residence was recently sold for \$395,000. Excess from the sale will be invested and the interest will be used to provide a housing allowance for the resident bishop, according to the Board of Trustees.; approved the discontinuance of Mount Olive United Methodist Church in Rural Retreat, Virginia, and Pleasant Hill United Methodist Church in Grayson County, Virginia; set the Holston Annual Conference 2017 for June 11-14 in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

Of especial interest is the action in which the conference: Studied Psalm 40 in two morning Bible sessions with Bishop Richard Looney, who said United Methodists are always “rethinking church” to avoid their mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. “For some reason, we can’t seem to do our task,” he said. “We’re like a football coach who keeps scheduling bigger and bigger games with fewer and fewer recruits.”

Statistics: # of people ordained is 7, commissioned is 8, and received into associate membership is 1; # of licensed local pastors is 24; # of people retired is 28; membership is 163,351, down 725; worship attendance is 64,251, down 1,730; church school attendance is 28,494, down 1,546; professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015 is 2,065, down 13; adults and young adults in small groups for 2015 is 41,955, up 39; worshippers engaged in mission for 2015 is 43,435, up 4,383.

– Annette Spence; as reported by the UMNS.

**Hungary Provisional Annual Conference.** The Hungary Provisional Annual Conference met April 14-17, 2016, at Budapest-Obuda United Methodist Church. The presiding bishop was Bishop Patrick Streiff. Having served as Superintendent of the United Methodist Church in Hungary for 20 years, the Rev. István Csernák handed over his duties to Rev. László A. Khaled. The Superintendent will retire in October 2016. Guests from the Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church, the Roman-Catholic Church, the Baptist Church and the Salvation Army as well as government officials participated in the celebrations related to this changeover. It was a proof of the important part the small United Methodist Church in Hungary is playing in regard to interchurch relationships and social relevance.

- Guests from Germany, Switzerland, and the United States made visible that the UMC in Hungary is not an isolated organization but a vital part of a worldwide connection.
- The UMC in Hungary is very mission-oriented – this became particularly visible in the report of the so-called Mission Council, which coordinates a variety of mission activities: ministries with women, youth and children, ministries with Roma, international church partnerships and a colorful media ministry (publication of magazines and books, radio and TV programs).
- The Forrai Secondary Grammar and Vocational School specializing in Art, which was taken over by the UMC in Hungary a few years ago, also offers some unique mission opportunities. Both the school and the United Methodist ministries (pastoral care, religious education, camps, etc.) develop very well – and the Forrai School is an area where sharing faith with people with very diverse backgrounds can be practiced.
- Given the strong commitment to mission, it is no surprise that the focus theme of the 2017 Annual Conference meeting will be on “Generation Z.”

Statistics: One new local pastor was commissioned, another will start his internship later this year. Membership is 466 (up 9 from the previous year); worship attendance is 1,369 (down 77 from the previous year).

– Urs Schweizer, Assistant to the Bishop, The United Methodist Church, Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe; as reported by the UMNS.

**Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference.** Officiating bishop: Bishop Jonathan D. Keaton. The Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference gathered around the theme, The Fields are Ripe for the Harvest June 8-11. This year's conference celebrated the 46 years of ministry of Bishop Jonathan D. Keaton, who will be retiring Aug. 31 after 20 years as bishop in the North Central Jurisdiction. In other action, the conference overwhelmingly approved a \$2.5 million campaign to endow the spiritual life programs of the conference's five child-serving ministries – The Baby Fold, Chaddock, Cunningham Children's Home, Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House and the United Methodist Children's Home. The five agencies have had to rely upon benevolent giving as the Illinois General Assembly has failed to pass a budget since July 2014, causing many agencies to lay off personnel as they await payment from the state. The 2017 annual conference session will be held June 7-10, 2017, at the Peoria Civic Center in Peoria, Ill.

Statistics: # of people ordained, commissioned or received into probationary membership, and average age: 3 ordained elders, 1 transitioning deacon to full elder, 1 associate member, 8 provisional elders, 1 provisional deacon. # of people retired: 33, with a combined 959.75 years of service. Membership is 127,052 in 2015, down 2,535. Worship attendance: 57,620, down 1,580. Church school attendance: 18,121, down 431. Professions or reaffirmations of faith: 1,948, up 33.

– Paul Black, director of Communication Ministries, Illinois Great Rivers Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Indiana Annual Conference.** “Be. Hope.” was the theme of the 2016 Indiana Annual Conference held Thursday through Saturday, June 9-11, at the Indiana Convention Center in downtown Indianapolis.

Especially memorable: “Hope. It's quite a theme isn't it,” remarked Bishop Coyner. He continued, “if there is anything our world needs, it's hope.” He also said that true hope is more than wishful thinking. As the service continued, Coyner invited retired clergy and Theologian in Residence at St. Luke's UMC, Dr. Adolf Hansen, to share his story of how tragedy can be turned to hope. Hansen began with a simple story, “It began on Georgia Street...” Georgia Street is a familiar street for Annual Conference-goers as it runs perpendicular to the Indiana Convention Center. Twenty years ago, Hansen's 31-year old daughter, Bonnie, was [struck] while crossing that street. Bonnie died the next day on May 11, Adolf's birthday and the eve of Mother's Day. The days that followed were full of chaos, disbelief, and painful moments no parent desires to experience. “It seemed so unfair, unwarranted, unreasonable,” said Hansen. Not long after Bonnie's death, Hansen and his wife decided to return to the place where the accident occurred. They embraced each other, cried, and barely uttered a word as they watched the wheels of busses go by. As they imagined what it was like for their daughter that day they relied on hope in a moment of extreme grief. On the anniversary of Bonnie's death, Hansen and his wife will often return to that same spot on Georgia Street. On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death as they returned to Georgia Street they were able to reflect on Bonnie's life, all God had done in the time since her death and give thanks to a God, who doesn't disappoint.

Hansen ended by sharing three truths that he and his wife clung to that provided them with hope during those years. “God is good always, God works for good always, and we can trust God always.”

In other actions: Members of the 2016 Indiana Annual Conference passed a budget of \$13,864,261 which includes a 3 percent increase in income from the 2015 actual expenses and a slight reduction from 2016 program dollars to fund the General Church apportionment at 100 percent. The 2017 Annual Conference is scheduled for June 8 - 10.

Statistics: Ordained 1 deacon and 9e elders, 2 provisional deacons and 19 provisional elders, & recognized 2 members from different orders; retired 46 elders, deacons and local pastors from active ministry; membership is 190,911 down 1%; average worship attendance is 99,050, down 3%; Christian formation groups, 89,523 down 11%; professions of faith, 3,060 down 9%; baptisms, 15,126 down 7%.

– As reported by the UMNS.

**Iowa Annual Conference.** On June 3<sup>rd</sup> the 2016 session of the Iowa Annual Conference called its communities of faith to “Therefore Go and Make Disciples.” Meeting at the Iowa Events Center in Des Moines, the 1472 members of the Annual Conference Session – clergy and lay – gathered with Bishop Julius Trimble presiding.

Of interest during the proceedings: Rising for a moment of personal privilege, the Rev. Anna Blaedel told the conference, “The Spirit is calling, moving, inviting. Be the church. Now. Be the body of Christ.” Surrounded by colleagues and friends she offered a glimpse into her life story and journey of faith – “I have been a United Methodist almost my entire life. I was baptized, confirmed, called, commissioned, and ordained into this church.” After saying “in my language, I am out, queer, partnered clergy,” Blaedel acknowledged, “by simply speaking this truth to you, aloud, here, I could be brought up on charges, face a formal complaint. I could lose my job, lose my clergy credentials, lose my space of spiritual belonging, of vocational calling, my faith community, my faith home.” Citing the fact that The United Methodist Church is not of one mind about homosexuality and that for LGBTQ persons this is a painful reality she observed, “This institution is instilling in me and other LGBTQ people some horrible, harmful untruths. That we are unloved and unlovable. That we are unworthy. That we are incompatible, disordered, divisive. That at our core, at the core of our createdness, there is something shameful, sick, sinful.” Addressing language within the Book of Discipline, she said, “That, friends, is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Challenging the controversial paragraph Blaedel added, “Allegiance and adherence to unjust laws in incompatible with Christian teaching.”

[Note: This exemplifies how sin can deceive us and turn truth on its head. She said nothing about what the Bible teaches on this practice, nor the very destructive results of living this type of life. God’s truth determines what is right. – AOM]

In other action, virtually all of the legislation from the entire pre-Conference manual was adopted on the consent calendar, without discussion.... Margaret Biggs, interim treasurer for the conference, presented the 2017 working budget, which called for a four percent reduction from 2016. The 2017 budget was approved, with expenses of \$14,171, 974, a reduction of \$638,643 compared to 2016.

Statistics: Congregations: 771; membership: 161,343, 2% decrease; average attendance at weekly worship services: 49,496, 4% decrease; baptisms (ages 0-12): 1,485; baptisms (13 and older): 389; average weekly Sunday School attendance: 14,289 (6% decrease; number of persons engaged in mission: 25,197, 14% decrease.

– Arthur McClanahan, director of communications for the Iowa Annual Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Kentucky Annual Conference.** Sloan Convention Center, Bowling Green, Kentucky. June 13 -15, 2016.

Officiating bishop: Bishop Lindsey Davis. Approved a \$7.3 million budget with an 11% apportionment, down 13%.

One merger was approved; 6 churches were discontinued. Recognized 10 retiring clergy who served a total of 352 years.

Collected an offering of \$3,035 for the Isaiah Project, which is an initiative to identify, encourage and support young people who may be experiencing a call to ordained ministry. Raised approximately \$3,400 for the Red Bird Missionary Conference.

Statistics: # of people ordained, commissioned or received into associate membership, and average age: 2 ordained as deacons; 5 ordained as elders; and 7 were commissioned on the elder track. # of people retired: 10 clergy who served a total of 352 years. Membership is 151,316, down 170. Worship is 52,308, down 1,096. Church school attendance is 21,949, down 1,520. Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2015, 1954, up from 2014 by 26 persons.  
– As reported by the UMNS.

**Louisiana Annual Conference.** “AC2016: Rooted and Grounded” was held June 8-11 with more than 1,000 United Methodists from throughout Louisiana gathered in the Gold Dome at Centenary College in Shreveport. Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey told conference members, “Our lives are entangled. Life causes us to become entangled. I don't know of anyone I would rather be entangled with but you.” “It is because of our entanglement that we are stronger. It takes a different kind of leader to lead the church today. It takes an entrepreneurial leader that will not settle. Amazing things happen when we see things not as problems to be solved, but as opportunities to be seized,” added Bishop Harvey. The Scripture for “AC2016: Rooted and Grounded” was Ephesians 3:14-21.

In 1956, the General Conference granted full clergy rights for women. The Louisiana Annual Conference celebrated the 60-year anniversary of that event, as well as the 20 years of full clergy membership for deacons during AC2016.

Statistics: Current membership is 118,194, down 531; worship attendance is 39,071, down 693; church school attendance is 14,290, down 422.  
– Betty Backstrom, director of communications, Louisiana Conference; as reported by the UMNS.

**Memphis Annual Conference.** “Offering Christ: One Neighborhood at a Time” was the theme for the 2016 Memphis Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church that took place June 19-22 in Jackson, Tennessee, with Bishop William T. (Bill) McAlilly presiding. He is the bishop for the Nashville Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church that includes the Memphis (West Tennessee and Western Kentucky) and Tennessee (Middle Tennessee) Conferences. McAlilly stated he is looking for “people who will see what is possible, not impossible,” and added, “In the next four years, we are going to build on the work God is doing.” His message included several examples of churches doing work that speaks of a “thriving church,” not the “dying church” that receives so much attention. The annual conference approved a budget of \$8,134,256 for 2017, a \$521,136 decrease. 13 clergy retired.

Delegates will meet June 4-6, 2017, at Collierville UMC in Collierville, Tennessee, for the 2017 Memphis Annual Conference.

Paused to remember the death of former Bishop William Morris.

Statistics: No statistics were available through the UMC website but are at: [www.memphis-umc.net/2016AC](http://www.memphis-umc.net/2016AC)

– Lane Gardner Camp, Memphis Conference Director of Communications; as reported by the UMNS.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.*

– The newly-elected Pope John Paul II to leaders of the Warsaw Pact forces during the 1978-1980s time frame.