

# Monthly Update

November 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This Update is being sent out early for two reasons. One is for us to reinforce the recommendation to you to study the candidates, inform others of what you know about them, and then vote for those who reflect sound Christian values that are supportive of our Constitutional Republic. Secondly, it is to clarify the fact that you all have already seen the information contained in the next issue of *The Christian Methodist Newsletter* that you will receive shortly; as I had explained to the people in one church, the Monthly Update goes to the friends and supporters of Concerned Methodists, whereas *The Christian Methodist Newsletter* goes out to over 17,000 people, churches, and ministries across the nation and to other people around the world. They have not yet seen this data.

We shall touch on some recent happenings in The United Methodist Church and the two holidays in this month. I have said before that there is a reason that November has both Veterans' Day and Thanksgiving Day; we recognize those who have served our country and count them among our blessings as we are eating turkey and the other foods we enjoy on "Turkey Day" as some of us are wont to call it. We would urge you to "Count Your Blessings" – in spite of all that is going on, and offer up to you "An Election Day Prayer for America" by Mike Milton that came out about ten years ago – but is applicable now.

Just some of the headlines of information we received here at the office have to do with various aspects of "racism" and political activism. These are:

- Conference backs Replacing Cross and Flame (because of perceived "racist symbolism")
- Bishop to clergy: Preach about racism pandemic
- "Silence is violence" (in reference to the "racism issue")
- Grappling with how racism coexists with faith
- Intersectionality in Anti-Racism
- Colonialism and the Doctrine of Discovery
- Systemic Racism in The United Methodist Church
- Racism and Latinos: The wall of separation and fear
- "Service of Lament" challenges church on racism
- Bishops pledge more effective anti-racism campaign
- Northaven United Methodist Church is shining a light on how Black lives matter.
- The International Students Association at Africa University has condemned racism in the U.S.

When we examine some of these areas in detail, we find that they are very problematic and point to a deeper problem in our denomination – and our society. As I had told a group of concerned United Methodists at a meeting in the North Little Rock Conference several years ago, "I believe that 'we are called for such a time as this.'"

I do thank you for your support – so essential to our ministry as we strive to "contend for the faith" in obedience to His call. Please pray!

In His service,

Allen O. Morris  
Executive Director

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## November 2020 Update

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

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, seek my face,  
and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin,  
and will heal their land. ~ 2 Chronicles 7:14

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#### **An Election Day Prayer for America**

By Mike Milton

As we approach the November ... national elections in the United States of America, I have written a prayer for our nation. To do so is to keep in step with our founding forefathers and mothers who treated elections as great moments of spiritual renewal and possibilities. Churches were often filled to hear “election day sermons” from clergy whose job it was to point the people to their God-given responsibilities. They encouraged their congregations to cast the ballot for those who would most nearly preserve the blessings of a God-given freedom that contributed to national morality, economic health, and protection against enemies foreign and domestic.

I have no other motivation in this prayer but that God would bestow His very blessings on the people of this nation in this our great hour of need. I make this prayer not as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, nor as merely the servant of a great theological seminary, nor as an officer and chaplain in the United States Army Reserves, all of which I am. No, I make this prayer as one believer filled with a foreboding sense that unless God comes down and moves among us in these days, we will not escape judgment and we will not know the divine covering that we need to endure the war against us: both the real warfare that is taking our sons and daughters from without, as well as the spiritual warfare that is destroying us from within. Yet for the demonstration of God’s mercy and grace in days past, I make this prayer with absolute confidence that God hears and answers. I pray with great optimism for the future, for it is surely a future in the hands of a sovereign and just God.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who guards, protects and governs all of Creation with perfect oversight, unfathomable grace and unapproachable justice and righteousness; Thou, whose ultimate gift of protection for our lives, grace abounding for our souls, and divine justice for our sins was given through Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior; we come to Thee before this coming election day in our nation, the country Thou hast given unto us, even the United States of America.

We recall, O Father, how so many of our founders cried out to Thee as one people for Thy blessing and how their prayers were answered with Thy providence and favor. Yet we confess with pierced and mourning hearts our own sinful negligence and lackadaisical attitudes towards sin and Hell, holiness and Heaven, that we have not come to Thee as we ought. We remember how our forefathers and mothers covenanted together for the sake of the Gospel of Thy Son. We recall how they consecrated their lives and fortunes to Thee for the advancement of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth, and how they did not count suffering something to be avoided for the sake of all righteousness. In our memory of those men and women of God, our fathers and mothers in the faith, and given that these, our spiritual forebearers prayed for us, their posterity, to keep the Gospel, and to bring that godly influence to this nation, we plead for Thy forgiveness. Forgive us of our private, personal, corporate and national sins before Thee, O Christ! Where have we to go but to Thee? What chariot or horse, what army or navy, however brave and honorable, can deliver us from our enemies, but Thee, O Father? In what economic power can we boast before the living God, who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and who will not put up with our ingratitude forever?

Yet in Thy eternal mercy through Thy Son, Jesus Christ, be our fortress and shield, O Lord! Protect us from national catastrophes and the terror that would seek to strike at the heart of our people. Remember our weak frame, O Lord, and remember the blood and righteousness of Thy Son, O Father, and preserve this nation. Preserve us through the means that Thou hast ordained for our governance: through the power of the sword given to the armed services of this nation. Therefore, in remembering this provision, we are bound to pray for the soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardsmen, and Marines of this country that Thou hast made great before the world. We also are bound to pray for all policemen and firemen, doctors and nurses, lawmen and representatives of the court, first responders to life, health and property, and all who risk their lives for the sake of common grace and common good. Bless them, O Lord, with their families, and cause them to know the applause of heaven over such humanity that imitates Thy grace and protection, even as they would know the gratitude of a thankful nation.

O Lord, we also lift up those who serve our nation in elected offices. These are “ministers” doing Thy work and deserving our honor and obedience and our prayers. Guard the lives and bless the families of our President... and of our Vice President.... Keep the Speaker of the House and the leader of the Senate in Thy perfect care. Strengthen our justices and the courts of our land. Bless that noble institution for good with wisdom from on high. Guard their lives, O Father. Give them wisdom. Give them wise counselors who are under the influence of Thy Word. Strike from our government thoughts and ideas that are contrary to Thy Word and overrule our folly through whatever means is best for our elected leaders and our people.

Do bless also our people, O Christ. Help us to recall our heritage as people seeking to replicate the government we find in Thy sacred Word, that of self-governance. Remind us of how Your people, O Lord, were governed by elders and deacons elected by the people. Remind us how the people were to choose only those who cultivated and exhibited noble and holy lives in both their personal and professional undertakings, as far as one was able to do so by Thy grace. We desire such representatives, O Lord! Grant that we, the people, may exercise wisdom, discernment, and seriousness of mind as we cast our ballots for these, our representatives. Give us candidates from among the people who have the people’s best interest at heart and not their own. Keep us from wolves in sheep’s clothing, who would devour the people’s wealth, the people’s creativity, the people’s independence, and the people’s God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness through unwise and hurtful laws. Grant that in keeping away such self-serving public officials, we may be blessed with a renewed trust in the people's government and, thus, a renewed esteem for the offices of public service that, according to Thy Word, deserve to be held in great honor.

Give us an election day, this November...O Lord, in which we may rejoice in righteousness, be astounded by true humility in the lives of those who are elected, and be encouraged by the humbled hearts of those who are removed from office or denied office by the vote of the people. Bless this Election Day, O God. We in America need Thee more than ever. We have learned that we have nothing apart from Thee. We are humbled before the nations and before the throne of Heaven. Have mercy, O God. Have mercy, O God. Have mercy and send Your Spirit even in these days of national election.

Remember the covenants of our mothers and fathers, O Lord, who prayed that this nation would be used of Thee for the advancement of the Gospel. Remember their prayers and now hear the prayers of their children as we cry out before Thee for genuine revival! Thou didst send a powerful movement of Thy Holy Spirit in the Church before the days of the Revolutionary War when we were given Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and countless other faithful ministers and godly people. When we were at war among ourselves, during the War Between the States, both sides encountered an outpouring of Thy Spirit. So now, O God, in this time when radical religious madmen aim to decapitate our nation, kill innocent people, and destroy a way of life that leads to peace; and when our own sin eats away at our core as an unseen but real and deadly virus, visit us, astonish us, and humble us with a magnificent display of Thy glory. Let the Church know of the power and presence of the resurrected and reigning Lord Jesus Christ. May souls be saved and lives be transformed

through the faithful exposition of the Word of God by dedicated ministers called out and prepared by Thee. Bless us with a spirit of prayer, not only for ourselves, but also especially for those who do not know Thee. Make us once more a nation of missionaries, O Christ. Let us humbly learn from Thee among the nations of the global east and south who are experiencing Thy divine visitation and then join with them in the march to evangelize the world. Let us renew our commitment to the Covenant of Grace so that we may once more hate sin and love Thy law, extinguish the raging fires of sensuality in our culture, and regain that godly disposition of reverence and modesty in our relationships. Let us drink of Thy grace that we may draw from thy holiness. For the sake of the very preservation of this nation, grant us grace to know genuine nobility in our men, heavenly virtue in our women, and sweet innocence in our children.

Thus we pray, O Father, not for a party spirit but for Thy Spirit. We pray not for a victory that leads to good for some, but a victory that leads to good for all. We pray for a government that exults in what is right before Thee and unleashes the people in a creative marketplace where all to which we put our hands glorifies Thee! We pray for a victory that leads to true freedom for all men and a new sense of refreshment that will bring us to the “old paths” of faithfulness to Thee.

Lord God, our heavenly Father, will You be pleased to pour out Your blessings on America? Bless her as in days past. Bless her for the good of the Gospel and the strengthening of Thy Church. Bless her to be a blessing to the world, and a model of Biblical government that we may lead peaceable lives before Thee and extend that peace, through freedom and mercy and justice, to a world in need. We ask this in desperation, for we have no other Name to go to but to the Name of Jesus, our Lord and our Savior. Amen.

It is our sincere desire that these prayers, which have been offered up for such a time as this, be personally read and forwarded; used in church bulletins and websites; and sent by the reader to elected officials and newspaper editors.

In so doing, please transmit the complete prayer text and acknowledge the author. Thank you.

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### **The Good Stuff**

#### **+ *Blessings Abound for You!***

Remember the old gospel song, Count Your Blessings? It was one of my grandfather’s favorites. When we look at the world around us and all the things going on that have so many people depressed and feeling oppressed, we shouldn’t look at all the doom and gloom. We should look to God and see and remember all He has done for us. We are blessed people! The chorus of that gospel song went something like this: “Count your blessings, name them one by one...” Sometime in the coming days sit down with pen and paper and count your blessings. It’s amazing what the Holy Spirit will bring to your memory. You will begin to sense burdens lifting as you remember what God has done and is doing – what a blessing!

What’s happening in the world around us may not change much, but how we look at our lives will change our outlook. What are the words of the worship song – “come change the atmosphere...” That’s what we need to allow God to do, change our atmosphere. Walk in the knowledge that God is able to change the atmosphere around you so that you can look for ways He is working. When we are aware of what God is doing, we can minister to others so He can change their atmosphere, too. Do you know someone who needs an atmosphere change? Pray for them. Go to them and let God use you to change their atmosphere.

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change life shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created.” James 1:17-18

#### **See Yourself as Blessed in Every Season of Life**

We all want to be blessed. We desire health, happiness, promotion, joy, financial security, peace, good relationships, and every quality signifying that blessing and abundance are flowing in our lives.

So how do you continue to live blessed even when you are going through life’s valleys?

Everyone faces difficult times – seasons where we don't feel blessed. God wants to mould and shape you into a person who sees yourself as blessed, not because of your circumstances, but because this is your God-assigned identity!

Whether you are standing on the highest peak of victory or feel like you are sinking into the valley of trial, once you start to see yourself as blessed, you will be positioned to thrive in every season!

Join in a time of counting blessings....Be a part of a celebration of thankfulness. Be aware of the blessings God is working right now. Allow the Holy Spirit to change your atmosphere. Blessings abound for you!

May you know many blessings,

Ric Holladay, Aldersgate Renewal Fellowship

[Note: This is something that I try to do if there are severe challenges facing us. It is good to “put things in perspective” and realize that all that we have and all that we are comes from God and His infinite kindness to us. – AOM]

### **Of Interest.**

+ *Dr. Dobson's [final] Open Letter to Christians Regarding The Election.*

October 2020

Dr. James Dobson shares his final personal thoughts before our national election, urging voters to become fully informed about the stark differences between our two candidates for President of the United States. Be sure to vote your values on November 3<sup>rd</sup>!

Dear Friends,

This will be my final letter to 800,000 people before Americans cast our ballots on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. It is a breathtaking moment in the history of the United States. Perhaps I will be permitted to repeat a brief comment I made in my August letter because of its relevance to today. Many political commentators have stated that this election is the most significant since 1864, when Abraham Lincoln vied for a second term against Democratic nominee, George McClellan. The future of our beloved nation hung in the balance that year. If Lincoln had lost, the Civil War would have ended precipitously and the wretched evils of slavery would have remained legal in the Confederate States, and perhaps even in the North. Had Lincoln been defeated, the Union would have been torn asunder. Thank God Mr. Lincoln won, even though it cost him his life!

Now we are approaching another presidential election that carries enormous implications for the stability of our democratic system of government. Indeed, Newt Gingrich said that what we are facing now might bring an end to civilization as we have known it. He may have been referring to a possible revolution. Regardless, I believe his grave concern for our nation is valid. For centuries, America has stood as a shining light for liberty and freedom in our nation and around the globe. If we abandon our founding core values, the world will suffer for it. The binary choice before us is that stark.

How will Americans, and how will you, decide who to vote for as our Chief Executive Officer? I have heard from dozens of friends and acquaintances in recent weeks who tell me they will base their decision solely on a candidate's rhetoric, tone, style, or likeability. Does that describe your thinking process?

Just now, as I was about to react to that idea, my wife, Shirley, brought in an email that she had received a few minutes before from a friend. It quoted an anonymous statement that gets to the heart of the issue, as follows:

“This is not a junior high or high school popularity/personality contest. I'm not voting for the person—I'm voting for the platform!

I'm voting for the Second Amendment. I'm voting for the next Supreme Court justice. I'm voting for the electoral college. I'm voting for the Republic in which we live. I'm voting for the police and law and order. I'm voting for the military and the veterans who fought and died for this country. I'm voting for the flag that is often missing from public events. I'm voting for the right to speak my opinion and not be censored for it. I'm voting for secure borders. I'm voting for the right to praise God without fear. I'm voting for every

unborn soul that is at risk of being aborted. I'm voting for freedom and the American dream. I'm voting for good and against evil. I'm not just voting for one person.

I'm voting for the future of my country!"

I couldn't have said it better, although I want to add to the writer's list. I'm also voting for candidates who will exercise sound leadership internationally. I'm voting for those who will support Israel. I'm voting for those who will protect children from leftist curricula. I'm voting for the nation's fiscal integrity. I'm voting for parental rights. I'm voting for school choice and home education. I'm voting for freedom in the suburbs. I'm voting for Little Sisters of the Poor and other Christian organizations. I'm voting for racial unity. I am voting to support "In God we trust" and school prayer. I'm voting for freedom of conscience for physicians and other professionals. I am voting for marriage. I am voting for life in all its dimensions. I am voting against euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. I'm voting for wisdom in handling the pandemic. I am voting for protection for the Church from oppressive politicians.

One final thought: With all respect, this election isn't about you. It certainly isn't about me. It is about our kids and grandkids. It is about those who are yet to come, if they are allowed to live. This vote has awesome implications for future generations and the nation we love. It is about our Constitution and the immutable, God-given rights it protects. It is about values, and truth, and greatness, and hope. That is why the notion of choosing a president based on frivolous personality characteristics is so unfortunate.

In summary, this election is for all the marbles . . . the Presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Court. Together, they set the agenda for this country.

If you love America and don't want it to be "fundamentally transformed," it is time to do three things:

Pray like never before that God will spare this great nation from tyranny and oppression of religious liberty.

Volunteer to help your candidates.

Vote for the candidates who will best uphold your values and convictions.

Also, consider forwarding this letter to your friends, family, and others whom you might influence.

May God bless America!

[Signature] Dr. James Dobson

Never before has there been a more critical election than the one our country is facing on November 3rd. The political parties' platforms and ideologies are in stark contrast with one another and present two opposing visions for our nation's future. This is not the time to be silent or to stand idle!

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– Letter received from Dr. James Dobson

+ ***Putting things in perspective.***

[Note: A final thought on where we are as a country. This has been printed before but offered again at this time. – AOM]

President Ronald Reagan once said that the United States was like a shining beacon on a hill. We often fail to appreciate the many blessings that we enjoy by living in this country. In the days of the Soviet Union we remember the lengths to which people would go to try to escape to the West and freedom – often at the cost of their lives. We also learned of people fleeing Cuba on almost a daily basis, even to the extent of trying to get across the ninety miles of water separating that country from ours. In Bill Clinton's presidency, we remember the controversy over the forced return of Elian Gonzalez to his father in Cuba, even after the boy's mother brought him to this country at the cost of her life.

Our country is held up as a “beacon of freedom” to other people all over the world. I once heard a talk given by the late Richard Wurmbrand, the Romanian pastor imprisoned by the Nazis in the 1930s then by the communists because he refused to compromise his message of freedom and Jesus Christ. With his over fourteen years’ experience of being in confinement, he said, “A prisoner who is being tortured in the remotest jail cell focuses on one thing to give him hope – that of the shining light of freedom that exists in the United States. At times, that is the only thing that keeps him fighting to survive.” More recently we have the example of the people in Hong Kong, common citizens, who are standing for freedom. We have seen pictures of them bravely carrying the American flag knowing that they will suffer consequences from the Chinese Communist Party, one of the most brutal entities on earth. They serve as examples to all of us. Let us so conduct ourselves that we live up to the image they have of us as a country – and are paying the price. Our freedom is a precious gift – and we must never forget that.

– AOM

+ ***Conference backs Replacing Cross and Flame.*** The North Texas Conference voted at its Sept. 19 annual meeting to submit legislation to General Conference 2021 that would begin the process of changing the church’s Cross and Flame insignia. The Rev. Edlen Cowley wrote a column this summer urging that the denomination move away from the Cross and Flame, saying the emblem conjures for him and other African Americans the terror of Ku Klux Klan cross burnings. The North Texas Conference voted 558-176 on Sept. 19, at its annual meeting, to submit to the 2021 General Conference legislation drafted by Cowley that would begin the process of changing the insignia. Cowley is pastor of Fellowship United Methodist Church in the Dallas suburb of Trophy Club, and a North Texas Conference alternate delegate to the denomination's 2021 South Central Jurisdictional General Conference. In speaking to the North Texas Conference, he called cross burning “a historically powerful image that for over 100 years has been and still is being used today to assert dominance and invoke fear.” The insignia combines the cross, as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, with two flames. Those suggest the “tongues, as of fire” (Acts 2:3) present through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as well as the Methodist Church and EUB. Cowley called the individual elements and ideas behind them “beautiful.” “But when you put it together it’s problematic, because at first glance it’s a burning cross,” Cowley said.

The Book of Discipline deals with the Cross and Flame in paragraph 807.10 and gives the General Council on Finance and Administration and United Methodist Communications responsibility for ensuring its proper use.

[Note: With the Christian persecution and serious problems we have, this smacks of “imagined grievances.” – AOM]

– By Sam Hodges, United Methodist News; Sept. 22, 2020. Hodges is a Dallas-based writer for UMNS.

+ ***Louisiana Conference – Hurricane recovery “back to square one”.***

BATON ROUGE, La. – Two hurricanes, Laura and Delta, have battered Louisiana within a span of six weeks, leaving residents there with the frustration that their recovery efforts are “back to square one.”

– Rev. Todd Rossnagel, communications director United Methodist News Service (UMNS) Weekly Digest; Oct 16, 2020.

**(UM) Bishops. Bishops call for full participation in US election.**

WASHINGTON – Bishops in the U.S. called on United Methodists to encourage people to vote in the Nov. 3 elections. “The right of every citizen to vote in the United States is under attack, and with it, the foundation of American democracy and the sacred worth of all persons,” said the Faith and Democracy statement signed by 31 active and 28 retired bishops. Council President Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey said the statement is not from the Council of Bishops, but is a statement by United Methodist episcopal leaders living in the United States.

[Note: This makes me wonder at the thinking of the bishops. How is this right under attack? It is not in any way. – AOM]

– UMNS Weekly Digest; Oct 16, 2020

+ ***Supreme Court DACA decision brings joy.***

DREXEL, Mo. (UM News) – About 650,000 young people can sleep a little easier with the Supreme Court decision to continue the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program that lets young, undocumented immigrants live, work and study in the U.S. without fear of deportation. However, the decision is not a permanent solution for citizenship.

[Note: UM staffers support unlimited immigration in a “no borders” nation: the book *In Defense of Creation*. – AOM]

– Kathy L. Gilbert, UM News Weekly Digest; Jun 26, 2020.

**(UM) Judicial Council. Top court to look at resuming its work.**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – The United Methodist Judicial Council, whose work was suspended because of the pandemic, has announced it will determine how to meet electronically. Pending before the court are cases from the April 29-May 2 docket, as well as additional matters that were submitted after the deadline for the 2020 spring meeting. Revised timelines and filing deadlines will be provided to the denomination in November. The Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church will be determining how they will meet electronically to conduct its business. The matters pending before the Council are those cases that were docketed and previously posted for April 2020 as well as additional matters that were submitted after the deadline for the April 2020 Docket. The revised timelines and filing deadlines will be provided to the denomination in November.

– The Rev. J. Kabamba Kiboko, Ph.D., Secretary of the Judicial Council, as reported in UMNS Digest; Oct 16, 2020.

**General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM). Fernandes succeeds Thomas Kemper as head of GBGM**

Roland Fernandes: “From a very young age, I was drawn to matters of the spirit and soul. I was very religious as a young boy growing up in Kolkata, India. I graduated from St. Xavier’s College and School. I didn’t plan to become general secretary. I was asked to think about it and after careful and prayerful consideration, decided it was something I could and would do.

– By Christie R. House,

UMNS; September 24, 2020; Atlanta

**Stewardship: Monitoring How UM Money is Spent.**

+ *“Becoming part of the solution to racism.”* Confessing to being part of the problem of racism is a first step toward being part of the solution, writes the Rev. Ryan Dunn. “The racism I need to root out is present in my attitude of exceptionalism that the acceptable way of being is in being like me.” [Note: The way to deal with any real problem in this area is not in self-deprecation nor other self-flagellation. We should address this in a balanced, logical way. – AOM]

– UMNS, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

**(UM) Women/Women’s Issues.**

+ *United Methodist Women elects board of directors.*

NEW YORK – Twenty women were elected at several online jurisdictional meetings for the 2021-2024 term on the United Methodist board of directors. The board sets policy, secures funds from members and determines the organization's budget, as well as hiring and supporting the agency’s top executive. UMW also announced a new program advisory group.

– As reported in UM News Weekly Digest;

Aug 21, 2020.

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Don’t say God is silent when your Bible is closed. ~ As posted by Susan DeSiena

**Global Outlook**

That our church leaders oppose capital punishment for convicted felons, while supporting it for supposedly ‘unwanted’ babies is ironic at the very least....How can we ask God to bless America when we behave so abominably?

~ Mr. Jonathan Carlsen, formerly of Chicago



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**China. Growing Support for Chinese Pastor Under Attack.** “CCP Operative Threatens Pastor, Others in USA”  
[Note: This very concerning in that it shows the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in our country. – AOM]

Last week, the Reverend Dr. Bob Fu’s house in Midland, Texas was besieged by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operatives. This attack – which actually began on Saturday, September 26 – continues to plague Fu’s house even though Bob and his family have been moved to safety. In response dozens of outraged individuals and organizations are signing IRD’s statement of support for Fu and other freedom-loving Chinese also being targeted.

The protesters, brandishing defamatory posters and vile threats, were following directives from videos made by Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, AKA, Miles Kwok. At the end of September Kwok launched a terrifying video campaign urging violence against Fu and other Chinese freedom activists living in America and elsewhere. Kwok assures his followers in the videos that his campaign is funding the protests. And, remarkably, on his video solicitations he offers a “bonus” to any individuals that will respond with more “aggression” towards the targets. The billionaire tells his listeners that these people are all “cheaters” and, breathtakingly, “Communist Party agents.” I first reported on the harassment of Fu and his wife, Heidi – both former prisoners of faith in China – and their children in my September 30 article. Those of us present for Fu, the founder of China Aid, praying for China at the spiritually seismic The Return on the National Mall in Washington, DC on September 25 heard first-hand what was taking place at his house as relayed the text he had received from his wife just moments before. On September 27 and 28 Kwok publicly ranted on social media, calling Fu a “fake pastor.” He slandered Fu and other prominent freedom fighters, human rights activists, and other members of the Chinese diaspora as CCP agents, thieves, cheaters, [et.al.] on video in what he called “the kill cheaters” campaign. Kwok boasted that he would send 100-200 of his followers to Fu’s house, and on the 28<sup>th</sup>, more thugs arrived.

Law enforcement and the church and wider community of the very close-knit city of Midland have all stood up for Fu and his family. When Bob flew home from Washington he reported, “Got home safely with full police and anti-riot squad security details. . . I am so thankful for this kind of thoughtfulness and care by our city.”

A week later, Monday, October 5, Fu was one of the speakers for Jubilee Campaign USA’s virtual side event at the UN Human Rights Council’s 45<sup>th</sup> session. The event “China Bans Faith for All Children,” exposed the CCP’s violation of the human rights of Christian, Falun Gong, Uyghur, Tibetan, and other children in China. Even while Fu was speaking on his computer, ominous black buses were rolling up to his house and unloading dozens of protesters!

One of Bob’s clergy friends reported the scene: “The protesters I overheard were speaking in a Chinese dialect to one another, but a Caucasian English speaker . . . gave me a flyer accusing Bob Fu of being a “fake priest,” and a Communist agent who traveled back and forth to China many times, and was receiving money from the CCP to enable him to buy a house in this neighborhood. How could he travel so freely, he asked, if he were not a Communist agent? A Midlander told me that when the bus pulled up, those on board were given American flags, posters, and face masks as they exited. They also passed out bottled water to the protesters and those who were watching.”

Pastor Fu is very fortunate to live in Midland, Texas. The “Midlanders” were not about to put up with such nonsense about who had been one of their own for many years. In an October 5 press conference Midland’s mayor, Patrick Payton, explained that “some Communist agitators have been making threats – not veiled threats, but aggressive threats – towards Bob Fu and his family, and towards China Aid. . . ” The mayor dispelled the lie of Mile Kwok that the CCP gives Fu the funds to fly back and forth, stating that Fu and his wife “had fled China in 1997, and hadn’t been allowed to set foot in China since 1997.” The indignant mayor mocked the accusations of Fu being a powerful Communist agent. Payton used this as an opportunity to highlight those for whom Bob and China Aid are working. He spoke about the Chinese Christians and other religious believers in prison for their faith and about the attorneys who are defending them.

The mayor indicated that every possible law enforcement agency, including all of those “three letter agencies,” had been briefed on the situation. Every city needs a mayor like this strong, brave man of integrity! Astonishingly, Kwok put out another video in which he threatens not only Bob Fu, but the mayor of Midland, Texas! (He also refers to some of the “redneck members” of Bob Fu’s church!) It is past time for those “agencies” to do something!

Not only are the good people and leadership of Midland supporting Bob Fu. As mentioned above, IRD is spearheading a statement of support for Fu and all of those Chinese freedom activists who have been targeted in this manner. At last count, the statement has passed 100 signatures from human rights and religious freedom organizations and individuals.

As I said in my previous article many in the West have emboldened the CCP into believing that it can do anything as long as it has the money to do it and to pay people off. Large, powerful entities such as Disney, the NBA, Big Tech, major U.S. banks, and others have consistently acquiesced. So the CCP believes it can shut the mouths of Chinese Americans in America. Many of those who have been recruited to protest against Bob Fu and the others may genuinely believe that he is a CCP agent. They don’t have clue about any of these freedom fighters other than what they are hearing on these vile videos. One of them sent me a very sincere sounding and courteous email after I posted my first article saying that I should take seriously the allegations about Pastor Bob Fu, who I had “interviewed.” The trouble was that person did not know that I have known Bob Fu for over 20 years! If Bob is pretending to be who he says he is, he’s extremely good at the long con job!

But seriously, I feel sorry for those who have been snookered by this CCP reverse-the-roles game. I would just hope and pray that they would begin to follow the advice in Holy Scripture that says “by their fruits you shall know them.” If they look at the fruit of China Aid, they will see nothing but good. On the other hand, do a tally of how much obscene language and threats of harm you find in the videos below – you will see bad fruit from a bad tree. You will know the truth.

– Faith McDonnell, Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1023 15<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Washington, DC 20005; Oct. 10, 2020.

**Hong Kong. Please pray for Hong Kong. Its religious freedom is under severe threat.**

Until now, Hong Kong had been a free and semi-autonomous city, even though it stands in the shadow of China’s harsh Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But on July 1<sup>st</sup> the people of Hong Kong woke up knowing their freedoms were gone. The night before, China’s National People’s Congress had passed a new national security law for Hong Kong. And to the Chinese government, “national security” has a broad interpretation that often means the repression of dissidents, including people of faith. Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong has enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and freedom under a “one country, two systems” principle that has guided its government since 1997. At that time, Britain passed its authority over Hong Kong to China, but Hong Kong maintained its own distinct judicial system. Now, however, the broad provisions contained in the new national security law effectively end many of the unique liberties Hong Kong residents cherish. Sadly, that includes religious freedom. On the mainland, we have observed increasing pressure on Christians leaders over the past few years. We’ve seen pastors such as Wang Yi accused of “subversion of state power” and sent to prison. Today, we can clearly see that China’s clampdown on Hong Kong is not just a threat to that city’s religious freedom. It is likely to have widespread effects on the mainland and beyond. Hong Kong churches have long provided training, funds, and support for house churches in mainland China. The crackdown on Hong Kong is likely to damage the lifeline the city has provided to Christians throughout China. The new law is supposedly meant to address secession, subversion of state power, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. But China’s broad definition of these terms means they can punish whoever they see fit. Christians also played an influential role in recent massive Hong Kong protests supporting greater democracy and opposing the Chinese government’s campaign of suppression.

Starting today, please pray with us for Hong Kong’s brave and bold Christian believers. They are in grave danger themselves, and they are no longer free to support and protect the persecuted believers inside China.

Will you share their story with others? And please pray as if their lives depend upon it, because their greatest hope lies in the Lord's mercy and relies on our prayers from around the world.

In His Name, Lela Gilbert, Senior Fellow for International Religious Freedom

– Family Research Council; 801 G Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20001; Jul 14, 2020.

**Malawi.** *“Water is Life” chronicles global struggle for clean water.*

MZIRA, Malawi (UM News) – More than 750 million people around the world lack reliable water access. In a photo project three years in the making, the church's efforts to provide clean water to rural Africa.

– Kathy L. Gilbert, United Methodist News Service (UMNS) Weekly Digest; Oct 16, 2020.

**World Council of Churches.** *Fix broken migration policy, religious leaders say.*

A dozen global and regional religious organizations released an advocacy statement on the situation of migrants and refugees in Europe that defines their calling as Christians to “welcome the stranger,” and urges the creation of a world in which “we become human together.”...“We expect the EU [i.e., European Union] to reject the discourse and politics of fear and deterrence, and to adopt a principled stance and compassionate practice...”

[Note: This refers to “immigrants” from primarily Islamic countries who have swarmed into Europe, overwhelmed the societies of some of the countries, and undermined its Christian base. There is an Islamic tactic of “conquest by assimilation” in which a country is conquered by replacing its population with a majority of Muslims. This is suicidal for these countries to allow this. It reeks of the UM bishops' call for a “world without borders” in the 1985 book it published *In Defense of Creation* – which was a call to globalism with no individual national autonomy. Given the situation in the world today with implacable enemies to freedom of communism and Islam, this amounts to national suicide. – AOM]

– By Linda Bloom, UMNS; Sept. 22, 2020. WCC, 1 Route des Morillons, 1218 Le Grand-Saconnex - Switzerland

### **Annual Conference Reports**

**East Ohio Annual Conference.** Bishop Tracy S. Malone presided over the 51st session of Annual Conference, the first-ever virtual session in the East Ohio Conference. The worship services and business session presentations of the Sept. 26-27 session were live from the Great Hall at Church of the Saviour United Methodist Church in Cleveland Heights. There, members of the Annual Conference planning team, production team and service participants wore masks, observed social distancing, sanitized surfaces after use, and followed other guidelines established to create safer environments in the COVID-19 world in which we currently live. The 1,226 members of Annual Conference who registered for the conference viewed the sessions online and used their individual, unique, non-shareable voting codes to cast online votes from their home or church or from one of the internet hotspots established in districts across the East Ohio Conference. Annual Conference 2020, continuing the quadrennial theme “Bearing Fruit that Lasts: Called, Committed, Connected,” underscored the importance of being connected to God and to our neighbors so that clergy and laity can bear fruit by making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The words of John 15:4-8 (CEB) were the foundation on which each worship service of the Sept. 25 Clergy Executive Session and the Sept. 26-27 Annual Conference were built.

Episcopal Address: “Friends, we are living in a different world. The Church is serving a different world; a world that is broken; a world that is filled with hate and violence and fear – and, yes, filled with darkness and despair. But Jesus says that, ‘I have come as a light to shine in this dark world so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the dark.’ He says, ‘I am the light of the world and whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life,’” Bishop Tracy S. Malone said during her Episcopal Address to the clergy and laity of the East Ohio Conference.

“I believe that there is a sense of urgency, a clarion call from God, for the followers of Jesus Christ to shine the light of Christ, to be the very embodiment of Christ's light and his love and his mercy, to work for peace and justice for the marginalized for the healing of the nation and for the transformation of the world,” she said.

Bishop Malone preached the sermon during the service that commemorated 49 saints who joined the Church Triumphant in the past year. “God’s love for each of us is infinite. God’s love for each of us is absolute, is irrevocable. And within the love of God is the promise place where we shall be united with him and with those whom we love,” Malone said. “Jesus’ love isn’t something that we can fully grasp and comprehend but his love is something that we can trust. He says, ‘I am the resurrection and life and those who live and believe in me shall never die. I am alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. And because I live, you shall live also.’ We give thanks to God for the great company of saints. We give thanks to God for our loved ones who are now with the Church Triumphant. To God be the glory. Amen.”

Clergy Executive Session: Bishop Tracy S. Malone preached the sermon during the Clergy Executive Session, during which much business was conducted, clergy were reminded of their covenant together and 18 retiring clergy were recognized for their ministries to the people and communities of the East Ohio Conference. “You are leading while navigating the challenges, and the anxiety and the loss and the grief associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted everything that we considered normal and familiar and routine. You are leading while navigating the anger and the tensions and the unrest and the traumatization and the loss and the grief associated with the ongoing pandemic of systemic racism and the oppression and the police killings of Black lives. You are leading in some liminal times; leading while navigating the disappointment and the challenges and the delay associated with the postponement of the General Conference; leading while navigating the divisive and the hateful rhetoric and political polarization associated with our upcoming elections. You are leading in some liminal times and some divergent times; leading while navigating the pushback and the strain and the stress, the feelings of being beat up associated with your courage and your care for the safe return to in-person worship and gatherings. You are leading in some difficult times and yet, and yet, amid these and other challenges you are called by God and you have been given the sacred trust and privilege to lead and serve for such a time as this,” said Malone. “In these liminal times, in this disoriented state, in which we are called to lead as clergy, as pastors, as bishops, as leaders of the Church, we hold onto this promise: ‘If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and, in this way, you prove that you are my disciples.’ Abiding leaders lead. Abiding leaders lead. Let it be so,” she said.

The Rev. Abraham D. Allende, Bishop of the Northeast Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) preached the sermon during the service where seven clergy were commissioned as provisional Elders and six clergy were ordained as full Elders. Those commissioned were able to have two family members present for the service. Those ordained also were able to have two family members with them, as well as one sponsor and their district superintendent. “We are all connected in Christ and through Christ in this community that we call the church,” Allende said while holding a bunch of grapes as a visual aid. “There are no free-standing individuals in community but branches which encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters here is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of the many surrounding branches. Jesus abides, lasts, endures, continues, hangs in, holds on to us and in us. He does so despite our forgetting that we have been baptized into his life. God is with us. Christ is in us. The Spirit is all around us,” Allende said later in his message. “Bearing fruit is our calling. That’s what it means to be a disciple; all the more reason then, to anchor our abiding as the community of faith in Jesus and to draw deeply from the well of baptismal grace and nourishment of the eucharist.”

In this year when the theme word of Annual Conference was Connected, the livestream link of the service was made available in advance to the nearly 700 churches of the East Ohio Conference to post on their websites and social media platforms in place of their individual services so that the clergy and laity of the Conference had the opportunity to be connected in the Word and with one another for the closing worship service of Annual Conference. Pastor Jason Snyder (Utica UMC), the Rev. Hannah Tucker (Strongsville UMC) and the Rev. Marilyn Coney (Tiffin Faith UMC) preached an interconnected sermon titled "Connecting on the Journey. We are not better off when we live life by ourselves. We are better off when we are in small groups together, Sunday school classes together, praying together, breaking bread together, serving and connecting together,” Snyder said. “The heart of this John 15 scripture we’ve been hearing for four years now at Annual Conference

is that we abide in Christ because Christ abides in us. This whole concept of connectedness, it starts with Christ being connected to us. As beloved children of God we have the promise that no matter where we are on the journey, no matter what we face, no matter what has happened that Christ abides in us. We can go with others because Christ is with us first. We can connect with others because Christ connects with us first,” Tucker shared. “The turning point in any of our lives is when we stop inventing the Jesus we want to follow and start following the God Jesus is – and that takes courage. It takes courage to move from decision to discipleship, from knowing Jesus to following Jesus, to communing with Jesus, to abiding with Jesus, to stay on the vine. So, friends, we need to make up our minds: Do we want to follow Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, or do we want to do our own thing?” Coney asked.

This year’s Annual Conference offering will benefit Puerto Rico United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM), Flat Rock Homes and Care Center and the Bishop’s Discretionary Fund. Please visit the Conference website, [www.eocumc.com/donate](http://www.eocumc.com/donate), to learn the specific ways that you can support the Annual Conference offering by donating online as an individual, donating online as a church or mailing a donation. Whichever way you choose to support the Annual Conference offering, please remember to include Fund number 9214 with your donation. Your giving is very much appreciated.

The East Ohio Conference has supported Africa University since the school’s founding more than 25 years ago. Our conference built the first dormitory on campus and has raised more money for student scholarships than any other conference in The United Methodist Church. In January we launched the public phase of the Teach • Reach • Bless campaign to raise and collect \$1.5 million to build and furnish a new dorm on the campus for female students. To date, donors have committed more than \$1.1 million toward this life-changing project. You will have an opportunity to learn more about the campaign during Africa University Saturation Sunday. Video mission moments, devotions and messages are currently being produced. Each will be available for download and use in our churches and faith communities on Saturation Sunday. The Communications office will let you know when the resources have been posted to the site for download.

Financial Report: The Rev. David Palmer, chair of the Conference Council on Finance & Administration, reported that for the 14th consecutive year the East Ohio Conference paid General Church Apportionments at 100%.

Annual Conference members voted to approve the proposed 2021 Conference budget of \$10,981,679, a 5% decrease from the 2020 budget.

Minimum Clergy Salary: Dr. Gloria Brown, chair of the Conference Commission on Equitable Compensation, reported that “after researching the minimum salaries of every conference in the country, results show that East Ohio ranks second-from-the-bottom except for two missionary conferences.” Annual Conference members voted to increase minimum clergy salaries by 5% in 2021. The increase will raise the minimum salaries to:

- \$39,638 for full, associate and provisional members.
- \$35,623 for full-time Local Pastors who have completed the course of study.
- \$33,617 for full-time Local Pastors who have not completed the course of study.

Closed EOC Churches: Cabinet recognized the ministry that has taken place during the life of these 13 churches that closed by action of this year’s Annual Conference:

- Barton UMC (Ohio Valley District)
- Beach City UMC (Tuscarawas District)
- Bethel Valley UMC (Canal District)
- Bloomingdale UMC (Ohio Valley District)
- Canton Korean UMC (Tuscarawas District)
- Howard UMC (Three Rivers District)
- James S. Thomas UMC (Tuscarawas District)
- Mapleton UMC (Tuscarawas District)
- New Somerset UMC (Ohio Valley District)
- Leetonia UMC (Mahoning Valley District)
- Robbins Memorial UMC (Mahoning Valley District)

- Shiloh UMC (Firelands District)
- Trinity UMC (North Coast District)

Resolution: One resolution was submitted for this year's Annual Conference. Resolution 2020-01: "A Call for East Ohio United Methodists to Address Racism in our Churches and Communities." This resolution prayerfully calls on clergy, lay leaders and individual members of the United Methodist churches in East Ohio to:

- Read and discuss resolutions passed by General Conference 2016 that address specific actions and inactions that have perpetuated racism in our local churches and communities, and within ourselves.
- Provide and promote opportunities to discuss this resolution within their local churches and districts.
- Read, observe, listen and examine instances of racism within local communities.
- Host discussions related to matters of race in our communities so as to identify ways local congregations can participate in and promote dismantling racism.
- Commit to addressing racism so as to build The United Methodist Church as an authentically inclusive Christian community.
- Prayerfully reflect individually to discern our roles and individual responsibilities in having contributed to racism and commit to dismantling racism in our churches and wider communities.

Submitted by: East Ohio Methodist Federation of Social Action, East Ohio Reconciling Ministries Network, East Ohio Church & Society, East Ohio Religion and Race and East Ohio United Methodist Women

The motion was approved.

Annual Conference 2021: Wednesday, June 16 – Saturday, June 19 at the John S. Knight Center in Akron.

– Rick Wolcott, director of communications, East Ohio Conference; Sep 27, 2020.

**Indiana Annual Conference Annual Conference**. Bishop Julius Trimble and Bishop John Hopkins opened the Celebration of Life service by sharing personal stories about Bishop Mike Coyner and his influence on their lives and the lives of United Methodist throughout the denomination. Bishop Hopkins presented Marsha Coyner with flowers and a medallion. In turn, Marsha addressed the conference, thanking members for their support through the last several months.

Worship. The Rev. Aleze Fulbright opened the Celebration of Life Service with prayer and scripture. The Rev. Dave Neckers preached on Proverbs 13:22, challenging the conference to leave an inheritance through investing in the lives of others. The conference then honored the lives of 46 clergy and 30 spouses who have joined the Church Triumphant during the last year.

Darlene White, conference secretary, announced that the official tally of registration for both lay and clergy on August 15, 2020 were as follows: • 1,268 virtual session • 310 onsite • 1,522 total

Episcopal Address. Bishop Trimble shared an impassioned episcopal address entitled "Always - A Promise We Should Remember" based on Matthew 28:19-20, during which he encouraged members of the conference to remember that God is with us always, even in the midst of life's storms.

The Rev. Dave Neckers, dean of the Appointive Cabinet, celebrated the following churches in the Central District that merged in the last year:

- Fortville merged with Gateway
- Horizons of Faith merged with Bethel
- Wesley merged with Bethel

The following churches disbanded in the last year:

- Central District: Whiteland
- East District: Barton, Eastside (Connersville), Old Franklin
- North Central District: Hillsburg, Kokomo Faith
- North District: Grovertown
- Northwest District: Culver Poplar Grove, Deedsville, Santa Anna
- Southwest District: Rockport First
- West District: Crawfordsville Trinity

Ian Hall gave the following financial update:

- INUMC has experienced a significant decline in tithe giving: -9% (\$575,000) as of August 2020.
- INUMC received \$1,232,685 as part of the Payroll Protection Plan which is expected to be forgiven.
- Department expense lines are currently below the 59% benchmark.

Chris Lantz summarized the proposed 2021 budget, which is broken into two sections:

A) \$7M funds the mission and work of the Indiana Conference.

B) \$4.3M funds the worldwide ministry of The United Methodist Church.

A + B = C, \$11.3M, the total proposed budget for the Conference year 2021.

Shannon Stringer announced that \$50,000 has been put toward anti-racism and gave an update on the Conference's plan for making anti-racism more of a priority.

Motion: "that the Annual Conference approve the 2021 Annual Conference budget, as presented." The motion passed (90.7%).

Lisa Schubert Nowling presented a motion: "that develop a strategic plan that demonstrates our commitment to anti-racism and to actively dismantling systemic institutional racism in our Conference by January 31, 2021. I move that the Bishop, Extended Cabinet, Board of Ordained Ministry, and Board of Laity develop a specific plan that includes details of resource allocation, a timeline, and point people assigned to the strategies." The motion passed (75.5%).

Bishop Trimble has set the dates of June 10-12 for the 2021 Indiana Annual Conference at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana.

Laity address. David Johns, conference lay leader, challenged the conference with the question: Why are you here? "How do we treat the people we encounter? Jesus' expectation of us is that we're different than the rest of the world. We're here to bring help and hope," he said.

United Methodist Foundation of Indiana Inc. Manet Shettle made the motion that the annual conference affirm the slate for the Board of Directors of the United Methodist Foundation of Indiana, Inc. She presented the Class of 2020-2023: John Clay, Shalimar Holderly, Larry Price, Lee White. The motion passed (98.5%).

Board of Pension and Health Benefits. Susan Spaulding announced that Wespath will cover 100% of COVID treatment through the end of 2020, even if a deductible has not been met. And that churches will be receiving a refund because of decreased medical expenses thanks to digital consultations. She made the motion: that the report, including raising the Past Service Rate for years pre-1982, be approved as presented. The motion passed (96.6%).

Council on Finance and Administration. Rodney Frieden explained that the 2021 budget wasn't ready to present. "We're dealing with and juggling unknowns day to day and week to week and month to month," he said. The 2021 budget will be prepared and shared prior to the October Annual Conference session.

Emerging leaders. As Emily Krach opened the Emerging Leaders report she shared, "This is a reminder that we need to listen and be present with young people," referring to featured speaker Meadow Mertz.

Emily Reece, director of Church Development, presented two newly-chartered churches:

Disciples Korean United Methodist Church (West Lafayette) - January 2020

Abundant Vida Nueva United Methodist Church (Indianapolis) - December 2019

Phil Amerson made a motion that the Committee on Finance and Administration set aside 10% of the 2021 budget for anti-racism work. Bishop referred this motion to the Committee on Finance and Administration to consider before it's brought back before the conference.

Children Matter Most. Emily Krach presented one of our Missional Offerings: Children Matter Most, an initiative that began because of startling statistics: Indiana has the second highest infant mortality rate in the Midwest. Indiana has the highest rate in the country of teens who have considered suicide and the second-highest of those who have attempted it. Compared to neighboring states, Indiana has the highest rates of children in the foster care system. The Children Matter Most Team's goal is to inspire churches to partner with schools, inform others about adverse childhood experiences, and invite children to camp. "Children Matter Most: We must live this out based on the realities around us!" Emily said.

Retiree recognition. Bishop Trimble welcomed members with a greeting and prayer. The Rev. Bryan Langdoc, the Rev. Mary Dicken, Bill Hamm, Rick Provine, and Steve Snyder offered "And Can It Be (Amazing Love)" as a musical response. Fifty-seven retirees were honored for their 1,705 years of combined service. The Rev. Cheryl Garbe addressed members as a representative of the retiring class. Cheryl interviewed some former retirees and shared a few of their words of wisdom for the Retiring Class of 2020: "Retirement is a time to let go of that which has served you so well in the past to make room for that which will serve you so well in the future." "Travel as much as you can for as long as you can." "Give yourself a sabbath from ministry."

Four persons were commissioned for the work of deacon. Nine persons were commissioned for the work of elder. Two were recognized as associate members. One person was ordained into the Order of Deacon. Twelve were ordained into the Order of Elder.

Names of clergy delegates for 2021 General Conference: Russ Abel, Aleze Fulbright, Lisa Schubert Nowling, Ronnie Bell, Rob Fuquay, Jill Howard, Duane Carlisle, Larry Whitehead

Names of lay delegates for 2021 General Conference: Chris Hancock, Ian Hall, Shirley Dominick, Leah Padgett, Michael Womack, John Lomperis, Shannon Priddy, Amy Land.

There was a push for a more diverse delegation and Jennings, Lundy and Padgett are all in their 20s. R.C. Muhlbaier is 33.

Conference statistics for 2019: Membership 174,032 down from 180,045. Worship attend 84,554 down from 87,983. Church school attend 26,911 down from 27,883. Professions or reaffirmations of faith 2,395 down from 2,690. Adults/young adults small groups 45,607 down from 47,899. Worshipers engaged in mission 52,526 down from 52,619.

– Serena Acker, Indiana Conference communications officer; Oct 10, 2020.

**North Alabama Annual Conference.** United Methodists gathered in front of computers, tablets, cell phones and other internet-connected screens for their first virtual annual conference. The previous Sunday afternoon, Sept. 20, clergy members gathered online for the Clergy Executive Session. Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett presided over her eighth annual conference in North Alabama. The theme of the 2020 annual conference was Singing God's Song with the Forgotten. The focus was on one of the conference's four ministry priorities: Ministry with the Poor.

The session began with opening worship. After a prelude by Dr. Anthony Powell, an ensemble led the conference in singing the traditional opening hymn of "And Are We Yet Alive."

Bishop Leonard Fairley, guest preacher, offered an opening sermon based on the theme verses of Luke 4:18-19. In discussing ministry with the poor, Fairley encouraged North Alabama United Methodists by reminding them that, "You are both called and anointed to be bearers of God's grace and love and peace and justice. North Alabama, that calling remains the same even in the midst of fear — even in the midst of racism and polarization and anxiety. The calling remains the same, even in the face of COVID-19 and news cycles filled with



sensational soundbites. Our calling remains the same even in the midst of hatred and division that is being spread through social media. We are called and anointed by God as passionate, spiritual disciples."

During opening worship, Conference Director of Ministry of the Poor, Dr. Adlene Kufarimai, said a prayer of thanksgiving for the special offering designated to support the conference's QuadW Missional Internships, a potentially life-changing mission experience for young adults, ages 19-25 that allows them to experience ministry with the poor. The conference has sponsored 40 young adult interns over the past three summers. The generosity of local churches to this year's offering will provide for 2021 interns and beyond.

Following opening worship, Conference Secretary Dr. Dedric Cowser led conference members through its organizing work and adopting the consent agenda. Members used an online voting system to cast their votes. The voting totals were close to the largest number of votes cast last year during the 2019 Annual Conference using an in-person electronic voting system. (And much higher than the vote totals cast on the final day of the 2019 Annual Conference.)

The conference then began to work through the business that was not a part of its consent agenda. During this time:

The conference voted to postpone indefinitely the discussion of changes to its standing rules with a stated intention of holding that business until the annual conference could once again meet face to face.

After much discussion, the conference failed to vote to suspend its standing rules to allow for nominations for conference lay leader from the floor of conference. Current rules state that the nomination of the conference lay leader comes from the nominations team.

The conference overwhelmingly adopted the nominations team's Spiritual Leaders Report of those to serve on conference teams and committees.

After hearing a report from Camp Sumatanga outline the work of the Sumatanga Action Team, the conference voted to approve the new Sumatanga Board of Trustees. The conference also approved the sale of 58.23 acres of camp land previously leased by the buyer.

The conference approved the closing of seven churches.

The conference heard the report of the Ministry with the Poor Team, which included ways local churches and districts could participate in this conference priority.

Steve Lyles presented his last laity address as conference lay leader. He has served the annual conference since 2011. His address focused on the past, present and future of the church.

The conference then affirmed the nominations team's nomination of Northwest District Lay Leader Lisa Keys-Matthews to be the new conference lay leader.

Business closed with the report from the Board of Ordained Ministry, which highlighted new pastors, 20 retiring clergy and the 12 clergy who have died since last annual conference.

Halfway through the business, Bishop Wallace-Padgett invited the conference to pause from its work as she and the director of Ethnic Ministries led conference members and viewers through a time of guided prayer specifically focusing on the church's response to the coronavirus pandemic and racism.

The annual conference plenary closed with a time of closing worship. The service began as new appointments, most of which took place on July 1, were officially fixed. District superintendents read the names of those clergy who had moved to new appoints as all appointments scrolled across the screen. The district lay leaders then joined in a prayer of blessing for the clergy, churches and their ministry together.

Bishop Fairley shared another message with the annual conference, focusing how individuals who purposely reached out to his family living in poverty made a difference in his life.

"It's amazing what happens when you are in ministry with the poor. I would not be here with you now if there had not been people who took seriously what Jesus said on that day in that synagogue, as was his custom, that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to those who were oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. And the acceptable year of the Lord is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and share words of health, healing and hospitality," he said.

On Sunday, Sept. 27, two special worship services were held and livestreamed so all in the conference could be a part. During the Service of Licensing and Commissioning, the conference presented licenses to 12 new local pastors. The conference commissioned one provisional deacon and two provisional elders. (The average age of the provisional clergy is 35.

Later that afternoon during the Service of Ordination, the conference ordained five new full-connection elders. (The average age of the newly ordained clergy is 41.)

Names of delegates for the 2021 General Conference (elected in 2019):

General Conference:

- Clergy: Glenn Conner (Huntsville First United Methodist Church)
- Laity: Steve Lyles (Alexander City First United Methodist Church, Conference Lay Leader)
- Clergy: Dedric Cowser (New Beginnings United Methodist Church)
- Laity: Pat Meadows (Pleasant Hill United Methodist Church - Bessemer)
- Clergy: Kelly Clem (Northwest District Superintendent)
- Laity: Precious Kufarimai (St. Paul-Triana United Methodist Church)
- Clergy: Robin Scott (New Church Development & Palmerdale United Methodist Church)
- Laity: Ann Lee (Guntersville First United Methodist Church)

Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference:

- Clergy: Sherri Reynolds (Southwest District Superintendent)
- Laity: Michael Wilder (Guntersville First United Methodist Church)
- Clergy: Tiwirai Kufarimai (St. Paul Triana)
- Laity: Gail Hiatt (Geraldine First United Methodist Church)
- Clergy: Vaughn Stafford (Clearbranch United Methodist Church)
- Laity: Liz Bowlin (Sheffield First United Methodist Church)
- Clergy: Mary Henley (Helena United Methodist Church)
- Laity: Randall Ham (Fort Payne First United Methodist Church)

Reserves:

- Clergy: Sheri Ferguson (Ministry Health Coordinator, Board of Ordained Ministry)
- Laity: Scott Selman (Canterbury United Methodist Church; Conference Treasurer)
- Clergy: Paul Lawler (Christ Church)
- Laity: Howard Rew (Athens First United Methodist Church)
- Clergy: Brian Erickson (Trinity United Methodist Church - Homewood)
- Laity: Jacqueline Riggs (Christ Harbor United Methodist Church)  
– Danette Clifton, director of communication, North Alabama Conference; Sep 26, 2020.

### **Upper New York Annual Conference.**

Upper New York Conference, Oct 03, 2020

The 11th session of the Upper New York Annual Conference took place virtually on Oct. 3. This was the culmination of multiple weeks of events comprising different annual conference elements. Prior to the full

annual conference session on Oct. 3, the Upper New York Conference held a practice session on Sept. 18, Clergy Session on Sept. 19, and the Service of Ordination on Oct. 2.

The Service of Ordination was held in-person but by invitation only to allow for appropriate social distancing coupled with the requirement that Personal Protective Equipment be worn. There was also an open livestream of the service on the conference website, allowing those who could not be there in person to be a part of the service.

During the service:

- Two individuals were commissioned for the work of elder.
- Three individuals were commissioned for the work of a deacon.
- One individual was ordained to the Order of Deacon.
- Two individuals were ordained to the Order of Elder.
- Two individuals from the Korean United Methodist Church were recognized.

A full report is available at <http://bit.ly/UNY2020ordination>.

All other components of annual conference were held in a virtual meeting environment through a secure microsite, livestreaming, and live voting.

Hundreds of individuals logged in to the practice session to assure that their technology would work and to practice voting as well as what it is like to be recognized to speak in the virtual environment.

Due to the death of a close personal friend, Upper New York Resident Bishop, Mark J. Webb, was not able to preside over the Upper New York Clergy Session so Upper New York Conference Clergy had the unique opportunity to have Bishop John Schol of the Greater New Jersey Episcopal Area preside remotely. Other presenters and leaders were gathered in a makeshift studio, wearing PPE and following social distance guidelines, at the United Methodist Center in Liverpool, New York, to lead the event.

The makeshift studio was used again at the full conference session, where Bishop Mark J. Webb would preside. The majority of presenters and leaders were also gathered at the United Methodist Center, socially distanced and wearing PPE whenever possible or necessary, although several individuals did present remotely due to conflicts or health concerns.

The general feeling was of appreciation that while the Upper New York Annual Conference, originally scheduled to meet at the end of May, was still not able to gather in-person, the option of using technology to gather was available. Of course, there were those who struggled either with understanding how they system worked or with operating the technology, but there was a tech support phone number and email address to help them through in as timely a way as possible.

The technology worked well for most with the possible exception of some individuals reporting difficulty hearing and imperfect closed captioning during unscripted segments. This would later prompt the request of a declaratory decision on if this resulted in a lack of access for those who are hard of hearing, potentially in violation of Paragraph 603.4 of the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

The agenda for the annual conference session was limited to only the following items:

- Leadership Report
- Board of Pensions and Health Benefits Report & Recommendations
- Equitable Compensation Report & Recommendations
- Board of Trustees Report & Recommendations

- Committee on Nominations Recommendations
- Council on Finance & Administration Recommendations
- Acknowledgement of Appointments

Furthermore, while there was extensive discussion related to the organizational motion, the motion passed as originally written, which included language barring amendments.

There were no recommendations associated with the Leadership Report, but it did fulfill Disciplinary requirements for annual conference. A full report is available [here](#).

Three of four Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits recommendations accepted including recommendations to:

- Accept the 2021 housing/rental exclusion resolution designating 100% of United Methodist pension, severance or disability income as housing exclusion, in accordance with IRS Code section 107, from January 1, 2021, through December 31, 2021.
- Support the 2021 past service annuity rate for the pre-82 pension plan remain the same as for 2019 at \$645.
- Accept the 2021 Comprehensive Benefit Budget Plan.

An additional recommendation to reduce the health reimbursement account for retiree spouses by 50% was referred to the Conference Board of Pensions and Health and Conference Committee on Finance and Administration to reassess.

Four equitable compensation recommendations were supported including recommendations:

- For the standardized minimum base compensation that was established for the Upper New York Conference effective Jan. 1, 2017, stay the same.
- For the yearly increment amount that was established for the Upper New York Conference effective January 2020 stay the same.
- That an additional \$500 for each additional church on the pastoral charge (over one), not adjusted for part-time appointments remain in place.
- That no pastor's salary can be decreased as a result of the above policy, as long as they retain their current appointment.

The Upper New York Conference Trustees report included updates on topics including:

- Properties
- Audits
- Revenues/Expenditures
- Conference Property Insurance
- An update on New York State's Child Victims Act

The Child Victims Act removed the statute of limitation on survivors of childhood sexual abuse and has put some churches in the Upper New York Conference in a position where they may be liable for horrific deeds of childhood sexual abuse that took place decades ago. Following this update, the conference took time to pray for all those impacted by sexual abuse.

The trustees report concluded with affirming the closure of churches that had previously stopped worshipping and accepting the trustees report in its entirety. Additional information on the trustees report is available [here](#).

There were no changes to the report submitted by the Upper New York Committee on Nominations. However, the committee did take the time to explain that New York State's requirement that the conference elect conference trustees by written ballot means new trustees can't be elected during a virtual session. The Book of Discipline does allow the bishop and cabinet, on recommendation of the nominating committee, to fill

vacancies ad interim (between sessions of Annual Conference). The nominating report lists the three persons who will be appointed using this provision. They will serve only until our 2021 annual conference when new trustees will be elected by conference members using a written ballot.

Bishop Webb also acknowledged that Conference Lay Leader Susan Hardy, is stepped down. Drew Griffin, former Associate Lay Leader is the Conference Lay Leader this year, and Jessica White is now the Associate Lay Leader.

The budget presented by the Conference Council on Finance & Administration was supported. However, motions were passed that resulted in the annual conference requiring all ministry areas receiving an increase of more than \$5,000 to provide within three months a report on how their budget has and will be used. These areas include:

- Camp and Retreat
- Hispanic and Latino Ministries
- District Operations
- New Faith Communities
- Vital Congregations

Vital Congregations was specifically asked to provide information on Spiritual Leadership Incorporated (SLI), including:

- The coaches hired to train leaders
- How SLI helps grow and support a thriving United Methodist Church

Once the budget, motion, and report were approved, Kevin Nelson, a lay member, requested a declaratory decision be made regarding the budget. There was specific concern about if the formula used to calculate General Church Apportionments was in order.

The 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Upper New York Annual Conference concluded with an acknowledgement of appointments, thanking all those who made the session possible, and a prayer to send the body forth from outgoing Lay Leader Susan Hardy.

Membership stands at 140,544, up (or down). Decrease of 3,823 from the previous year.

Worship attendance stands at 39,127, up (or down). Decrease of 1,317.

Church school attendance stands at 10,247, up (or down). Decrease of 205.

Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2019, 1206, up (or down) from 2018. Decrease of 171.

Adults and young adults in small groups for 2019, 15,995, up (or down) from 2018. Decrease of 845.

Worshippers engaged in mission for 2019, 14,239, up (or down) from 2018. Increase of 1,869.

– Submitted by Stephen J. Hustedt, Director of Communications