

Monthly Update

September 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This edition of the September Monthly Update has more of the news of what is happening in the United Methodist Church, to include reports from several of the annual conferences (for the complete report, go to our website or request a hard copy from us). In the August Update we did not include much United Methodist-related news so we could examine what is happening in our society, from both a health-related perspective and also from one of social dynamics surrounding Covid19. We received pushback from some of our supporters. The reason that we had done that and why we include more such data here is because we need to know, and also for some of our supporters in their 90s. One issue that increasingly commands the interest of the UMC is that of “racism” and as played out in the “Black Lives Matter” movement; as you read about this, note especially that actions by church employees are financed by apportionments supported by your money. To give my views on this, please note my letter sent to my city’s Mayor Mitch Colvin:

I have given some thought about what is going on. Until I was 10 years old, our family lived in the Denver Heights section of San Antonio, Texas. My two brothers, my sister and I were the only “white” kids in the neighborhood (I dislike using terms denoting skin color but kind of need to). My older brother and I went to Smith Elementary, a not-very-good school over a mile away, so our parents took us out of school and sent us to Ben Milam Elementary (we had to catch 3 connecting city buses to get to that school in another part of town). All of our playmates walked to Dorie Miller Elementary School, a half-mile away (a brand new school). My best friend was “Frankie” Napier. He remembers us as being blood brothers. During that time a man and a woman moved into the neighborhood. A few weeks later, our mother was angry at them and told us that they must be communists, because they were really trying to divide us in the neighborhood. Even though our family moved to Palacios when my father retired from the Army, Frankie and I have kept in touch over the years....

On my first assignment to Germany as a second lieutenant, I was a special staff officer for the battalion commander. As LTC Porter’s Equal Opportunity Staff Officer (EOSO), I had been trained to investigate issues of discrimination – and did so. We had a cordial relationship and I had his complete support. Again, he and I have maintained a warm relationship over the years. Whenever I’m in Washington, DC, I visit him and his wife Shirley and go to their church – Bethlehem Baptist Church.

When doing research for the book “Hometown Heroes” one of the people included was Dorie Miller; I wanted to find out exactly who this guy was, since our neighborhood school was named after him. His story in Chapter 85 tells about his being awarded the Navy Cross for his actions at Pearl Harbor. I wanted to dedicate the book itself to Greg Bryant’s father, who had been killed in action and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (chapter 3 of the book).

I say all of this because the stuff going on right now really breaks my heart. What happened in Minneapolis was tragic, but there are some who are trying to exploit it, those who were looting and those who are anarchists. Don’t mistake the seriousness of those who want to bring down our country. We need to inform ourselves and stand against this.

Sadly, we as a society are not as close as we were when Frankie and I were 8, 9, and 10 years old living in San Antonio. I think I understand now more of what my mother was trying to tell us back then about the man and woman who had moved into our neighborhood. There is a lot of work going on to try to divide us as a people, and to get us fighting among ourselves.

Thank you for continuing to partner with us as we “contend for the faith” through your gifts and your prayers.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

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September 2020 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

We have to pitch our tents where we shall always have quiet times with God,
however noisy our times with the world may be. – Oswald Chambers

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The Good Stuff

+ ***Selfless compassion.*** “Twice this week, I have watched an elderly individual, fade into the busy life in which we all live. One man just needed Panadol for his wife but the shop assistant simply said it’s in aisle ‘6’. But he struggled to navigate the supermarket and as I watched him go in the wrong direction, I left all my groceries and took him [to] where he needed to go. Today, I watched an elderly man struggle in the heat, who had obviously had a fall with a huge scrape and blood on his leg. He walked past people in the cafe, while he slowly made his way to his car. Not one person stopped. Or looked. Or acknowledged him. I took him to his car and checked [to see if] he was ok. He told me he had a fall and wasn’t sure how the air con worked in his car so he just didn’t use it. I sat with him, until his air con kicked in and heard him talk about the old frail body that he is in, that fails him now, every single day.

“When you see an elderly person walking down the street, searching in the supermarket or struggling to their car, take a minute out of your busy schedule and ask them if they need a hand. Think about your grand parents and your parents and how [“irritated”] you would be if someone didn’t stop to help them. But more, think of them as you.

“Once upon a time they were you. They were busy, they had work, they had children, they were able. Today, they are just in an older body that is not going as fast as it used to and this busy life is confusing. They deserve our utmost respect and consideration. One day it will be you, it will be us. I wish more people [“cared”] about them and acknowledged them for their admirable existence and jeez I hope someday, not that far away, someone does it for me.”

Wise words from this young woman!

– Facebook post

Of Interest.

+ ***SCOTUS Decision.*** The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has decided that Nevada can allow 500 people in the Movie Theater, and 500 people in a Casino, but NOT more than 50 in a church. “But there is no world in which the Constitution permits Nevada to favor Caesars Palace over Calvary Chapel” – Neil Gorsuch; Facebook post; Jul 27, 2020.

+ ***On voting rights, we are not there yet.*** In the 100 years since the 19th Amendment’s ratification, the United States has made strides in increasing access to the ballot. But there are still many barriers to citizens exercising their right to vote, write the Revs. [Note: There is nothing to stop someone from voting, so what are the “obstacles” they see? – AOM]

– Madeline Luzinski & Mary Mitchell, Florida Conference; as reported in the UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

+ ***Lawson – Black Lives Matter a religious movement.*** The Rev. James Lawson, a United Methodist elder who is now 91, says that his life work has been to create a nonviolent nation. Watching the Black Lives Matter campaign today, Lawson said this movement is the most important nonviolent campaign since the movement in the 1960s that he and the late John Lewis and C.T. Vivian helped lead. He lives in Los Angeles, where he is pastor emeritus of Holman United Methodist Church. “They have organized around the grief and offered a ministry to the families of the Black men and women who have been shot and killed by police. They have helped those families to grieve, helped them to be empowered – to not let the murder, the execution of their child, go quietly away.” He calls it a modern religious movement. “Now Trayvon Martin’s father and mother

are involved with George Floyd's family. They have surrounded almost every family with a ministry of healing." [Note: There is no talk of drugs, resisting arrest, or assault. – AOM]

– By Kathy L. Gilbert, United Methodist News Service (UMNS), as reported in UM News Weekly Digest Jul 24, 2020.

+ ***Teacher takes to TikTok.*** Tricia Zinnecker, a sixth-grade teacher and member of Kingwood United Methodist Church, has used TikTok to post videos during the pandemic. It's a way of demonstrating to students a smart approach to social media. Her Houston-area church also has turned to TikTok for student ministry. [Note: TikTok has been determined to be used by the Chinese Communist Party to gather information, a dangerous thing to use – or to teach kids. – AOM]

– Lindsay Peyton, Texas Conference, as reported in the UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

+ ***Dr. James Dobson's concerns.***

Dear Friends,

As I write this newsletter, voters across this nation are only a few short months away from the next general election. What an ominous time this is for our 244-year-old republic. Its future hangs in the balance. The choices we make on November 3rd will send this nation down one of two dramatically different paths. The wrong decision will be catastrophic. I agree with former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, who said recently that the next election will be "the most important since 1860."¹ He also warned that if we appease or ignore the violence and anarchy occurring in the streets, it might be the end of civilization as we have known it.² Those are sobering words coming from a man who has stood at the pinnacle of national power.

Mr. Gingrich referred to the significance of 1860 because that was the year Abraham Lincoln was elected president. I'm sure the Speaker would agree that the following election of 1864 was also critical to the future of the nation. Lincoln and his opponent, Maj. Gen. George McClellan, were in a hotly contested campaign for the White House that could have gone either way. The "war between the states," as it was called, had been raging for three ghastly years, and the entire nation was staggered by reports from the bloody battlefield. Lincoln was running for a second term, and he campaigned on the promise of finishing the war and preserving the Union. These were momentous times for the young nation. During the first week of January 1863, the President signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves.

Democrats and their presidential candidate, Maj. Gen. McClellan, initially campaigned on a "peace platform," pledging to end the war and send soldiers home. As the election approached, he talked more about negotiating to let the South establish a separate government whose cornerstone would be slavery. If McClellan had been elected, there would have been no foreseeable end to the inherent evil of buying and selling human beings and treating them like cattle. Thus, the Civil War was a struggle for the soul of America. The summer before the election, the war was going badly for the Union. Lincoln, in fact, was convinced he was going to lose the election.³ He wrote the following memorandum on August 23, 1864, asking his Cabinet to accept the grim prospects for his re-election. These are his words:

"This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such grounds that I cannot possibly save it afterwards."⁴

No wonder Lincoln dealt at times with depression. Clearly, the Union was a hair's breadth away from losing the war. But then, the tide began to turn. One historian wrote, "The political landscape shifted dramatically when Gen. William T. Sherman took Atlanta in early September. This major military shift, coupled with the severe internal strife within the Democratic Party, solidified Lincoln's chance at victory."⁵ As you know, Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans won the election of 1864 in a landslide. McClellan was defeated by more than 500,000 popular votes and 191 electoral votes. An estimated 78 percent of Union soldiers cast their ballots in favor of Lincoln. McClellan took just three states: Kentucky, Delaware, and his home state of New Jersey.⁶ Less than two months after Lincoln's inauguration, he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. He is said to have been the "last casualty" of the Civil War.⁷

Why have I recounted our Civil War history and the election of 1864 at this time in our history? It is for two reasons. The first is to consider some striking similarities between then and now. Our nation is divided like no time since the Civil War. Lawlessness and anarchy stalk the cities as angry mobs riot, burn, loot, rob, and kill innocent bystanders. Cultural monuments are being destroyed. Scores of people have been shot. Our courageous police officers are being brutally attacked by the same people they have vowed to protect. A man and his son stopped to ask for directions, and he was gunned down on the spot. A one-year-old baby was shot in the stomach while he sat in his stroller. The child died at the hospital.

What began as a justified and lawful protest in response to George Floyd's senseless murder by a rogue police officer has morphed into violence for the sake of violence. Hatred flows in the streets, including vitriol directed at the President of the United States or anyone who dares to support him or his policies. Constitutional rights to freedom of speech and religious liberty are being trampled. There is also widespread belief that violence and anarchy are being organized and funded by powerful forces that are maneuvering America toward a socialist dictatorship. There is always a kingmaker behind such lawlessness. Most disturbing is open talk of another civil war. It is troubling to even utter those words. The last time Americans faced off against each other, 600,000 soldiers died. May God forbid it from happening again.

During the revolution of the 1960s, I recall a ubiquitous bumper sticker that read, "What if they gave a war and nobody came?" It was a catchy phrase that made sense to those who opposed the Vietnam War. But my reaction to it then and now is "What if they gave a war and only one side came?" That question keeps me awake at night. There are multiple millions of passive Americans out there today, many of them Christians, who are clueless about what is happening to their homeland. [Emphasis added. – AOM] They are losing something precious and irreplaceable. Do they not understand that their children and those who are yet to be born will live in tyranny if we fail them on our watch? Countless young men and women have laid down their lives on battlefields around the world to protect liberty and our way of life. Now, what they purchased for us with their blood is slipping away. Disengaged people won't lift a finger to preserve this great land. They won't take even a few minutes to go to their polling places to vote. There are also thousands of pastors who won't allow voting registration tables in the lobbies of their churches. Don't they know or care that America is on the ropes? Hordes of angry anarchists are salivating over the next election, hoping to push America over a cliff. If they succeed, as Newt Gingrich said, Western civilization will never recover. Is there anyone left who believes some things are worth dying for? Aren't there patriots out there such as Patrick Henry who said in defiance of British tyranny, "Give me liberty or give me death!"? That was the spirit during his day. The Declaration of Independence closed with these words endorsed by the signers, "We pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." They knew they would be hanged if they lost the war. Why did they do it? Because they loved their country enough to die for it.

How I pray for the emergence of silent, intimidated Americans who will come out of their hiding places to let their voices be heard on Election Day 2020. There must be tens of thousands of ministers in our midst who, like the Black Robed Regiment of the Revolutionary War, will strip off their clerical garb and fight valiantly for religious liberty. If these men and women of faith and conviction don't come to the rescue of their country, it is doomed.

During the Civil War, untold soldiers gave their lives to preserve the integrity of the United States of America and to end the tragedy of slavery. Here is the question of the hour: Are you and our brothers and sisters willing to carry the bloodstained banner around which our predecessors rallied? We will know the answer on November 3rd.

That brings us to the second reason I have addressed the Civil War and the election of 1864. It is to remind us that voting matters. Each presidential campaign has been important, but some have had jaw-dropping and nation-shaping consequences. I believe we are at such a pivotal moment now. You can be certain that America will be forever changed by the political party that gets its supporters to the polls. They will win the day – and the future.

Unfortunately, the majority of Christians have a record of not showing up on Election Day. It is unbelievably sad. As many as 75 percent of them sit on their hands, apparently assuming that their votes don't matter. They are wrong. Voting ALWAYS matters. George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000 by 537 votes in a nation of 130 million registered voters. Many down-ballot contests have been won or lost by a single vote.

I plead with you to register and vote in this presidential election. I won't try to tell you who to vote for because you can figure it out for yourselves. But I will suggest how you might evaluate the situation we face. I'll close with seven critical issues that have stunning significance for the nation. Please think hard about them, and then go to the polls.

1. The Next Generation. There is a fierce battle being waged now in the nation's classrooms for the hearts and souls of our children and grandchildren. Those of us who are passionately committed to the Judeo-Christian system of beliefs are losing our kids right before our eyes. They are being force-fed a radical curriculum that is godless, anti-American, and sexually perverse. Make no mistake, the left and secular culture are manipulating the minds of your sons and daughters every day of the year. I urge you to be extremely careful about those whom you set in power over your children. Protect them with your very lives.

2. The Sanctity of Human Life. All life is sacred and is a gift from Almighty God. But as you know, America has the blood of innocents on its hands. Since 1973, more than 60 million babies have been murdered through abortion and countless lives have ended by euthanasia. This is the most tragic holocaust in the history of the world! Some states have even passed laws allowing wounded and suffering infants to lie alone on porcelain trays after somehow surviving unsuccessful abortions. They will die without the comfort of their mothers' breasts. If that doesn't touch your heart, you are without compassion. I hope you will not cast a single vote for any politician who supports such wickedness.

3. Marriage and Family. The family is God's original building block for society. Marriage continues to serve as the foundation for every dimension of human life. Everything of value rests on it, including procreation and the care and training of children. If that ground floor is weakened or undermined, the entire superstructure of civil society will come crashing down. But listen carefully: powerful and highly funded forces, including LGBTQ and other leftist entities, are determined to destroy the family as an institution. It is already on its knees, and its future is grim. Before you vote, find out what position the candidates have taken on this issue. Then vote accordingly.

4. Religious Liberty. The first item listed in the Bill of Rights addresses the issue of religious liberty. All the other enumerated rights flow from that fundamental freedom. That is why it is alarming to recognize that this right to worship and honor God as we choose is under vicious attack today. The courts have done the greatest damage, but now an entire sub-culture is trying to bring down the Christian faith. Whether it has invaded your private world or not, it is at your front door. It was this primary concern that led to the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War in 1776. We can't compromise one jot or tittle within that fundamental right. Fight for it with every ounce of your strength and determination. Don't let the government close the doors of your church or tell you when you can sing praises to the Lord Almighty. They have a devious agenda, and it is dangerous. Be ready to go to the mat in defense of what you believe. And let this passion influence how you cast your ballot in November. Here I stand. Will you join me?

5. Capitalism v. Socialism. It is difficult to believe that for the first time in American history, our nation appears to be thinking about trading our democratic way of life for the tyranny of socialism. I can hardly catch my breath. Could we really consider abandoning the beloved system of government that was designed to be of the people, by the people, and for the people? Is it true that up to 40 percent of millennials and others are prepared to surrender their liberties in exchange for the absolute authority of the state? Democracy and capitalism have made ours the most powerful and successful nation in the history of the world. Are we really considering scuttling the system that has served us for 244 years in exchange for what some people call "free stuff?" I pray not! But that option awaits you in the polling booth.

6. The Judicial System. Given recent rulings, we know that judicial overreach has almost ruined this great nation. Justices and judges are constitutionally charged to interpret the law, not make law. But again, and again, they have overstepped their authority and brought us atrocities such as abortion on demand, same-sex marriage, and the so-called "separation of church and state," which doesn't appear in the Constitution. Most recently, the Supreme Court handed down one of its most egregious rulings since *Roe v. Wade*. It is the case of *Bostock v. Clayton County*. This decision was not based on constitutional law but on the whims of six justices. It created a new legal definition of sex out of thin air. Lawyers tell us that this ruling will affect every dimension of culture

and haunt the nation as long as it endures. Please don't vote for politicians who will expand, rather than limit, the power of the judiciary.

7. The Nation of Israel. Scripture tells that those who bless Israel will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Our prayer is that the next Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. will continue to promote and cultivate a vibrant bond of friendship with the nation of Israel, which is our only ally in the Middle East. Anti-Semitism and all forms of racial discrimination are inherently evil, and we condemn them categorically. We are a nation that is dedicated to "freedom and justice for all" (The U.S. Pledge of Allegiance).

I could list dozens of other issues that should be considered as we vote on November 3rd. I will end with this final statement from Abraham Lincoln. He said: "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light that I have."⁸

Let us come boldly before the throne of grace and ask God for His mercy on America.

Sincerely, Dr. James Dobson

P.S. This just came to my attention. Would you like to see where America may be headed if it abandons the sanctity of human life? New Zealand recently passed legislation that allows abortion up to the moment of birth, for any reason. That means a baby can be killed for sex-selection purposes or for the presence of disabilities, such as a cleft palate, Down syndrome, or yes, being born alive after a botched abortion. Do you shudder at those grotesque words? Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had promised, if elected, not to allow any kind of deadly discrimination, but she broke her word. We can anticipate something similar happening in America if anti-life factions prevail.

1. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/newt-gingrich-trump-biden-abraham-lincoln-election>

2. <https://justthenews.com/nation/culture/allowing-vandals-destroy-statues-end-civilization-weve-known-it-gingrich-says>

3. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/election-1864>

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/election-1864>

7. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100377337>

8. https://archive.org/stream/abrahamlincolnqulinc_29/abrahamlincolnqulinc_29_djvu.txt

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+ *Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) could save up to 100,000 lives if used for COVID-19: Yale epidemiology professor.*

Dr. Harvey Risch, an epidemiology professor at Yale School of Public Health, said on Tuesday that he thinks HCQ could save 75,000 to 100,000 lives if the drug is widely used to treat coronavirus. "There are many doctors that I've gotten hostile remarks about saying that all the evidence is bad for it and, in fact, that is not true at all," Risch told "Ingraham Angle," adding that he believes the drug can be used as a "prophylactic" for front-line workers, as other countries like India have done. Researchers at the Henry Ford Health System in Southeast Michigan have found that early administration of HCQ makes hospitalized patients substantially less likely to die. The study, published in the International Journal of Infectious Diseases, determined that HCQ provided a "66% hazard ratio reduction," and HCQ and azithromycin a 71% reduction, compared with neither treatment. In-hospital mortality was 18.1% overall; 13.5% with just HCQ, 22.4% with azithromycin alone, and 26.4% with neither drug. "Prospective trials are needed" for further review, the researchers note, even as they concluded: "In this multi-hospital assessment, when controlling for COVID-19 risk factors, treatment with HCQ alone and in combination with azithromycin was associated with reduction in COVID-19 associated

mortality.” “Our results do differ from some other studies,” Dr. Marcus Zervos, who heads the hospital’s infectious diseases unit, said at a news conference. “What we think was important in ours ... is that patients were treated early. For HCQ to have a benefit, it needs to begin before the patients begin to suffer some of the severe immune reactions that patients can have with COVID.”

Risch said that most in the mainstream are not allowing people to speak about the evidence on the effectiveness of HCQ. Risch also said discussions about the drug became “political” as opposed to “medical.” “All the evidence is actually good for it when it is used in outpatient uses. Nevertheless, the only people who actually say that are a whole pile of doctors who are on the front lines treating those patients across the country and they are the ones who are at risk being forced not to do it,” Risch said, arguing that the mainstream media is not covering the benefits of HCQ.

[Note: Mainstream media, Facebook plus other “social media” are complicit in suppressing the truth about it. – AOM]

– Joshua Nelson, Fox News; July 21, 2020.

United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race. Panelists urge action on race issues.

[Note: The refusal to admit BLM responsibility by in rioting or the group’s origin; supported by UM money. – AOM]

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UM News) – Four veteran activists compared Black Lives Matter with the 1960s civil rights movement and urged more activism against racism during a virtual discussion. The internet broadcast was part of a series of United Methodist town hall meetings on race. United Methodists need to “get off the sidewalks” and engage directly in the campaign for racial equality, said Bishop Joel N. Martinez, during the second of several virtual panel discussions on racism. The Aug. 19 broadcast on the United Methodist Communications website and Facebook page was part of a series of denominational town hall meetings held to discuss eradicating racism. Also taking part were retired United Methodist pastor and civil rights leader the Rev. James Lawson; Sue Thrasher, co-founder of the Southern Student Organizing Committee; and Clara Ester, a deaconess and vice president of the United Methodist Women Board of Directors. The panelists agreed that Black Lives Matter is a continuation of the 1960s civil rights movement. “There have been over 700 cities in which there have been nonviolent demonstrations in the year 2020,” Lawson said. “These have been by-and-large nonviolent and actively engaged.” Violence during recent protests in Portland, Oregon, Seattle and other cities was the product of police and federal law enforcement agents “actively engaged in provocative behavior hidden underneath a movement” and not the fault of the Black Lives Matter movement, he said.

The panel was moderated by Erin Hawkins, outgoing top executive of the United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race, the denominational agency that cultivates racial inclusion and the full participation of all people into the work, witness, and life of The United Methodist Church. – By Jim Patterson, UM News, Aug. 19, 2020.

(UM) Women/Women’s Issues. Dismantle racist systems, UMW board says. The board of directors for United Methodist Women has affirmed a statement calling for the dismantling of racist systems “in our communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.” The UMW Board Affirms “Black Lives Matter to God” in New Call to Action to Members. – Yvette Moore, Director of Public Relations & Marketing, UMW Communications; July 17, 2020.

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Ours may become the first civilization destroyed, not by the power of our enemies, but by the ignorance of our teachers and the dangerous nonsense they are teaching our children. In an age of artificial intelligence, they are creating

artificial stupidity. ~Thomas Sowell; Thomas Sowell (2002). “Controversial Essays”, Hoover Inst Press

Global Outlook

There is no difference between communism and socialism, except in the means of achieving the same ultimate end: communism proposes to enslave men by force, socialism – by vote. It is merely the difference between murder and suicide. ~ Ayn Rand; Ayn Rand (1988). “The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z”, p.466, Penguin

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Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone bishop dead at 63.

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone (UM News) – Sierra Leone Area Bishop John K. Yambasu was remembered in The UMC for his leadership seeking unity and compromise and in his own country for his response to Ebola, a deadly landslide and COVID-19. He died at 63 in a car accident. – Kathy L. Gilbert, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

Annual Conference Reports

Arkansas Annual Conference..Members

The 2020 meeting of the Arkansas Annual Conference was different than any past gathering, in more ways than one.

Taking place on June 13, 9 a.m.–1 p.m., this year’s annual conference was a one-day meeting, held completely online via the Zoom video conferencing platform, and took the place of the usual three-day conference at Bank OZK Arena in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

“It’s at this time that I would usually say, ‘Welcome to the Arkansas Annual Conference in Hot Springs, Little Rock, or Rogers.’ Today, I get to give a first-ever greeting. Welcome to the Arkansas Annual Conference, wherever you are!” said Bishop Gary Mueller, in his opening address to the conference.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended all in-person gatherings planned by the Arkansas Conference in 2020, which forced the meeting to be moved online in order to protect the health and well-being of the attendees.

The virtual conference, which was made possible by Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson’s Executive Order 20-15 in early April, was a stripped-down and condensed version of the usual annual meeting and consisted only of business deemed essential by the conference staff and cabinet.

Not only was this year a first for the manner and location of our conference, but it also arrived during the middle of massive protests across all 50 states and the world over the killing of George Floyd, a black man, at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, a white man.

The Bishop’s Cabinet released a unified statement a few days prior to the meeting, which stated the commitment of the conference to better work toward eradicating racism, listening more to black voices within the conference, and putting into action a plan for creating a more just and equal environment for people of color within the conference.

At the start of the Conference, Bishop Mueller asked for a moment of silence to be taken to honor the memory of George Floyd. A silent video with a picture of George Floyd played for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the amount of time that Officer Chauvin had his knee on Floyd’s neck before Floyd died from his injuries.

Afterward, the Rev. Mark Norman, Southeast District superintendent, offered a powerful prayer to the conference, asking for justice to be served, healing to happen, and for us all to remember the work of John Wesley and the mission of United Methodists to offer justice and peace to a broken world.

During the afternoon business session, Bishop Mueller presented more details on new initiatives the conference would be taking to better support and work with members of the black community, both clergy and laity, in the Arkansas Conference.

Part of the initiative includes a partnership with Philander Smith College, a historically black United Methodist-related college, for an annual mandatory training event for clergy with Philander's Center for Social Justice. This training would work to educate clergy on issues related to race and better equip them to understand the needs of the black communities they serve.

Other elements of the initiative include a new landing page on the conference website dedicated to dismantling racism in the church. Links to resources on the topic of racism and race will be included on the page in the coming weeks.

Additionally, the Arkansas Conference Cabinet will undergo implicit bias training provided by the United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race. Small groups of black clergy will also be invited to meet with the bishop and district superintendents to voice their concerns and questions.

The Rev. Rashim Merriwether, who currently serves as the developer of Ethnic Faith Communities in the Center for Connectional Ministries, has also been appointed as a member of the cabinet to increase the representation and voice of the black community in the Arkansas Conference.

And finally, increased funding for ethnic ministries in the conference, as well as a new working group to develop strategic plans for black churches in Little Rock, were announced.

At the conclusion of Bishop Mueller's presentation, the Rev. Michael Roberts, First United Methodist Church Conway, presented legislation that proposed using funds from the Connected in Christ Endowment Fund, in the amount of \$550,000, to purchase St. James Pine Bluff from the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas and deed it back to the congregation for continued ministry.

The church fell into financial distress after a previous pastor was implicated in an embezzlement scheme with a former Arkansas state representative in 2018, which resulted in the church not being able to pay the mortgage held by the Methodist Foundation. This resulted in the church voluntarily deeding the property to the Methodist Foundation.

The legislation passed on a vote of 577- 69. In addition to the congregation regaining control of their church property, the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas has awarded St. James with a \$100,000 grant which will be used to renovate existing space into a new kitchen and dining area for the church.

"I am very excited about the recent transaction between the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas, The Arkansas Annual Conference, and St. James United Methodist Church, Pine Bluff," said the Rev. Wayne Clark, president and CEO of the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas. "A plan that truly helps the local church, campus ministry, and the annual conference do mission and ministry better is a blessing to everyone. I continue to be amazed at how God works."

The 2020–21 Conference Center for Finance & Administration report was presented in the morning business session by Todd Burris and the Rev. Brittany Richardson Watson.

Overall, the conference budget, which we are now calling the Conference Spending Plan to better reflect the goals of the conference, saw a reduction from \$10,547,689 in the 2019–20 fiscal year to \$8,429,924 in the 2020-21 fiscal year. That translates to a 20% overall reduction in budget.

Factors that contributed to the lower spending plan include the reduction of conference staff, as well as the dissolving of the Center for Multiplying Disciples. The Rev. Merriwether, the only remaining member of the center's staff as of July 1, will be moved to the Center for Connectional Ministries, which will also absorb the remaining budget for New Places for New People.

Additionally, effective July 1, the 10% tithe for conference apportionments will increase by .5% to help the transition of district offices to the conference office. This increase in tithing will last for one year, from July 1, 2020, to July 1, 2021. After that time, conference apportionments will return to 10%.

The CF&A Spending Plan was adopted by the conference, 631–25.

For more detailed information on the Conference Spending Plan, please refer to Pages 9-23 of the Pre-Conference Journal.

The clergy session of the 2020 annual conference took place prior to the June 13 meeting. During the session, seven people were approved to be ordained as elders in full connection: The Revs. Andrea Cummings, Brad Moore, Daniel Read, Doug Phillips, Jonathan Bevil, Matthew Carter and Taylor Loy.

The 2020 Ordination Service is tentatively scheduled for Aug. 30 at 4 p.m. A location has not yet been announced.

The Rev. J.J. Whitney, current chaplain at Hendrix College and senior pastor at Bentonville First United Methodist Church beginning July 1, was the recipient of this year's Jim Beal Barnabas Award. The Barnabas Award is given annually by the Board of Ordained Ministry to a person, lay or clergy, who has a heart for pastors and mentoring others. It is given in remembrance of the late Rev. Jim Beal.

Retirees and Celebration of Life.

Although it looked quite different this year, the Arkansas Annual Conference was able to find a way to honor our faithful pastors who retired this year, as well as clergy and clergy spouses who passed away since our last meeting.

A Retiree Service video was presented, with Bishop Mueller offering a few words of encouragement to the 21 retirees who, combined, served for 572 years of service.

The Celebration of Life Service, honored the memory of the clergy and clergy spouses lost this year. Additionally, special recognition was given to the family of Rebecca Davis, administrative assistant for Connectional Ministries, who passed away shortly before annual conference after many years battling cancer.

Next year's annual conference is scheduled for June in Hot Springs, Arkansas. An exact date will be announced later. An order form for print copies of the Conference Journal and Directory will be available soon.

To view the 2020 Arkansas Annual Conference in its entirety, watch the video.

Membership stands at 121,168 for 2019, down 3,682 from 2018.

Worship attendance stands at 44,261, down 365.

Church school attendance stands at 21,435, down 609.

Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2019 1423, down 263 from 2018.

Adults and young adults in small groups for 2019 1,990, down 25.

Worshippers engaged in mission for 2019 at 28,289, down 3,427 from 2018.

– Caleb Hennington, digital content editor; Jun 13, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020..

Desert Southwest Annual Conference..Members

The 36th Desert Southwest Annual Conference session was held online on June 12-13, 2020.

"For Such a Time as This," the theme for this year's session, was relevant as the country's reality of rising racial tension, continued economic and political divides, demoralizing immigration issues, and the isolation from COVID-19 brought justice and equality to the forefront.

Throughout the session video messages from clergy and laity shared informative, contemplative, and prayerful pleas for action and grace. During the opening episcopal message, the officiating bishop, Robert T. Hoshibata, echoed the call to act for justice, asking all those that are willing to do something to record a video message where they proclaimed the following on social media:

"Hello, my name is (your name). I am a United Methodist, and a child of God. I join with United Methodists in the Desert Southwest Conference in remembering the vows I spoke when I dedicated my life to Jesus Christ when I was baptized.

I renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent for my part in supporting systems of racism and oppression.

I accept the freedom and power God gives me to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. I recognize that all persons are children of God and are created in the image of God. I pledge to continue to live my life in this covenant until all persons are treated with equality and justice prevails."

During the Laity Session, Bishop Hoshibata and Conference Lay Leader Laurie Lineberry engaged in a conversation-style interview to empower laity on their part of transforming the world.

Gwen Bortner, Project Manager for the Western Jurisdiction, led an inspiring mix of teachable videos, discussion topics, and idea-generating. The conversation via chat in Zoom was tremendous. But Gwen didn't want people that attended the Laity Session to get energized just for the day. She wanted the laity to come up with a way for them to build relationships with each other so that they could continue to bounce ideas off each other, be in prayer together, learn from each other, and establish accountability. The creation of a Desert Southwest Conference Facebook Group for Laity moments after the idea was shared prompted many to join immediately. The Group URL is <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DSCLaity> and open for new members from the Desert Southwest Conference.

This year's mission project supported the need for clean water for our siblings on the Navajo reservation. Together, the conference raised \$30,400.31 and the people of the Desert Southwest Conference did not stop. Since that report, the total has risen to \$70,000 and donations for this project will continue to be received through the end of July. To find out more, visit <https://dscumc.org/annual-conference/mission-project/>.

Resolutions, recommendations, and legislation were submitted and available for review at <https://dscumc.org/ac>. The legislation items and the Conference budget were referred to the Covenant Council.

The following items on the Consent Calendar – PASSED

CF&A Recommendation No. 2 – Special Days and Causes

CF&A Recommendation No. 3 – Conference Advance and Benevolence Specials

CF&A Recommendation No. 4 – Other Recommendations (level 1 exempt compensation, employee expenses, mileage reimbursement rates, and spending within budgets)

Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits Recommendation No. 1 – Annuity Rate and Past Service Obligation

Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits Recommendation No. 2 – Resolution Relating to Rental/Housing Allowance for Retired or Disabled Clergy persons of the Desert Southwest Conference

Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits Recommendation No. 3 – Resolution Relating to Local Church Funding for the Clergy Retirement Security Program in 2021

The following recommendations were approved as submitted.

Commission on Equitable Compensation Recommendation – Base Cash Compensation and Housing – 2021

Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits Recommendation No. 4 – Resolution Relating to HealthFlex Exchange Participant Contribution Levels and Church Payment Rate

Board of Trustees Recommendation – Master Insurance Program 2021-2024

Personnel Committee Recommendation No. 1 – Changes to Exempt Salary Levels

Personnel Committee Recommendation No. 2 – Changes to Non-Exempt Salary Levels

Conference Nominations Report

Changes in Leadership

Clergy deaths in the conference: the Revs. Cynthia Langston Kirk, Roger Stressman, Phyllis Ayers Nelson, Sandra Kimbel and Pastors Mavae Koli and Dale Jensen.

Retirements: The Revs. Michael Bryant, Rula Colvin, Mark Conrad, Valerie Fairchild, Kim Gladding, Lois Hedden, Julius Keller, Billy Martin, Beverly Ritland, Deanna Self-Price, Sherylan Gay Thorson, Jim Wallasky.

Church Closures/Changes

Camp Verde United Methodist Church closed

Youngtown United Methodist Church closed

Most of the churches of the Desert Southwest Conference adopted online worship and virtual communities of faith or embraced a phone-tree platform to keep their congregation connected.

Reporting statistics are as follows:

Membership stands at 25,990 for 2019, down from 27,972 in 2018.

Worship attendance stands at 17,795 for 2019, down from 18,616 in 2018.

Church school attendance stands at 4,030 for 2019, up from 3,880 in 2018.

Professions or reaffirmations of faith stands at 635 for 2019, down from 713 in 2018.

Adults and young adults in small groups stands at 8,520 for 2019, down from 8,687 in 2018.

Worshippers engaged in mission stands at 12,302 for 2019, up from 11,889 in 2018.

Homework

Due to time restraints, some of the legislation proposed for the Annual Conference differed to the Covenant Council. The group met on June 25, 2020, via Zoom, and the following actions were decided.

Juneteenth Legislation – PASSED

Petition Concerning the Treatment of Asylees and Refugees – APPROVED

Petition Concerning the Treatment of Immigrants – APPROVED

Resolution Concerning the Treatment of Asylees and Refugees – APPROVED

Resolution Concerning the Treatment of Immigrants – APPROVED

Supplement to Asylees and Refugees Petition – APPROVED

Resolution to Publish Retired Salaries – PASSED

Resolution to Address DSC Budget – REFERRED AS AMENDED TO A TASK FORCE

Black Lives Matter Legislation – (To be considered at next Covenant Council)

DSC Budget Document – ADOPTED AS AMENDED

Lay Members to Annual Conference may share this report with their church and find the items submitted prior to Annual Conference available at <https://dscumc.org/annual-conference/documents/>. Resources shared during the session are available at <https://dscumc.org/annual-conference/local-church-resources/>. A copy of the items submitted for consideration by Covenant Council are available at <https://dscumc.org/covenant-council>.

– Christina Dillabough, conference communicator; Jun 13, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

Great Plains Annual Conference..Members

May 30, via teleconference, with videotaped worship. Live conference scheduled in October in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Calling it an unprecedented move for “unprecedented times,” Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. opened an abbreviated, condensed Great Plains Annual Conference session the morning of May 30.

The three-plus hour session was conducted via a phone conference call that had early technical glitches but eventually allowed clergy and laity representatives to vote on key business items. Worship videos were published on the conference Facebook page and website the evening of May 29 and the afternoon of May 30.

“This is exciting, because we’re the early adapters here,” Bishop Saenz said of conducting a conference via telephone because of the coronavirus.

Time-sensitive matters were voted on in the conference, with other items to take place in a special, in-person session scheduled for Oct. 1-4 in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Approved during the special session:

- The sale of Camp Comeca near Cozad, Nebraska, for \$20,000 to Cozad Camping Ministry. The United Methodist camp, which opened in 1955, had been operating at a \$300,000 deficit, the Rev. Bill Ritter, chair of Great Plains United Methodist Camps Inc., said during the call. The sale was approved 879-33, with 23 abstaining.
- The ratification of disaffiliation agreements for six churches, all in Kansas: Abilene Emmanuel, Aulne, Bartlett, Benton, Esbon and Norcatur. “As we part, we do so with mercy,” the bishop said in his prayer for the churches. The disaffiliation passed 770-69, with 55 abstentions.
- The closing of 14 churches: Beemer and Long Pine in Nebraska, and Burns, Carneiro, Cassoday, Greeley, Iola Calvary, Kansas City Metropolitan Avenue, McGraw (Hoxie), Pomona, Topeka St. Peter, Walnut, Wichita Brookside and Wichita Dawson in Kansas. The closings passed 908-14, with 28 abstaining. All closings were planned prior to the pandemic.
- A recommendation from the personnel committee that minimum pastoral salaries at all levels remain the same as 2019-20. The Rev. Craig Hauschild, chair of the personnel committee, said the pay was recommended because of the pandemic precautions that have hit local churches. Minimum compensation will remain \$44,921 for full elders and deacons; \$42,486 for provisional elders and deacons; \$40,051 for associate members; and \$37,617 for full-time local pastors. It was approved 814-20, with seven abstentions.

In addition, a resolution from the 2019 conference for a pastoral renewal leave policy was withdrawn with possible consideration during the October special session.

Opening the conference call, Bishop Saenz recognized that May 30 would have been the final day of the annual conference session scheduled for Stormont-Vail Event Center in Topeka.

“We will miss not seeing each other, we will miss fellowship, we will miss worshipping together,” the bishop said.

Saenz also acknowledged two recent racial incidents: the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, an African American man jogging in Georgia, and George Floyd, an African American who died in police custody in Minneapolis.

“We are broken over what we see in our nation even today,” he said.

Read a transcript of the bishop’s prayer here.

The bishop also spoke to the disaffiliation of six churches.

“Friends, this is tough. I was writing a prayer for this time this morning, and it hit me in a way that I hadn’t really thought of it before, that we come to this time when we decided to part ways in our mission, in our ministry. And I wish we could look into each other’s eyes and express our best to each other in the days ahead. But we can’t. But nevertheless, I hope this prayer conveys what was in my heart this morning as I was thinking about this moment and the life of our conference,” Saenz said.

The Rev. Doug Gahn said he and the rest of the Camp Comeca site council were heartbroken when they first learned of the potential selling of the camp.

“But this was not the end of Comeca’s story. Great Plains Conference leadership expressed their strong desire to find a local board who would keep camping ministry going out at Comeca. From that vulnerable moment on, the power of the Holy Spirit began to work in the heart of some very committed followers of Christ who love camping ministry. New relationships are forming, as they have worked hard over the last five months to prepare for this moment, the new beginning of Camp Comeca shaped during the fire of the pandemic, to take its ministry into the future,” he said.

In his opening worship sermon, provided on video, Bishop Saenz spoke to how God’s story of the Kingdom compels the church to keep moving forward.

“We keep walking forward because it's the story of God's new world that gives us the courage to continue with faith, hope and love. It is the story of what God is doing in our world and wants to do through Christ followers that inspires our imagination for what is possible. The story of God's coming reign gently invites us to think about a new future. Now is the time to make decisions that will liberate us to reimagine and reconstruct a new world that is more connected and more humane for all people, especially the most vulnerable.”

The clergy session was postponed for now.

The following people, elected in 2019, will remain the Great Plains delegation for General Conference 2021:

- General Conference
 - o Rev. Adam Hamilton
 - o Rev. Amy Lippoldt
 - o Rev. Junius Dotson
 - o Rev. Kalaba Chali
 - o Rev. Dee Williamston
 - o Rev. David Livingston
 - o Rev. Cheryl Jefferson Bell
 - o Oliver Green

- o Lisa Maupin
- o Scott Brewer
- o Randall Hodgkinson
- o Steve Baccus
- o Dixie Brewster
- o Lisa Buffum

- Jurisdictional Conference

- o Rev. Dr. Anne Gatobu
- o Rev. Mark Holland
- o Rev. Eduardo Bousson
- o Rev. Ashley Prescott Barlow-Thompson
- o Rev. Stephanie Ahlschwede
- o Rev. Zach Anderson
- o Rev. Andrew Conard
- o Abigail Koech
- o Dan Entwistle
- o Jesi Lipp
- o Shayla Jordan
- o Ally Drummond
- o Esther Hay
- o Joyce Jones

- Alternates

- o Rev. Ashlee Alley Crawford
- o Rev. Kurt Cooper
- o Rev. Nathan Stanton
- o Ally Drummond
- o Esther Hay
- o Joyce Jones

Some keys statistics from 2019:

- Number of people to be ordained, commissioned or received into associate membership at some point later in 2020, and average age:
 - o To be ordained — 1 deacon, 12 elders (average age of 41)
 - o To be commissioned — 2 deacons, 12 elders, 2 former OEs (average age of 36)
 - o Overall age average for all categories: 40
- Number of clergy retired: 42
- Membership stands at 199,079, down 3.2% from the previous year.
- Worship attendance stands at 70,339, down 5.3% from the previous year.
- Church school attendance for 2019 stands at 27,470 up 0.4% from the previous year.
- Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2019 stands at 3,494, down 9.4% from the previous year.
- Adults and young adults in small groups for 2019 stands at 4,269, up 1% from the previous year.
- Worshipers engaged in mission for 2019 63,763, up 1% from the previous year.
 - David Burke, communications content specialist; Jun 04, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020..

Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference..Members

The Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference gathered online for its first-ever virtual annual conference session on Aug. 15. The theme of the single-day gathering with a two-hour clergy session and a three-hour plenary session was Let's Get Fired Up: On Holy Ground.

Despite the limitations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, conferees were able to worship and gather for Christian conferencing. IGRC Communications collaborated to produce a hybrid, part-live, part-recorded annual conference. Worship leader Cynthia Wilson provided music for both the opening and closing worship. Music was also provided by several music groups of Pekin Grace United Methodist Church. Attendees gathered virtually via Zoom web conferencing or by attending one of the 13 remote locations throughout the annual conference. Slightly more than 1,022 attended annual conference from home and another 166 attended through one of the remote sites and voted manually with marshals reporting vote totals via text messaging to annual conference secretarial staff, who aggregated the vote totals.

Several services were aired leading up to the single-day conference:

- Aug. 10: A service recognizing 31 retirees with a combined 868 years of service.
- Aug. 11: Cabinet Address.
- Aug. 12: A memorial service remembered clergy, clergy spouses and lay members to annual conference who had passed away in the previous year. Ten congregations with a combined 1,561 years of ministry that have completed their mission – Center UMC, Claremont UMC, Dix UMC, LaHarpe UMC, Lawrenceville Otterbein UMC, New Salem UMC, Ohio Chapel UMC, Orange Chapel UMC, Tiskilwa UMC and Vermont UMC – were also remembered.
- Aug. 13: Bishop Frank J. Beard's Episcopal Address.

The annual conference approved a 2021 budget of \$11,206,875 – a reduction of 7.38%. While budgets have been relatively flat over the past 10 years, the total returns the spending level to 2014 levels. The \$893,033 reduction comes on the heels of apportionment collections of 88% in 2019, down from 95% in 2018. The Conference ended 2019 with a \$276,000 deficit, which was addressed by using reserves of previous years' surpluses.

This year, the conference provided 312 congregations a forgivable loan during the pandemic at a cost of just over \$1 million. The amounts were based upon apportionments paid in the three previous years and the percentage of apportionments paid in 2020 will determine the percentage of forgiveness to the loans. The conference also provided funds for 150 food ministries at a cost of \$75,000 and 72 micro-grants to enhance technology in congregations.

Legislatively, the conference announced that the health insurance allowance paid to full-time pastors will remain at \$17,500 for 2020. The conference also approved a 2.1% increase to its minimum salaries. In 2021, the salaries will go to \$45,290 for clergy in full connection, associate members and provisional elders, and \$41,560 for full-time local pastors.

Retirees under the pre-1982 pension plan will see a 2% increase to \$810 per active service year in 2021.

The conference approved a transportation procedure and language regarding cyberbullying recommended by the Bishop's Task Force on Relational Ethics as an addition to the conference's Abuse Prevention Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults.

The conference also remembered the ministry of MacMurray College, which closed its doors in May after 174 years as a college affiliated with The United Methodist Church.

Membership stands at 115,959 in 2019, down 2,722 (2.3%) from 2018. Average worship attendance is 49,270, down 2,426 (4.7%). Church school attendance stands at 16,206, down 840.

The 2021 Annual Conference will be held June 10-12, 2021, at the Peoria Civic Center in Peoria, Illinois.

– Paul Black, director of Communication Ministries Aug 15, 2020
as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

Indiana Conference.

“I’m grateful this year for the gift of technology,” Bishop Julius Trimble said as he opened the 2020 Indiana Annual Conference. He encouraged members to fulfill the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that “everything should be done with dignity and in proper order.” “Beautiful people of the Indiana Conference, let us do this work,” he said.

Laitry 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.

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. Meadow shared about her family’s apartment fire and how she had to transfer schools. “I started to have a lack of faith because I thought God no longer loved me,” she said. After attempting suicide, Meadow ended up at Parkview Behavioral Health, where she “never felt closer to God.” She reminded members that many young people have a story as well. “I challenge you to listen to the stories of younger people.”

Charter Recognition. 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.

Closing Business. Darlene White shared some closing business:

A reminder of the next annual conference session on October 10. (Registration opens August 29.)

Missional Offerings gathered to this point:

Stuff the Bus \$1,375

Children Matter Most \$700

The Cabinet Emergency Fund \$520

Dave Neckers offered a closing prayer.

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 the song "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."

To ordinands, she offered the following gems of wisdom, among others:

"Surround yourself with the best people you can find."

"Be the best possible you."

"The size of a church is not an indicator of the size of their success."

Presentation of Persons to be Commissioned, Recognized as Associate Members and Ordained

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.

Bishop Trimble offered his message "Climbing our Second Mountain" without wearing his shoes, though he donned his United Methodist socks. "Where God's name is proclaimed and Christ is lifted as our Lord and Savior is holy ground," he said. The bishop referenced David Brooks' book, "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life," as he defined a "second mountain:" people who radiate joy and clarity of purpose. He encouraged members to live that way. "We can choose joy. We can choose justice. We can choose life with Jesus!"

– Serena Acker, Indiana Conference communications officer.,

Liberia Annual Conference..Members

Officiating bishops: Bishop Samuel J. Quire Jr. and retired Bishop Arthur F. Kulah

The 187th annual session of the Liberia Annual Conference featured several speakers, including the Revs. Elizabeth Cummings, Daniel Sasaro Brewer, Hilary Paul and Erlene P. Thompson.

"I am pleased to report to the 187th session of the Liberia Annual Conference that our conference has completed its indebtedness to the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM)," Quire said. Delivering his

episcopal address on Feb. 12, Quire praised members of the Liberian church for remaining faithful, patient and supportive during these difficult times.

He lamented the financial difficulties facing Liberians, including United Methodists, in sending their children to school. He said The United Methodist Church's educational system remains a major challenge despite pockets of success.

"Affordability remains a major problem by parents who can barely make it to survive," he said.

Quire indicated that the economic challenges facing the Liberian people makes fee collection in the United Methodist school system difficult and undermines the provision of quality education.

In her opening message, the Rev. Elizabeth Cummings, 85, challenged the church and its membership to get involved in activities that will affect the lives of people within the communities where the church has its presence.

"Do good to the people who are in need so that they know that you represent the goodness of God," she stressed.

Focusing on the theme of the conference, "A Future With Hope," the Rev. Daniel Sasaro Brewer told members not to focus on the future of the church, but the church in the future.

"Do not think about what the church will look like in the future, think about what the church will be about to do for its people and the community in the future," he said.

He pointed out that The United Methodist Church in Liberia has the potential of improving and expanding its services to the Liberian people beyond what it is doing now.

As part of its major action during the 187th annual session, the conference adopted a resolution calling for amendments to the proposed Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. The conference voted 725 to 0 for the resolution, with one person abstaining from the voting process.

The Rev. Jerry P. Kulah, one of the lead facilitators of the discussion that led to the resolution, responded to concerns from the global United Methodist Church following the publication of the Liberia Annual Conference resolution.

"Votes were taken after more than an hour of presentation and discussion on the content of the protocol and its evolving legislation. Results: 725 for, 1 abstained, 0 against. Well-informed and capable leaders of our conference facilitated the presentation and discussion prior to taking the vote. (The) vote is consistent with the Liberia Annual Conference's previous position and votes."

Prior to the vote, Bishop Quire, who presided over the process, announced that members of the conference were not coerced to vote for the resolution.

"You have the right to vote against this resolution," he said.

Fifty-five people were voted into the clergy order of the Liberia Annual Conference: 44 people were received and commissioned into associate membership; two people were commissioned; and nine people were commissioned elder in full connection. One person was retired.

Quire challenged United Methodists in Liberia that if they want to move in the church of the future with hope, they must be humble. “Humility is a trait that God requires of us all, including the bishops.” He concluded the conference by reminding members that humility should not be misconstrued as weakness.

Membership of the conference officially stands at 300,000 members.

– E Julu Swen is a communicator in Liberia.; Feb 16, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020..

Michigan Annual Conference..Members

The word “monitor” took on a whole new meaning for the Michigan Annual Conference in 2020. In the past the word referred to a panel of persons observing conference action and reporting levels of participation. In 2020 it described the dozens of screens of all sizes used by producers, leaders and viewers to engage in holy conferencing together.

In fact, the Commission on the annual conference, chaired by Nichea VerVeer Guy, planned three annual conferences since the 2019 session adjourned. The first six months focused on a traditional session to be held again at Grand Traverse Resort in Acme, Michigan, May 28-31. Then came the weeks of organizing a special session. Members gathering at Albion First United Methodist Church on March 7, advanced a petition “Reconciling and Grace through Separation and Restructuring” to the fast-approaching 2020 General Conference.

Then came coronavirus. Annual conference and General Conference sessions scheduled for May, 2020, were postponed. For these last four months, the commission pivoted from working their plan for an in-person conference to creating an altogether different plan for a virtual session.

How do you “do” an annual conference measured in square miles rather than square feet? Such a turn-around involved change of agenda and procedure to focus on the “essentials” of what an annual conference does. Informing and equipping members to engage with that essential work was set in motion, involved old-tech like the U.S. Postal service and telephones, and new-tech like ZOOM. Conference leaders, used to standing before a microphone on a stage in real-time, were coached on what was needed for online reporting and decision-making. Times for recording, rehearsal and training were added to the calendar. A monumental effort indeed. Then there was careful masking and social distancing during on-site gatherings just to add to the complexity.

A typical annual conference agenda includes around 27 hours of reporting, legislating and celebrating. The printed agenda for the virtual conference was pared to 11 hours. With early adjournment both of the July 27 plenary and July 28 Clergy Session, the total face time of interaction was 9 hours.

Todd Price, chair of the conference Rules Committee, spoke to the framing of the agenda. “Our agenda has been prepared in accordance with ¶605.2 by the Commission on the Annual Conference Session in consultation with the bishop, district superintendents, and conference lay leaders,” he noted in the guidebook mailed to all members. “The agenda provides for addressing items necessary for the ongoing functioning of our conference, or our conference plan of organization and rules of procedure first, and only addressing other business as time permits.” Price added, “I am deeply grateful that so many persons were willing to withdraw their resolutions in the interest of facilitating our work in meeting virtually.” Fifteen of 23 resolutions were so withdrawn.

During opening moments of the July 27 session, Bishop David Bard echoed Price’s statement, expressing gratitude for this cooperation. Bard said, “While meeting virtually works well for many things, it is not particularly helpful for robust conversation, particularly about topics where there are important differences of opinion.” He thanked authors of resolutions for their “kind and generous spirits and your selflessness” in withdrawing those items that went beyond the essentials.

Though the agenda was significantly shortened, the 2020 conference followed the original theme and focus: “Sowing Seeds: Rooting, Tending, Reaping.” Opening worship was celebrated on July 26. The Rev. Dr. Margie Crawford, superintendent of the Midwest District, served as liturgist. Her first words, “Apart, yet together,” well described the extraordinary nature of the virtual experience. The tradition hymn, “And Are We Yet Alive?” was especially poignant at a time when over 6,200 Michigan residents had died of coronavirus. Other hymns, the Service of Remembrance, and the sermon all followed the agrarian theme of the conference.

The Parable of the Sower provided the scripture foundation for Bishop David Bard’s sermon, “Dancing in a Mine Field.” Last fall, his original inspiration for the sermon was the game Minesweeper. “I thought I would be preaching ... a couple of weeks following General Conference. I would have been preaching about mine fields of potential division within the denomination,” he began. Bard then noted that new mines had been laid since. “Wow. Has the coronavirus laid mines and changed the landscape ... The brutal killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police has seared our consciences. It has brought to the fore deep racial divides and exposed painful wounds.”

“Prepare good soil,” the bishop urged, even in the context of, “an ongoing pandemic, ongoing divisions about human sexuality and likely division in The UMC, and tough work of anti-bias and anti-racism.” Virtually dancing at the podium, Bard cited scripture and poetry to, “Picture the sower in the joy of the work, feet moving rhythmically, dancing about the field to sow seeds ... Our task from Jesus is clear. Keep sowing seeds. Keep dancing the dance. Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!”

The Rev. Brad Kalajainen, lead pastor of Cornerstone Church, picked up the “Sowing Seeds” metaphor during opening devotions on July 27. Kalajainen described six seeds “that will bear fruit if planted, nurtured, and tended over time.” He invited viewer “to pursue them relentlessly.” Kalajainen described the Relational Seed: “Being relational is so much more than saying, ‘Hi,’ to a new person, or swarming them after church and inviting them to lead middle school ... [Here’s] God’s 20/20 vision for the church. Gather for worship together, then meet house to house in smaller groups. That’s relational. Church is less about business and more about caring for people’s souls.”

Nichea VerVeer Guy opened the session celebrating, “the diverse pathways and legacies of the people of The Michigan Conference.” She honored First Peoples of the area for “caring for this abundant place ... The harvest of these Great Lakes and their fertile lands would go on to nourish expanding cultures.” The review of the state’s history included a call for justice in the present. “The slaves that found freedom in this place, stood firm for their rights even when they were beaten and treated unjustly ... To all our siblings, we apologize for the past atrocities that were inflicted upon you out of racism and doctrinal abuse. At this time when we come together as Michigan United Methodists, we humbly ask forgiveness. We honor you.”

The voting on all resolutions before the annual conference on July 27 were done by paper ballot. Those ballots will be tabulated over the next weeks and vote counts will be announced by Bishop Bard by Labor Day weekend. Therefore, the legislation mentioned in this overview, are resolutions presented and voted upon by those marking ballots during the virtual session; results of those votes remain unknown at the time of this report.

Health and benefits

Work on the essentials began with a report by Director of Benefits and Human Resources Don Emmert, along with a series of annual benefits-related resolutions. He reminded local churches that the Benefits Ministry Shares Holiday, instituted in April for financial relief during the pandemic, ends Sept. 30, 2020. Pension and Benefits resolutions addressed: Authorization to address claims; Housing/Rental Allowance; Comprehensive Benefit Funding Plan; Past Service Rate; and Equitable Compensation.

Plan of organization and nominations

The bishop recognized Amy Mayo-Moyle, chair of the Conference Leadership Council (CLC), Brad Bartelmay, chair of the Conference Council on Finance and Administration (CFA), and Jim LeBaron, chair of the Conference Trustees, to present resolutions on the Plan of Organization. The three resolutions seek to add persons to those councils and board. Janet Larner moved acceptance of the Nominations Report.

Finance report

Bartelmay was called upon to share the finance report. He began, “There is no way to soft-peddle the financial challenges we are facing.” He then went on to describe the central challenge around remittance of Ministry Shares. “Payment of Ministry Shares is weakening each year.” In 2018 \$11.4 million was by churches for ministries of the conference and general church. That number dropped by \$800,000 in 2019. Further dramatic decline has happened during the COVID-19 outbreak. Bartelmay said, “At the end of May, payment of Ministry Shares is 23.1% behind where it was on the same date last year.” He added that a Paycheck Protection Loan received by the conference “will not be sufficient to address the deficiency.” The 2020 Conference, first reduced by 15%, now “has grown to 30% in many areas.”

The CFA chair explained that in 2019 only 59% of Michigan churches paid their Ministry Shares in full. Such chronic deficiency in payment “is simply not just,” he stated. Bartelmay said CFA is forming a task force and outlined anticipated future study and strategies. “Absent a renewed commitment to Ministry Shares, the conference will need to take dramatic steps which will fundamentally alter and contract the way we do ministry,” Bartelmay cautioned.

Report by Lay Leaders

John Wharton and Anne Soles shared perspectives as they leave their role as co-leaders of Michigan Conference laity. Wharton praised the vital role of laity-clergy partnership. “Even the early disciples knew the importance of increasing the number of people performing ministry,” he said, quoting Acts 6:1-14. Anne Soles picked up the report with the statement, “The church, when you get down to it, is 98% laity!” She continued, “Each disciple is called to action. It might be sharing a conversation. It might be sharing a chainsaw.” Soles encourage laity to follow the model of Jesus. “He didn’t send a mass mailing or tweet” but relied on one-on-one connections. Her advice to all laypersons was, “Keep your tool kit with you.”

Corporate Session

Jim LeBaron, chair of the Conference Trustees, began their report with a work summary. He gave special emphasis to the transfer of title of the Saganing Indian Church to the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe. “We asked Bishop Bard to be the one who executed the deed on their behalf,” he noted. “And that is something that is a real accomplishment in terms of what we’ve done.”

Secondly, the chair spoke of the growing relationship between the trustees and board of Michigan Area United Methodist Camping regarding the disposition of properties. He turned to Stuart Smith, board chair, for a report. Smith reviewed the strategic plan recently adopted by the board that focuses on a faith formation model at three sites: Lake Huron Retreat Center, Lake Michigan Camp & Retreat Center, and Wesley Woods Camp & Retreat Center. “The closing of any camp is not taken lightly and is not to detract from the great ministries and wonderful experiences enjoyed by campers over the years.” (Five camps have been shuttered since February 2019.) He expressed excitement about the future growth of a life-changing camping ministry. “COVID-19 and the subsequent loss of revenue this spring and summer,” Smith said, “adds a layer of challenge but does not weaken our determination or enthusiasm for the future.”

LeBaron mentioned Dowry Reports. The 2019 annual conference approved a minimum of \$250,000 for each of the nine districts of the Michigan Conference. Districts were to “utilize their Board of Missions and apply those monies in missional support and extended grants.” Time did not allow these reports to be made. But they will be printed in the 2020 Conference Journal and made available in MIconnect.

Elizabeth Hill, dean of the appointive cabinet, was called on to read the legacy reports of four churches whose closure was voted on at this session: Owosso: Burton, Ubly, Muskegon: Unity, and Mulliken UMCs.

LeBaron then presented three Michigan congregations for disaffiliation with The United Methodist Church. He explained, “Bishop Bard has said, ‘I will honor the work that the trustees have done on this,’ and what we have done is modify the process [¶2553 under review by Judicial Council] and call it withdrawal.” The three churches brought to the annual conference for vote to affirm their withdrawal are: Shabbona United Methodist Church, East Boardman United Methodist Church, and North Adams United Methodist Church.

With prayers for the seven congregations, Bishop Bard presided over questions and the voting on closures and withdrawals.

2021 Conference Budget

Monday afternoon Bartelmay returned to the microphone to present the 2021 conference budget. The \$12,617,521 total budget is a 14.7% decrease from 2020. With no questions asked, members approved the 2021 conference budget as presented. Bishop Bard spoke words of encouragement. “We do believe that by the grace of God and the power of God’s Spirit, we can respond to the challenges we face as a church. Decline is not inevitable.”

Report by Dean of Cabinet

The Rev. Elizabeth Hill, outgoing superintendent of the Heritage District, has served as the dean of the cabinet since the close of the 2019 annual conference. “What a year it has turned out to be!” She spoke of the first nine months that ensued. “We left the 2019 Michigan Annual Conference with mixed emotions regarding the actions of the conference and the uncertainty of the next General Conference around issues of inclusivity of the LGBTQI community.” After a winter full of “promise and hope” with Local Church Assessment underway, coronavirus changed the ministry landscape dramatically. “Through hard work and the grace of God, the church did not close!” Hill exclaimed. “It was amazing to see how creative the churches became,” she observed. Noting that there is still much to be done to dismantle racism, she asserted, “The work of being an anti-racist white person needs to be active in the life of our churches.”

Names and faces

United Methodists across The Michigan Conference join Bishop David Bard in saying, “One of the things I really miss about not being together in person is celebrations.” While hugs and handshakes and congratulations could not be offered face-to-face, God’s blessing surely rests on those persons in transition in 2020.

Last year’s honoree, Don Emmert, presented the John Buxton Award for Creative Leadership to someone who knew John well “because they were married.” Susanne Buxton has served faithfully and ably at annual conference sessions for 35 years, as head usher and facilitator. Sue leaves the facilitator’s table this year. Jennifer Peters now steps into that important role.

Two cherished events of the annual conference – Celebrating the Journey of Ministry and the Service of Recognition, Commissioning and Ordination – were not able to be included in the 2020 session. Still the clergy session was held on July 28 and voting electronically, the session welcomed 19 persons into conference

membership. These included one deacon in full membership and five elders in full membership; one deacon into provisional membership and 12 elders into provisional membership. They also celebrated the retirements of 52 clergy. Bishop Bard noted, “These are moments when we would stand and applaud. Know friends that we are doing that in our hearts.”

Delegates to the 2021 General Conference are as elected in 2019: Laura Witkowski (Chair,Lay), Kennetha Bigham-Tsai (Chair, Clergy), Joy Barrett (Clergy), Diane Brown (Lay), Paul Perez (Clergy), Jennifer Peters (Lay), Nichea VerVeer Guy (Lay), and Meghan Walther (Clergy). One Delegate, Meghan Walter (33) is under 35 years of age.

Conference statistics:

Membership stands at 118,347, down 3% from 2018

Worship attendance stands at 59,416, down 3% from 2018

Church school attendance stands at 15,922, 12% decrease from 2018

Professions or reaffirmations of faith for 2019 was 2,115, 12% decrease from 2018

Adults and young adults in small groups for 2019 was 30,506, 7% decrease from 2018

Worshippers engaged in mission for 2019 was 36,342, 3% increase over 2018.

– Kay DeMoss, senior content editor, Jul 28, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

North Carolina Annual Conference..Members

“In these extraordinary times, God calls us through Psalm 86 and the witness of the entire scripture to lament honestly the heaviness we feel in our hearts and to hold that lament in the light of the goodness of God,” Bishop Hope Morgan Ward said in a virtual 2020 North Carolina Annual Conference session the morning of June 18.

Beginning in lament, the conference honored 21 clergy and 21 clergy spouses who have died since the last annual conference. Prayers were offered for all affected by COVID-19, for medical personnel and caregivers, for families who have lost loved ones to the virus, for the loss of in-person worship and gatherings, for persons who have lost jobs and live in economic uncertainty as a result of COVID-19, for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and for all persons who struggle daily in the midst of systemic racism, inequity and violence.

In her sermon, Bishop Ward invited all, though in lament, to sing the song of Psalm 86, which is a combination of petitions and praises to a merciful gracious God, abounding in steadfast love.

“We find ourselves with the psalmist in a holy mashup of emotions, longing to be faithful even with hearts heavy with COVID-19’s impacts in our communities and our world. With hearts heavy in the wake of the most recent brutal racial murders bringing to light the violence against Black and brown people across centuries in our country.”

“We are being awakened perhaps to acknowledge our history, love one another well, and create a new world that God intends for all humankind... We are at a time of waking up and may we never, never fall asleep again.”

The worship moved into a Love Feast led by the Rev. Nathan Wittman and the Rev. Laura Wittman and their three young sons, ending with the singing of “Lift High the Cross.”

After a short break, the conference moved into the business session.

Approved during the special session:

- The conference approved a budget for 2022 in the amount of \$15,472,714 (-\$732,734), a 4.52% decrease from the approved 2021 budget amount.
- 2021 health insurance premiums for churches and individuals will increase by 8%.
- At a request from the district superintendents, the conference will keep 2021 district superintendent salaries at the 2020 level. There will also be no salary increases in 2021 for conference and district employees.

- A recommendation from the Committee on Equitable Compensation proposed minimum pastoral salaries at all levels remain the same as 2019-20. Minimum compensation will remain \$46,627 for full-time clergy (full connection, associate, provisional, local pastor); and \$30,308 for student pastors.
- The conference recognized and honored the service of Gary Locklear, conference lay leader from 2012-2020. The work and ministry of laity was also celebrated with a video trailer titled “I’m a Lay Person and I’m in Ministry” as an introduction to a broader online report - <https://nccumc.org/laity/celebration/>.
- An online offering for the conference COVID-19 Response Fund totaled \$6,349. The COVID-19 Response Fund provides resources to be used to assist churches and ministries impacted during this time of unprecedented crisis.

Key statistics from 2019:

- Number of people to be ordained, commissioned, licensed, consecrated or certified at a later date:
 - 1 deacon, 24 elders to be ordained (average age of 37)
 - 2 provisional deacons, 6 provisional elders to be commissioned (average age of 28)
 - 30 local pastors to be licensed (average age of 41)
 - 3 lay ministers to be certified
 - 3 deaconesses to be consecrated
- Number of clergy retired: 33
- Membership stands at 223,708, down 1,418 from the previous year.
- Worship attendance at the principal weekly worship service stands at 67,310, down 3,966 from the previous year.
- While participation in UMW and UMM is down, participation in United Methodist Youth Ministry is up 1,514, a 19% increase.
- Four churches have closed since the 2019 Annual Conference.

The Conference honored the service of four outgoing district superintendents – Ray Broadwell, Edie Gleaves, Randy Innes and Linda Taylor. New district superintendents – Tara Lain, Ismael Ruiz-Millan, Jon Strother and Dena White – were welcomed.

Bishop Ward fixed appointments for the 2020-2021 year, and 169 churches received pastoral changes.

The two-and-a-half-hour session was broadcast on live.nccumc.org and via Facebook Live. You can view it at nccumc.org/ac2020/watch. The conference workbook and reports can be found at <https://nccumc.org/ac2020/reports/>.

– LeeAnne Thornton, conference communicator; Jun 18, 2020, as reported in UM News Weekly Digest; Aug 21, 2020.

South Georgia Annual Conference..Members

Donning an episcopal purple face mask with the cross and flame emblem, presiding Bishop R. Lawson Bryan welcomed nearly 750 delegates and guests to the 2020 annual conference session on Aug. 15.

An historic session, this year’s gathering was virtual, and clergy and laity participated from their living rooms, home offices and churches. This was due to the coronavirus pandemic, a concern for the health and safety of conference members and the restrictions on large-group gatherings, Conference leadership postponed the previously scheduled June in-person session and pivoted to plan the first-ever virtual session.

The 2020 annual conference session kicked off Sunday, Aug. 2, with a virtual clergy session. It was followed by four worship services on four separate days: The Virtual Commissioning Service on Aug. 8, the Virtual Ordination Service on Aug. 9, the Virtual Retiree Recognition Service on Aug. 11 and the Virtual Memorial Service on Aug 13. The 2020 Annual Conference season culminated with the Aug. 15 virtual business session.

Though significantly shortened, the 2020 conference followed the original theme and focus: “Alive Together in Witness.”

In his devotional and morning address, Bryan read Paul’s words from his letter to the Colossians: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison.”

Like Paul, he said, all need to pray to see the open doors. The coronavirus pandemic, race relations and rolling restarts are all open doors through which ministries can be expanded and God’s love and grace can be extended, he said.

“I invite you to consider your open doors,” he said. “What are the doors we can walk through? What are the open doors you and I want to walk through in the next 16 months? ‘God help us’ is our prayer. God help us not to miss the open doors that are right before us.”

During the business session, members:

Approved a motion for South Georgia United Methodist clergy and laity to commit to stand against racism, renew their commitment to live out their baptismal vows and speak with a united voice against systemic racism in every United Methodist congregation.

Approved a recommendation for the reallocation of designated reserve funds to support several ministries in the North Katanga Annual Conference.

Celebrated the commissioning of Deaconess Linda Laye from Columbus, Georgia.

Recognized Warren Plowden, the longest-serving chancellor in United Methodism, and welcomed Cater Thompson as his successor.

Celebrated the ways the conference has responded to disasters and built disaster response capacity.

Shared appreciation for Gloria Morgan and her service as the conference lay leader these past seven years, and affirmed J. Knapp as incoming conference lay leader.

Recognized Port Wentworth United Methodist Church for winning the One Matters Award, presented by Discipleship Ministries.

Celebrated as Communications Director Kelly Roberson was presented a denominational Epi Award for her outstanding work in communications.

Approved the disaffiliation of seven churches.

Approved a budget of \$9,172,314, a reduction of \$153,870 from the previous year.

Four persons were ordained into the Order of Elder, and four persons were commissioned as provisional elders.

Eighteen pastors retired and six were recognized for achieving their 50th anniversary in ministry. Twenty-seven clergy and clergy spouses who died in the past year were remembered during the memorial service.

As Bryan closed the 2020 annual conference session, he introduced the theme for the coming year, “Alive Together at the Table.”

After reading verses from the 23rd Psalm, he asked, “Is there anything more powerful we can do in the coming year than to ask, ‘Where’s the table, Lord?’”

It’s at the table where enemies — violence, poverty, abuse, racism, sexism, ageism, all that harms human flourishing — are defeated, he said, and where new life begins. These are overcome when we come to the table that the Lord has prepared for us.

“Where’s the table? It’s in your church, it’s in your life, it’s in our decision ourselves to come to the table. We have to be at the table.”

Membership stands at 103,613, down 3,936 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 42,413, down 1,320. Church school attendance stands at 20,154, down 91 from 2018.

– Kelly H. Roberson, communications director, and Kara Witherow, editor of the *South Georgia Advocate*, Aug 15, 2020.

West Virginia Annual Conference..Members

Aug 02, 2020

On Aug. 1-2, 2020, A Special Called Session of the Annual Conference was held at 12 locations, connected virtually across the conference, in addition to a livestreamed Celebration of Ministry and a Service of Baptism and Ordination. This format and schedule replaced the original planned gathering at Wesley Chapel on the campus of West Virginia Wesleyan College.

Dates of conference gathering:

Clergy session: June 6 (webinar, 10 a.m.)

Laity session: July 24 (webinar, 7 p.m.)

Annual Conference sessions: Aug. 1-2

Legislative sessions (in person), Aug. 1, 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Celebration of Ministry (Livestream), Aug. 1, 5 p.m.

Baptism & Ordination service (Livestream): Aug. 2, 10 a.m.

To provide for safe distancing and short time in on-site meetings, the agenda of the Special Annual Conference was limited to those items requiring annual votes by delegates, as governed by conference, Discipline and state laws. Other matters were postponed until the scheduled June 2021 Annual Conference. Legislative work took place over two separate sessions on Aug. 1, with delegates each assigned to a one-hour time shift and location. Both sessions covered the same agenda and conducted the same votes. Only conference members in attendance at assigned sites could vote; all others participated by livestream. Votes were totaled from each session and across the 12 sites and announced later in the afternoon during a livestream of the Celebration of Ministry. Districts each facilitated meetings in at least one site, with Wesley Chapel maintaining the presiding table for the conference.

Officiating bishop:

Sandra L. Steiner Ball

Memorable points or quotes by speakers:

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball said the challenges currently faced should not stop the church from being about the work of Jesus Christ. She said, instead, the challenges call for the church to continue its mission of being hope bringers to the people of West Virginia and the world. “We can be hope bringers in the midst of the challenges because hope bringers help people take the first step into a new and transformed life.”

Main actions enacted by the conference:

Conference members approved a \$12.8 million operating budget for 2021, with the same bottom line as was approved for 2020.

Conference members approved a change in the conference's health care plan to coverage by Cigna Preferred Provider Organization (PPO), along with a small employer exception regarding Medicare. According to Jamie O'Brien, chair of the Board of Pensions, the moves will benefit churches and the entire conference. The minimum salary for full-time clergy, CRSP, and medical insurance benefit were held to the same level as set in 2019.

Approved the report from the Board of Trustees, which offered no changes from its report in 2019.

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

Laity:

Judi Kenaston

Rich Shaffer

Erin Sears (under 35)

Clergy:

Amy Shanholtzer

Jeff Taylor

Lauren Godwin (under 35)

Nine persons were ordained, commissioned or received into membership by transfer.

Two were elected to provisional membership and will be commissioned in their local settings.

Four were elected to full membership. Of these, two were ordained during the Annual Conference session, including one elder and one deacon. Additionally, one elder was ordained later in a separate service, and one elected to full membership will be ordained elder at the 2021 Annual Conference.

Three were welcomed into full membership by transfer from other conferences.

15 successfully completed the conference's first online licensing school (in collaboration with Candler School of Theology) on July 17 and are beginning their first appointments as licensed local pastors.

Number of clergy retired:

20 clergy retired (10 elders, 10 associate members or licensed local pastors)

Additional information:

Worship attendance stands at 33,829, down 6.53%.

We had a 41% increase in participants in the Basic Lay Servant course from 2018 to 2019.

Certified Lay Ministry continues to flourish, with 55 CLMs in 2020, increasing from 45 in 2019 (after 24 in 2018).

We launched our first "Fresh Expressions" style new church in 2019 (New Wineskins in Parkersburg, Pastor Joe Webb).

– The Rev. Bonnie Glass MacDonald, Director of Leadership Formation & Ministry Staff, West Virginia Conference; Aug 15, 2020.

* * * * *

The disintegration of a society into...factions is bound up with its rejection of the forces that bring it unity – "law" and "justice." ~ Commentary on Habbakuk 1:4, "Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."; pp. 499-500. Carl E. Armerding,

Professor of Old Testament,

Regent College; as printed in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 7.