

A Personal View of the 51st Annual Conference of East Ohio UMC

While the joy of the Sunday morning service stays with me, I would like to share with you some thoughts about my virtual attendance at Annual Conference. This strange and challenging year has been difficult for the church: we are used to meeting at Lakeside for four days convening in Hoover Auditorium, sharing hugs and warm wishes with those we haven't seen in a year's time; having outdoor lunches and eating ice cream as the sun sets over Lake Erie. Then, after March 15th, we are told that for safety's sake we will meet at Lakeside for a long weekend in September, and then again, for safety's sake, we are told our meetings will be in Akron, and finally we are instructed that Conference will be held online, a virtual experience. Each of the delegates received a "Secure Voting" ID and password and a chance to practice before the actual Gathering takes place.

What was ironic was that the theme for this quadrennium has been John 15:1-17 "The Vine and the Branches". This year **Connected** was the emphasis. Who knew that the connectedness would be virtual!

Most of the time things ran rather smoothly, some distress over the sound quality and a few glitches in the voting process, but all in all, a surprisingly wonderful first-time experience for the Attendees.

Before I recount the actions of the Conference, let me send out a great big "**Congratulations**" to our **worship team** who led Sunday morning's worship service. They just made us so proud! I hope you got a chance to hear and see them. I had been wondering all these years of attending conference when our team would be allowed to shine, but even with masks and a tiny live audience they were spirit-filled and showed their love of Jesus through their voices. Huzzah! To the Team.

The Conference started on Friday, September 25th with a Clergy- only meeting in the morning and rehearsals for the special events of commemoration and ordination all afternoon. Six people were commissioned to the elder track and 7 were ordained as elders. Ordinarily we would have had an evening to thank and bless the retirees, but again COVID19 cancelled that celebration.

We gathered around our lap-tops, phones, iPads, notebooks, and desk-tops Saturday morning for worship. Church of the Savior UMC in Cleveland Heights hosted the Conference staff, all socially distanced and masked. Let me share with you the voting results followed by a few paragraphs on the speakers.

Only **one resolution** was brought before us. Resolution 2020-01: "**A Call for East Ohio United Methodists to Address Racism in our Churches and Communities**". This was approved by 694 voters. (Our numbers were down for the entire Conference). Most of the ballots concerned **business matters**: accepting the written reports of committees, agenda, budget, for example. There was one glitch as one of the ballots was read and then amended causing great confusion. This ballot was on Equitable Compensation: our clergy receive the next to last salary amount in the nation! Over three years we pledged last year to a 5% raise for each of the next three years. The amendment was to veto those raises, but confusion reigned over what a "yes" ballot actually meant, plus it appeared that lay members had not been counted, so it took the better part of an afternoon to straighten out what the will of the people was. Happily, the raises were approved. (As a side note, these ballots took much longer than any of us anticipated due to Covid-19! When we are gathered together in Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside, all we need to do to vote is hold a voting card up in the air – yea or nay. But because we connected from all

over the North-East Ohio area, we voted on the web which took at least 3 minutes per vote. Therefore, a meeting which was scheduled for dismissal at 4 PM lasted until 6:15! Over 13 ballots! Tedious, but necessary.)

Other news: the East Ohio Conference has raised 1.1 million toward our goal of 1.5 million toward the establishment of a women's dormitory at **Africa University**; it will be a great blessing for the women who come from many sub-Saharan countries. Sad news: thirteen of our smallest churches were closed this year, so I imagine some old-timers (like me!) are grieving over that loss.

This next section of my report reflects my take on the **five sermons** we were privileged to hear during this sacred time – my goal is to tell you a little about each speaker and then a quote or three from each that spoke to me. Keep the theme, CONNECTED firmly in mind for all the speakers.

Our first speaker, **Bishop Tracy S. Malone**, North East Ohio's Resident Bishop, spoke Friday morning at the Service of Commemoration and Holy Communion. She shared with us the fact that Jesus was always the guest throughout his ministry, but at Communion we are guests at His table. "He comes to us, so that we can come to Him". She used the Gospel reading, John 15:1-13, including the Farewell to the Disciples.

Saturday afternoon we heard the **Episcopal Address** delivered by **Bishop Malone**, our resident Bishop. "Jesus is the light of the world and our mission is to be His light through our ministry". She asked us not to focus too much on the General Conference scheduled for August 29, 2021. After that meeting, we will make our decisions concerning the future of the Church. Then she asked us the big question "Why are you Methodist?". "What is your Why?" It would do us well to have informed, critical discussions around these questions as she believes at the core of our belief we are not divided. To close she quoted RBG, "How do you want to be remembered?" A lot to think about.

Saturday evening was the Service of Commissioning and Ordination. Our speaker for that ceremony was **Bishop Abraham D. Allende** from the Northeastern Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He caught our attention early remarking on the full communion relationship that the Lutheran church has with the United Methodists. He reminded us that it was at a Lutheran meeting that John Wesley found "his heart warmed" to the Faith. Basing his sermon on John "I am the true vine" verses, he connected us with the Gervase Vineyard in Canton, "their fruitfulness depends on the branches". He is speaking to the newly commissioned and ordained asking them, "in this period of spiritual confusion "to bear grace to help the world "connect with Christ". Therefore, he cautioned them to take care of themselves with daily devotions, developing other interests (outside the church), and getting to know their colleagues. "What it is like being a chosen pastor"!

Sunday morning's worship (at which we were called to the service by our own Praise Team) was intriguing as there were three sermonettes instead of one sermon. Bishop Malone asked three of the pastors of churches within the conference to close the session with an emphasis on the theme of connectedness. The first speaker was **Pastor Jason Snyder**, lead pastor of Utica UMC. He spoke of these challenging times and referred us to Acts 3 1-8 "together" – we are better when we are together. Peter and John were approaching the Temple for sacrificing prayer when they are approached by a lame man being carried into the temple through the Beautiful Gate. He asks for alms but receives the gift of healing by Peter in the name of Christ and, the whole point, they then go into the Temple as three not just two. The cripple was their third.

Following was **the Reverend Hannah Tucker**, associate pastor of Strongsville UMC. “Look out for the Third” she cautions(See Above). “We cannot connect with others until we first make our connection to Christ”. “Be sensitive to the needs of others – share the Word”. It is not enough to see the one at the “gate” , we must look beyond to those who need Jesus! Let me encapsulate her last statements: Jesus shows up! We strive to be connected to Him. Through it all, we strive to be connected to Him. We abide in Him and He abides in us. We don’t have to agree with each other, indeed even when we do not agree, we still are connected to Jesus. So, just keep showing up!

Our last speaker was **the Reverend Marilyn Coney**, lead pastor of Tiffin Faith UMC. She told a story of an Indian woman who faced down some hoodlums by seeing through Christ’s eyes, they were her “Third”. Being connected to Christ means that we connect with all those He sends to us. Remember the call of the first disciples – they were a “called” community. We need to welcome others as we have been welcomed. It’s not easy following Jesus! We must become ready to follow Him. Come – it is an invitation – today I choose to follow. Amen.

Well, I’m sure by now that you see how hard it is for me to be brief about anything! My prayer is that you who read this will wish to go to the Conference site to hear for yourselves some of these heart-warming sermons. With love and Blessings,

Sally Carr

Delegate to Annual Conference, 2020