

My 2018 Annual Conference Report

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[Before I begin, I'd like to remind you that the services from the Conference are all on the Conference's website. There is also a video serving as an overview of the week. You will find these materials at eocumc.com. What follows is an extended personal report on a week at Lakeside entitled, "Not a Vacation". It is long, but I wanted you to get a sense of what it's like to be a delegate to Conference.]

Annual Conference was held this year from June 11-14, although most of us arrived in a pouring rainstorm on Sunday afternoon. Our family is always obsessed with the weather, so I need to mention that this year the weather surprised us – instead of blazing hot sun and the occasional LOUD thunderstorm, this year we experienced cool breezes and warm afternoons with the temperature only rising a bit every day. A blessed relief for those in Hoover Auditorium with no air conditioning and, at least for our district, hard, wooden seats

The theme this year is part two of the Quadrennial Topic "**Bearing Fruit that Lasts**" from John 15: 1-17. Last year we were introduced to the topic and this year the speakers emphasized the Calling that each of us, as Christians, has. Our worship booklet was entitled "**Called**". Our Bishop, **Tracy S. Malone** proved once again to be a terrific organizer inviting a diverse group of pastors who were full of the Spirit and who shared that Spirit with us. On Monday morning's Service of Commemoration and Holy Communion, the Bishop herself gave the sermon "**Living your Calling**". As we had just remembered those pastors and their spouses who had passed from this world this past year, she reminded us of the cloud of witnesses that was cheering us on to fulfill our call. And what is this call? We made a promise to live out our faith always proclaiming the grace of Christ. How are we doing? She gave us this advice: throw off sin; shoot adrenaline into your soul; go from being a doing church to a being church! She quoted William Coffin, "Most church boats don't like to be rocked"! The Bishop closed with this question: "What would the world look like if we all fulfilled our call?"

Our **Opening Business session** started that afternoon at which greetings were extended and matters of privilege were explained along with our administrative process. The Episcopal Committee report by J. Burkhart mentioned three sub-themes which would resurface throughout the week: The Rule of Christ, Critical Response and the Culture of Call. After a short break the session continued with the Bishop's Episcopal address and the first of the three reports on "**Living into our East Ohio Vision: Being Disciples, Making and Maturing Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World**". Each of these addressed special things that churches in our conference were doing to fulfill this call. These presentations were lively and full of hope: Reports from Sandusky Trinity, the Walk to Emmaus and from Laity, The Healthy Church Initiative, Small Church Cohort and Re-imagining Young Adult Ministry. Such energy and enthusiasm were expressed as each presenter showed how these programs were making a difference – responding to our call.

The Episcopal Address: "Keeping or Eye on the Why!" Bishop Malone reminded us that our Methodist Mission is To Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World. We

need to look at the **WHY** of this: the rationale can be read in the Book of Discipline. She told us that 50 years ago we joined with the United Brethren church to become the United Methodists. This bold and courageous step was not made without differences of opinion, but differences, then and now, which cannot be reconciled must find a way forward. Considering the major stumbling block our church faces today, she supports the **One Church Plan** (one of three plans proposed by the Council of Bishops). She asked us to be prayerful and deliberate as we consider this plan for our church. It appears to be the best solution when you consider that we are a **world-wide church**. In brief, this plan would **remove restrictive wording** from the Discipline but **leave it to each church to determine the cultural climate** of its area to retain the flexibility of that prevailing culture. She stressed that “differences cannot be more important than our Mission.” [This was the only direct mention of the homosexual issue that divides us here and abroad author’s comment].

She listed four stories of churches taking bold steps forward: the Nehemiah Mission, Ontario UMC - grandparents helping youth, Grandville – embracing diversity and work on teen suicide, and who actually cancelled the Women’s Annual Picnic to work on this issue! You can look on the Resource section of the Conference webpages to see more about the Rule of Christ and the Critical Response Ministry. Our Mission is yet alive!

Monday evening was the Celebration of Retirees of whom there were thirty-nine.

Tuesday, we met **Kimberley Erbaugh** who was our guest speaker for Tuesday’s worship service. Kimberly is the Associate Pastor of Carrolton First UMC where she leads the Bridge, a satellite worship service that meets in the livestock building of the Carroll County Fairgrounds (!). The title of her sermon was “**Untamed and in Love**”. She asked us some direct questions: When were we “fired up” – passionate – about worship? “Our churches won’t be filled until we are filled with the Holy Spirit!” “Are you on fire for God?” Faithful discipleship is contagious. We work hard for the church, but where’s the passion in crossing things off our lists? Are we living in the reality of the Spirit? Life is a struggle, we need each other so that wonderful things can happen. So, how do we do it? The Holy Spirit is our Google Map, if we take our eyes off God, we get lost!

Tuesday morning’s Business session included reports from several committees and we started discussion on Resolutions. **Number 2018-02 “Toward Racial Reconciliation”** This resolution was passed: we agreed to examine our own hearts and encourage study groups centered on this issue. **Resolutions 2018-04 and 2018-05** were both defeated during this session. They dealt with human rights issues as they related to children living under Israeli occupation (04) and incarceration of said children (05). The general feeling seemed to center on two points, a. the children targeted were in their teens guilty of throwing rocks and other missiles at Israeli citizens, and b. a consensus that the church seems to support Israel over Palestine. [These issues surface every Annual Conference for the years that I have been a delegate.] To pass, a resolution needs to have a 2/3rds majority and even though this Resolution had majority (518 – 426) of votes, it did not pass the 2/3rds requirement.

Tuesday Afternoon we heard the Board of Ordained Ministry Report. All the candidates and Provisionals were introduced as well as local pastors and associate members. Continuing is an eight-year assessment study: so far we are flourishing! It was noted that there is a 77% rise in admission to the united divinity schools, and United Seminary awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree on Bishop Malone. We were told of scholarships and a new software program that spots plagiarism. This report was followed by the Conference Offering. This year the proceeds are split into thirds – Suicide Prevention among Young People, Africa University and the Bishop’s Discretionary Fund.

After the break we reconvened to see a short video on the Youth Annual Conference held the weekend before we arrived. Then the second piece of the Vision was presented by Kathy Dickriede. **Living Into our East Ohio Vision: Being God’s Agents of Transformation in our Communities and Throughout the World.** Kathy shared many opportunities and projects currently being done -ways of showing and living God’s love. Some of these include: Connecting Neighbors, Chardon’s preparatory prevention program Active Shooter, Lincoln High School connects with students in Liberia, Bridges out of Poverty, Girls on the Run, Mike Bell surveys the Board of Laity – major issues- hunger, poverty and addiction, the Ohio Council of Churches (17 denominations) “Revive Civility Ohio, “ACT NOW (Awaken, Confront, Transform), a project with the Yankton Sioux of South Dakota, CCYM – Project Feed- Rise Against Hunger, No More Malaria – Sierra Leone. Our missions are alive and well. Remember to **Pray, Obey, Love, Repeat!**

That evening the **Ministry Fair** was held in two buildings – tables of all kinds promoting missions, colleges – connecting through missions and conversation.

Wednesday! A fabulous start to the day! **Reverend Chip Freed** from Garfield UMC preached. He is a sought-after speaker internationally and for good reason. His exciting and challenging sermon was entitled **“Don’t Settle for the T-Shirt”**. Reminding us of the person who goes on a wonderful trip and brings back the iconic t-shirt “My parents spent a glorious week in....and all I got was this t-shirt”. He pointed out that of all the religions, ours is the only one where the leader says “Follow Me!”. Don’t become a “souvenir Christian”. We do not need to please people “so they’ll stay” but we do need to become a “so that” church. “So that the world may know...we are Christians”. He shared the story in Acts 8 of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. A full understanding of the story invites us to see the many differences between Philip and the eunuch: different races, status and ability to enter the temple: yet Philip is urged by God to run along beside the chariot and preach! Do we do the same? Accept? Go out of our way? What barriers exist within our churches that keep people out? When did you do something outrageous for God? Be bravely courageous in breaking down boundaries between us – be amazed at who your Father is! [If you watch only one thing on the Conference web-site, be sure that you watch Rev. Freed’s sermon: you will not regret it!]

Two morning business sessions followed. Of interest would be the Cabinet’s Report as it was given by our District Superintendent, Sondra Snode. She remarked that Rule of Christ training would be made available to help us stay in love with God during periods of conflict. The fixing of

appointments followed: no changes in Mentor UMC's appointments. Two resolutions were covered: **#7 "Protecting the Right to Peacefully Address Injustice through Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions"** passed. **#10 "Educate and Inform the Conference Concerning Mass Incarceration"** also passed. A mission funding report followed with a description of the flood bucket donations – 635; health kits- 3600; and 400 other donations including 16 bicycles!

afternoon business included the third of the **Vision** presentations: **"Being Bold and Courageous Leaders in reaching new people, younger people and a more diverse people"**. The Discipleship Award went to Ellen Porter of Columbus Avenue UMC - one of her contributions is called **"break-through prayer"**. Each square foot of their church has been prayed on by the congregation. Another presenter discussed **"intercultural competence"**. We need to understand ourselves and others if we truly wish to make new disciples: we need to achieve deep understanding (the cognitive piece) and personal space (the behavioral). If we truly want "these" people we must first, re-read Acts and then take the "Intercultural Competence inventory". Information was shared about the Black College Fund and the Black Methodist College Fund. In **Avon** each student is "hooked up" with a member of the church as a mentor. Disability Awareness was included with hospitality stressed. All in all, what's our Purpose? Jesus wants us to claim our role, proclaim His Gospel and live out His message.

At 4:30 Wednesday afternoon we joined many guests for **the Service of Commissioning of Provisional Members and the Ordination of Elders and Deacons**. We were so proud to witness the ordination of Quincy Wheeler as an Elder and the commissioning of Jennifer Lam on the Deacon track. A good representation from Mentor UMC enjoyed the service and shared a party/dinner following the service. The sermon for this service was titled **"A Credible Witness"** and was preached by Bishop Malone. Matthew 28:16-20 isn't a message, it is a mandate! Christ is positioning His disciples for such a time as this. It is an example of derivative authority - He energizes them to go and speak the Gospel. It is a command: "GO, Teach, and I will be with you". In our churches are we making members or disciples? We need to fall in love with the things Jesus loves. The Gospel doesn't call us to be nice! We need to flip our "open doors" message: Go out those doors, Give testimony to God's power – be a visible witness in our own lives. Our message is (still) the hope of the world. Go and be credible witnesses – it matters HOW we go – in heart and in service. Be intentional about how you show up! [This is another sermon I would recommend listening to – our Bishop is on fire for the Lord!]

Our last Day, Thursday

This morning's worship service was led by a praise band from Garfield Memorial "Mosaic" with songs we all knew – an exuberant sing-a-long! The sermon was presented by **Becky Weaver**, Pastor of Crestline First UMC. She pleased the congregation mightily when she apologized for being from the U. of Michigan [however one of us was not pleased!] Her topic was **"Fully Alive"** from Romans 12 and I Thessalonians 5. Becoming a leader is becoming yourself. We must uncover the layers until we reach the true self and accept the fullness of God. In yielding ourselves to Him we become truly free. We need each other, and it is only through being together that we can be whole – the body of Christ. She shared with us three lessons that she had learned from the trenches: Do not try to do everything! Do what you love for the glory of

God in service to Christ. PRAY! We cannot be enthusiastic and on fire if we don't pray. Transform yourself first and then celebrate those around you.

Our last business session gave us time to discuss the remaining two **Resolutions: #01 and #11**. Both included much discussion. **Number 1** was entitled **"A Call to Discuss Gun Violence to Protect Life"**. Several amendments were brought from the floor. Neither passed. The first was the hunter's amendment and the second asked to strike the word "gun" and instead cite "all violence". The original resolution passed after calling for a division of the house, and the majority achieved 68% or over two-thirds of the voting audience. **Resolution #11** was presented by the Youth Council from their weekend meeting. It was called **"A Call to Discuss Improved School Safety"**. Several members of the congregation mentioned that Ohio schools had a system in place currently so an amendment dropping the phrase "Our churches recommend school districts" to "Our churches recommend creating action plans with local and state governments, as well as local organizations or the community...". The amendment and the resolution passed.

This was followed by a shared learning session led by **Dr. Joseph Daniels** from the Baltimore/Washington district, Emory UMC, where Dr. Daniels took over a church on the brink of collapse with a congregation of 50. Currently this church boasts over 400 members of all races and colors bearing real fruit. Dr. Daniels is a sought-after preacher, and this is another of the persons I would recommend watching. Be apprised however, this session went for close to two hours. **"Real Church for Real People"** He stresses throughout this learning experience the **REAL. R – relevant:** worship that connects; extreme community engagement; and a process for growing learners and following Jesus

E – enthusiastic, to lead we must be "possessed" by God to make a life-change; **A – authentic,** we lead in transparent, honest and down-to earth ways so that the people we touch can engage; **L- love,** what are you begging for? What do you expect God to do? We must be these things and our congregations likewise. For example, for LOVE he cites radical hospitality, breaking down barriers and building bridges, knowing and acting on who our heart breaks for. All these changes may force one to leave, but that will be the only person that keeps five others from coming! Invade them with love.

Our closing included a great serenade by the Vacation Bible School children. Announcements and the Benediction followed. A very busy three and one-half days.

I know that this report is lengthy, I stress again that the **entire sermons, talks and educational experiences are on the web-site** as written summaries and as video recordings – you can check on my accuracy! 'Till next year. Goodbye, Lakeside!