

**WEST MICHIGAN ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH – 2015
REPORT OF ALICE BOTTI, LAY MEMBER
EATON RAPIDS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF EATON RAPIDS**

Pending change was definitely in the air as clergy and laity members gathered for this year's Annual Conference at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. Conference members were reminded that, while there would not be a lot of legislation to be addressed this year compared to previous years, the items to be voted on were "benchmark" in nature. They included the following issues: a petition recommending *Creation of a New Michigan Area Conference of the UMC* (that being joining the Detroit Conference and the West Michigan Conference into one "*Michigan Area Conference*") and a petition recommending *Creation of a New Area Corporation to Administer Michigan Area Camps, Campgrounds and Retreat Ministries.*" The Detroit Conference had already met and voted on both of these issues. Their ballots were sealed and placed in safekeeping at the Area Ministry Center. Following the vote of West Michigan Conference members, their ballots were sealed and kept at the Area Ministry Center until the count day of Wednesday, June 10.

This year's gathering featured the customary reports, legislative discussions and voting, excellent preaching sessions, and a variety of musical presentations.

The **Rev. Dr. Bill Dobbs**, Clergy Assistant to **Bishop Deborah Kieseey**, preached at the opening worship service. Recognizing the sad statistics of declining membership in United Methodist Churches and the challenges of attracting new people to our churches, Rev. Dobbs used a variety of fishing analogies to make his point that, if our "fishing" expeditions to attract new members are not successful, we must examine the approach we're taking. He suggested a couple of questions to ask ourselves, such as, "Are we using the right "nets?" and, "Are we afraid to go into deeper waters (get out of our comfort zones)?" in order to reach people outside the church. In summary, he said, "We must not be willing to accept empty nets anymore."

West Michigan Conference **Bishop Deborah Lieder Kieseey** began her Episcopal Address Thursday evening with a confession: "I'm not very good at change." Commenting on her arrival in Michigan in 2012, she said, "The change needed to bring these conferences (West Michigan and Detroit) together was absolutely not on my radar. But I quickly discovered it was on many of yours." She also went on to affirm her belief that "we do ministry better when we do it together." During her message, **Bishop Kieseey** proclaimed, "I believe with my whole heart that God is constantly urging us into becoming more ...," "And I can get excited when God is in the picture and we make room for the Holy Spirit."

One of the highlights of this year's conference was the dynamic teaching of Rev. Adam Hamilton, founding pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, whose topic was, "**Leading Beyond the Walls.**" He conducted three teaching sessions titled: "**What Leaders Do and Why,**" "**Effective Worship and Preaching,**" and "**Mission, Evangelism and Methodism.**" Following is a quick look at each session:

- **What Leaders Do and Why:**

- Some characteristics of good leaders: they brush their teeth, are authentic, have integrity, and are able to "be real" in all situations, to name a few. Leaders, he suggested, among other tasks, establish direction and cast a vision for the church, are able to align people and resources, and motivate and inspire people to carry out the vision.
- He strongly recommends, as he put it, "unleashing the power of the laity." He described this as being a New Testament model of ministry: "Preparing God's people to do the

work of the ministry.” “We are meant to be a team,” he stated. He commented that Congregational Care Ministry is “Stephen Ministry on steroids.” While he strongly encourages this ministry model, he acknowledged that congregations sometimes have difficulty accepting the work of the laity.

- **Effective Worship and Preaching:**
 - Rev. Hamilton suggested five components of preaching that will engage the congregation: teach on something new, something they may not have known before; inspire or move the congregation and touch their hearts; deliver a “call to action” -- what should we do?; be relevant and practical – use metaphors and examples; and, finally, be biblical.
- **Mission, Evangelism and Methodism:**
 - Rev. Hamilton set the tone of his third teaching session by posing three questions: “Why do people need Jesus?” “Why do people need the church?,” and, “Why do people need this particular church?” His answers were varied and challenging, including: People need Jesus because they need to know there’s help when they go through hard times. Jesus is God’s answer to the world’s problems.
 - Why the church? People need a place to go where they can be accepted. The Body of Christ needs to be Jesus to others.
 - And finally, why this (our) particular church? We can help people see the good in themselves. It can be a place where their worth is affirmed. He quoted Luke 19, verse 10, where Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Concluding his remarks, he advised that we “be open to the unchurched – those are the people Jesus was most concerned about.”
 - Commenting on the declining number of young people who are choosing to go into the ministry, he suggested that we suggest that possibility to young people who display attributes that suggest they have a “heart for ministry.”

The **Rev. Nohemi Ramirez**, pastor of La Nueva Esperanza in Grand Rapids, preached in the Saturday morning worship service. Among other things, she told the congregation that in this “upside down and desperate time,” we must intentionally seek to grow spiritually for, “the deeper the roots, the deeper the fruits.” She challenged, “Let’s ...open our minds and hearts and doors to receive everyone in our churches. .. Brothers and Sisters, the one who is different enriches us.”

The final legislative session dealt with General Conference petitions on human sexuality. **Rev. Deann Dobbs**, speaking in support of Petition 102, which, she explained, “provides middle ground by removing all restrictive language in the Discipline but not replacing it with proactive language. This would allow each pastor and conference to move forward with ordination and same-sex marriage in a manner unique to their setting.” The **Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai** offered a substitute motion called “The Third Way,” that contains language that homosexuality is “historically not condoned,” but would also allow pastors latitude to perform same-sex marriages without requiring them to do so, depending on their conscience. Further, Annual Conferences could choose or refuse to ordain openly LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) clergy.” Following lengthy debate and complex parliamentary procedures, the substitute motion passed. It will now be submitted to the General Conference, which will meet in 2016, for the voting that will determine whether this petition goes into effect.

**West Michigan Annual Conference
of The United Methodist Church – 2015
Report Of Alice Botti, Lay Member
Eaton Rapids United Methodist Church Of Eaton Rapids
Page 3 of 3**

Finally, on June 10, all of the ballots regarding uniting the conferences were counted, and the results announced: both conferences voted to unite, thereby creating the Michigan Area Conference. It will take some time, however, to work out all the details of the merger -- several years, most likely, according to **Bishop Kieseey**. More information will be provided as the process continues.

The ballots were also counted concerning creation of the Area Corporation to Administer Michigan Area Camps, Campgrounds and Retreat Ministries, and both conferences voted to approve.

If you have any questions about the conference or wish more details, please do not hesitate to contact me at 517-663-3423 or bottia@acd.net. Summaries of the conference activities are also available on the West Michigan Conference website at WestMichiganConference.org.