

Report from Annual Conference 2019

Again, this year I was FUMER's representative to the Michigan Annual Conference, which was held at the Grand Traverse Resort Thursday, May 30 - Sunday, June 2. When I arrived that Thursday morning, the Memorial Service, where clergy, clergy spouses, children of clergy plus a few laity leaders were remembered. This was followed by celebrating Holy Communion together – indeed a good way to begin.

As I have said before, Annual Conference is like a “**family reunion**”. I saw Rev. Eric Beck and his wife, Heather Copp Beck, at the “Journey of Ministry” service on Saturday afternoon. Eric was FUMER's associate pastor about the same time that I joined FUMER's staff as Lay Assistant in 1980. After he finished his schoolwork and was ordained an Elder in the UMC, he received his first appointment and left Eaton Rapids. But in the meantime, we became good friends! Eric is now retired, his last appointment being at Jackson First UMC, and Jeannie Werkema (Heather's aunt) and I attended his retirement service, dinner and party on Sunday, June 16. They have purchased a condo in Charlotte; we can expect them to be visiting/attending FUMER after they are settled into their new home, so keep your eyes open! I also had short visits with former Pastor Daniel Hofmann and his wife, Mary. Pastor Daniel continues in his appointment to Leland UMC. Mary is now serving as a lay pastor to one of the Native American United Methodist churches in their area and thoroughly enjoying it! And I know that you will be pleased to know that Pastor Marty DeBow was reappointed to FUMER for another year.

We heard some powerful preaching from Bishop David Bard, as well as a lay person, Laura Witkowski, who spoke on the subject of “Ordinary Courage”. There were also two “teaching” sessions, led by Becca Farnum and Kristen K. Grauer.

Much was spent on church business. These times included the closing of 9 churches, including the near-by Grovenburg and Quimby United Methodist Churches, which were part of the former Lansing District. It is always sad when churches need to be closed.

Then there were the Legislative Issues presented by various individuals and groups within the church. All of us were assigned to a Legislative Committee to discuss, vote and bring the results back to the full assembly for action as needed. I was assigned to the Legislative Committee that discussed and made decisions on “Recognize the Unborn Baby”. It was debated and discussed thoroughly and eventually was defeated in committee. Others were less controversial, i.e., 1) one relating to ministry to those recently returning to society after being incarcerated, 2) what it means to be “Handicap Accessible”, 3) a Covenant Ministry Partnership with the Liberia Annual Conference and 4) the difficult closing of some long standing church camps in the Michigan Area. All of these passed.

And last but certainly not least, involves attention to the entire worldwide UMC. Every 4 years United Methodists hold what is called General Conference (GC). GC includes representatives elected from all around the world who make important decisions on issues that affect all of us who call ourselves United Methodists. The “Book of Discipline” speaks for the entire UMC on many issues, including social issues that affect our society, and GC is the only group that can make changes to the “Book of Discipline.” Because of the inability to come to ‘One Mind’ over the issues relating to LGTQIA persons, the 2016 GC made the decision to hold a special called GC in 2019. Its only agenda was to discuss this important issue.

In preparation for the 2019 GC, the 2016 GC requested help from the Council of Bishops. It was determined that a special ‘called’ GC would take place in St. Louis, MO from February 23 –

26, 2019. The Council of Bishops worked diligently to determine the best way to solve the impasse, creating a task force they called the "Commission on a Way Forward." Three models were presented to the delegates at the 2019 GC, 1) One Church [the model endorsed by the Council of Bishops], 2) Traditionalist, and 3) Connectional Conferences.

However, as you likely know, the 2019 GC did not pass either the "One Church" or the "Connectional Conferences" models. Instead, the "Traditional Plan" was passed by a close vote of 53% to 47%. This caused much distress by those who preferred the "One Church" model. Since February, supporters of the "One Church" model determined that they will continue the fight into next year's 2020 GC.

How did all of this affect the recent 2019 Michigan Conference? Those present chose to debate and then send the following items for consideration at the 2020 GC.

Two items were passed by more than a 2/3 margin. This is what they said. 1) "The Michigan Annual Conference aspires to live into an expression of Methodism that includes LGTQIA people in full life and membership of the UMC", 2) They also approved GCR 2019-3, the taking of a non-binding straw poll which indicated that 2/3 of those at this Michigan Conference preferred "a UM Conference whose policies allow for but do not require clergy to officiate at same-gender weddings, allow for consideration for ordained ministry of persons regardless of sexual orientation, and in which appointments are made with consideration given to the full range of contextual realities." (Both of these were part of the "One Church" model).

The final item, also approved by a 2/3 majority, asking GC to create "A Central Conference in North America." This was passed because it is known that if the churches outside of the U.S. had not been included in the voting at the February 2019 GC, the "Traditionalist Model" would likely have not passed.

At the service of Recognition, Commissioning and Ordination on Sunday afternoon, Bishop Alan Bard "ordained" two Deacons and six Elders were ordained. Also, 2 persons, one man and one woman who are openly gay, practicing homosexuals, were "Commissioned" by the Bishop. What that means, I do not know.

Yes, there is a real possibility that the UMC may split sometime in the future, and what that will look like is unknown at this time. But please understand that at this point it is all speculation. Your prayers will be greatly appreciated. In the meantime, let us continue to work together and love each other.

Joyce Showerman

