

MI CONNECT

Michigan Area of the United Methodist
Church News & Information

Print Edition

MIConnect Monthly Magazine

January 2018 Review

Detroit Central provides sanctuary to Albanian family of four



Rev. Jill Hardt Zundel, pastor of Detroit: Central UMC asks: "This is a congregation that believes strongly in immigration reform, so how can we change the systems that are oppressing people such as these?" ~mic photo/Mark Doyal

KAY DEMOSS Sr. Editor, Michigan Area

January 23, 2018 – A husband and wife sit in a living room, holding hands. They talk about their kids, one a student at U of M Dearborn, the other in Southgate High School. A TV sits across the room. A loaf of freshly baked bread rests in the kitchen. A huge teddy bear

smiles down from the top bunk in the bedroom.

Just any typical family anywhere in the U.S. Yes, in terms of what they value. No, in terms of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The Rranxburgaj family—father Ded, mother Flora, eldest son Lawrence, and his brother Eric—are living in

quarters, reminiscent of Anne Frank, within the friendly confines of Central United Methodist Church in Detroit, Michigan.

The boys are free to come and go to attend to their education. Their mother, Flora Rranxburgaj, suffers from multiple sclerosis so her world knows some limits.

Ded, her husband of almost 30 years, has been her primary caregiver since she fell ill. And that is why he sought sanctuary at Central UMC on January 16, rather than report for a random check-in with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

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MICONNECT

Michigan Area of the United Methodist
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January 2018

MIConnect provides the official news of The Michigan Area of The United Methodist Church. This printable edition is a summary of the month's top news published online every Wednesday in MIConnect Weekly. Find the "rest of the story" at MichiganUMC.org.

Bishop David A. Bard
Publisher Mark Doyal
Editor Kay DeMoss

We are 800 churches making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Connected in the Spirit with our neighbors, we are making a difference across the state of Michigan.

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Bishop David Bard

The Joyful Journey

A funny thing is happening this year. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent in the Church falls this year on February 14, Valentine's Day, our cultural celebration of love. Will there be romantic candle light dinners, followed by worship where we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return? If you are giving up chocolate for Lent, what do you do with the heart-shaped box that arrives February 14? Do you imagine two people, ashen crosses on their foreheads, exchanging brightly colored cards?

Digging a bit more deeply, though, the coinciding celebration of Lent and of love could be seen as a wonderful serendipity. Lent after all, is not simply a reminder of our mortality or of our penchant for messing life up, or of our tendency to sin. Lent is meant to be a time to re-focus on what is most important. It is meant to be a time of reflection and renewal, a time to re-energize our lives through a deeper connection with the God we know in Jesus Christ. It is to seek to have our lives more fully transformed by the grace of God in Jesus. What does that look like? John Wesley thought it looked like love. Wesley defined the heart of Christian faith as love of God and neighbor. Wesley's notion of Christian perfection was being made perfect in love. Let me share a love story that has a lot to do with Lent.

A few weeks ago, Julie and I drove to Mount Pleasant for their first morning worship service. As a bishop, one of my joys is sharing worship with you in many different places. It was a sunny, but cold morning. As we came into the entry way of the church,



I could not help but notice a woman and her two young children, a boy and a girl, sitting there. I also could not help but notice that she had a wire cart filled with a number of possessions. I wondered briefly if she had shown up waiting to talk to someone about getting help. I wondered briefly if I might be asked for money. My brief wondering was quickly

interrupted when the little girl, bundled in her warm hat and coat, came up to me and gave me a big hug. I was deeply touched and I thanked her for her kind greeting. Others arrived in the entry way, and we moved forward into the church.

During the morning worship I heard that the church had been home that weekend for some homeless persons and families. A number of congregations in the community take turns providing shelter for people without places. These guests had stayed the night at the church, and were being transported that morning to another location where they could spend the day. I am sure the little girl who hugged me had spent the night at the church and she and her mother and brother were waiting in that entry way for their ride to a day shelter.

Perhaps the little girl was able to share love in a hug because love had been shared with her through the church. Loving others in the name of Jesus, loving because we know we are loved wildly and deeply by God – Lent is a time to know that love of God more profoundly and to grow in sharing that love more widely and wildly.

I invite you to a holy, and wholly loving, Lent.

Meet Michigan's Director of Connectional Ministry

On December 15, 2017 Bishop David Bard announced the names of persons who will serve as the core leadership team for the new Michigan Conference. While many are familiar faces, each will be serving in the context of a new Director Model that takes people out of silos and into a team effort.

Bishop Bard noted, "We are working to organize our life together so that, centered in Jesus Christ, we are engaged in mission and ministry to our communities and the world, we are led by and are nurturing and encouraging bold and effective leaders, and we are supporting and fostering vibrant congregations."

MICONNECT will introduce these persons and the positions in a new series called, "Profiles in leadership." We begin with the Rev. Benton Heisler, who starts service as Director of Connectional Ministry on February 1, 2018.

Benton's previous appointments include: St. Joseph: First (Associate) 1986; Charlevoix and Charlevoix: Greensky Hill 1988; Lansing: Asbury 1992; Mt. Pleasant: First 1997; Lansing District Superintendent 2002. He has spent the last nine years as the West Michigan Conference Director of Connectional Ministries.

Benton is passionately committed to Christ, his wife, Linda, and their family.



The Rev. Benton Heisler and his wife, Linda, have been living and serving in the West Michigan Conference since 1986. ~ photo courtesy Benton Heisler

The Heislers will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary this year. Benton and Linda met as camp counselors serving at Wesley Woods. He has two married daughters, a two and one-half year old grandson and two rescued golden retrievers.

In his own words, here's a profile of Michigan's new Director of Connectional Ministry ...

Please share a little personal background that influenced your faith formation.

My family roots are based in farming and public education. My grandfather, with whom I was close into my young adult years before his death, worked the centennial farm of his wife's four sisters, milked cows by hand and raised in his garden or on that farm nearly all we had to eat at his table. My father was a teacher, principal and school superintendent. My mom was a kindergarten teacher and musician. Values of hard work, character, stewardship of the environment, appreciation of history and music, deep faith life and active involvement in the church and community were constant growing up. My parents' Church of the Brethren faith roots guided our family with a strong sense of social justice and peace. My father was a conscientious objector in WWII; no small act of



Rev. Benton Heisler

courage in that moment in time. My inspirational mentors, in addition to my parents, have been Marguerite Bradley, who taught me how to read the Bible; Chuck Grauer who taught how to tell a story and live by grace; Paul Ahlstrom, my high school coach and home building employer who taught me by modeling "never ask somebody to do something hard, you wouldn't do yourself" as we competed in carrying shingles to the top of a tall gable roof.

What's your professional background and what leadership lessons did you learn along the way?

In addition to paper boy, my first jobs were in a lawn business and residential construction/handyman work. While in college, I served as park ranger for a summer and then spent a year in Cornwall, England as a Volunteer Youth and Community Worker in a Methodist church. I taught math/science and reading in the Gladwin Middle School after college.

Ordained ministry has allowed me the opportunity to serve in a 16-church cooperative parish; as an associate and lead pastor in large congregations; in a Native American cross-racial/cross-cultural appointment; in small towns and large cities; as a district superintendent

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Bishop names additional Michigan Conference staff

On January 17, 2018 Bishop David Bard affirmed the selection of five Associate Directors and Coordinators, the Treasury and Benefits staff, Communication staff, and Episcopal Administrative staff for the new Michigan Conference.

These servant leaders join the list of Directors and District Superintendents announced in December.

“I give thanks for all these individuals who have offered themselves to serve the new Michigan Conference and I continue to pray daily for those who are preparing to put their names forward.” Bishop David said. “I give thanks for the wonderfully talented and dedicated people who serve our conference.”

FINANCE, BENEFITS AND ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

Executive Administrator, *Becky Emmert*; Accountant, *Chad Lundy*; Accounts Payables, *Nancy Wyllys*;



Accounts Receivable, *Rich Pittenger*; Benefits Coordinator & Payroll, *John Kosten*; IT Specialist, *Michael Mayo Moyle*; EZRA Database Specialist/Benefits & Treasury Administrative Assistant, *Jennifer Gertz*; Nominations and Journal Clerical Assistant, *Kathy Hippensteel*

EPISCOPAL OFFICE

Executive Assistant to the Bishop, *Deana Nelson*; Executive Assistant to the Clergy Assistant to the

Bishop, *Jennifer Weaver*; Area Finance Manager, *Kristen Gillette*

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

Senior Editor/Writer, *Kay DeMoss*; Executive Assistant to the Communications Director, *Kristen Gillette*; MIconnect Editor, *Valerie Mossman-Celestin*; Social Media Assistant, *Paul Reissmann*

More announcements expected by mid-February.



New Associate Directors and Coordinators have been added to the Michigan Conference staff. (Left to right) The Rev. Paul Perez, Associate Director of Mission & Ministry; Naomi Garcia and the Rev. Gary Step, Associate Directors of Congregational Vibrancy; Bridget Nelson Coordinator of Youth Ministry Initiatives; and Sonya Luna, Missionary for Hispanic/Latino Ministries. These positions begin on July 1, 2018.

Drinking the Cup ... *tribalism and following Christ*



REV. JOHN BOLEY
Clergy Assistant to the Bishop

I am convinced that one of the primary missions of Jesus was to break down the tribalism of the world. This is an article of faith in my faith journey and one of the important ways that I know that Jesus was/is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Some of the hard sayings of the New Testament relate to Jesus' understanding of "family." For instance, in Matthew 10 and Luke 12, Jesus states that to follow him means that father will be against son and mother against daughter, etc. And with respect to his own family, he clearly indicates some kind of break, so that family is now defined as being beyond the biological family – to anyone doing his will. He offers a new understanding of "family."

But Jesus had a broader and bigger intent. There are episodes in which Jesus offers a faith and a world view that is beyond the exclusivism of his traditional Jewish context. One that comes to mind is the event in Jesus' home synagogue where he claims grace for Gentile people, and then almost gets thrown off the cliff by his home folk.

Taking all of Jesus' sayings and attitudes together, Jesus is offering a new understanding of family and a new understanding of the authority of the family. In a nutshell, Jesus is suggesting that no longer can the patriarch or the matriarch of the family have the final authority. Ultimately, Jesus, and his life, teaching, death, resurrection, is the final authority.

When we use the term "family" in a discussion like this, we need to replace it in our minds with the word "tribe." The family in Jesus time was not much like our American nuclear families. They were part of tribal units within larger tribal units. For instance, "Jesus was of the house and lineage of David."

Most of the world throughout history has lived in tribal units that provided authority, security, sustenance, community, continuity and culture. Unfortunately, tribalism throughout history has almost always led to violence, sometimes massive violence. As the nation-state has evolved, it has taken over many of the roles of the tribe, but with much the same penchant toward violence.

But the anti-tribal standard that Jesus has offered still stands. And with this changed standard, the tribalism of the world, with its necessary violence, can break down. A Hatfield can say "no" to killing a McCoy. And an American can say "no" to killing an Iraqi. Because Jesus is the authority, not the tribe.

Many people suggest that humanity has not made any advancements over history – that human nature and sin mean that there is no progression. I disagree. Due to the evolution of faith, and constant migrations of people, tribal violence has diminished. While there is still plenty of violence in this world, there has been advancement in the diminishment of the tribalism on a broader scale. Especially in western democracies, old line ethnic/tribal feuds have significantly declined.

Dr. King taught us that the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice. This arc and bending includes the reduction of tribal and national instincts that bring hatred and violence. But of course, there is a long way to go. In our recent politics, there is a significant regression. Tribalism is being pursued, advanced, heralded and championed. It is disgraceful and disgusting, and represents many steps backward for the advancement of humankind.

The trajectory of our politics with respect to tribal understandings is contrary to the trajectory of breaking down tribalism that was part of the heart of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. We regress at our own individual and collective risk.

I intend to follow Jesus.

Family from p. 1

“I want to say everything true,” Ded explains. “I’ve been here for 17 years. My wife for many years has been very sick. I follow all the rules like every immigrant does. Now they try to send me back. I hope God sees us and makes the family stay together.”

Suffering hardship under Communism, Ded and Flora left Albania and lived for a time in Europe and Canada before arriving in the United States in 2001. During their time in Michigan, Ded has worked as a cook, in construction, for a landscaper. “Whatever I could do to earn \$20, I did. I have worked for 17 years without a day off,” Ded remarks. “Perhaps this time here [inside the church] is my vacation because, with no choice, I am here.”

Caitlin Homrich-Knieling, an Immigrant Family Defense Organizer, is working with the family as “an urgent response case,” on behalf of Michigan United. She summarizes their situation. “The family came to the U.S. without status and tried to receive political asylum.” All their appeals were denied so they have remained in the country on a humanitari-

an basis. “Ded has a work authorization card,” Caitlin says. “He pays taxes. He is documented. He does, however, not have a status that protects him from deportation.” He reported to every check-in with Immigration until his legal counsel advised him not to last week.

Caitlin recalls the desperation that then brought Ded to Michigan United for help. “In Ded’s case, he seemed to be saying, ‘The idea of deportation is so horrendous for my family, so scary that I must disobey my order of deportation. This is my only option.’”

That is when Caitlin began to contact the several churches that comprise their sanctuary network. Among the email recipients was the Rev. Jill Hardt Zundel, Senior Pastor of Detroit Central since 2014. When asked, “Is your sanctuary open?” Zundel response was, “Yes. We can take them in.”

Detroit Central had formally voted to become a sanctuary congregation in January of 2017. The Rranxburgaj family was the second to be welcomed as guests. The first to occupy the sanctuary home

space was a family from Africa. Because they were seeking political asylum, their time at Central was very private. That has not been the case with Ded, Flora and their boys.

“The news coverage this time has been constant,” Zundel says. “As the only pastor at Central, I stress about the bulletin and the shut-ins and the Ad Council as I deal with the details of getting this story out.” But she quickly adds, “There is a sense of peace that comes with it as you know you are doing the right thing.”

The church’s responsibility is two-fold: housing the family while meeting their basic needs and advocating on their behalf. “You want to make sure they feel comfortable and as safe as possible,” Pastor Zundel notes. “Further, this is a congregation that believes strongly in immigration reform, so how can we change the systems that are oppressing people such as these.”

The church’s relationship with the Rranxburgajs is one more chapter in a long history of social activism from their place in the center of the city. “Last year the sanctuary turned 150-years-old,” Jill recalls. “They wanted to have a big celebration of this space but I suggested that we not celebrate the room. Let’s talk instead about how Central has been a sanctuary.” Her list includes empowerment of women and minorities, welcoming people of different sexual orientations and the homeless ... and now an Albanian family. “Sanctuary for us has always meant something bigger than just this space where worship happens on Sunday morning,” she notes.

The pastor acknowledges that the church has taken risks over the decades but “this takes on more responsibility than anything else we have ever done.” Over the past 40 years ICE has never entered a church building in pursuit of an individual whom they intend to deport. However, Zundel reports, “We have eyes and ears open during the week and especially on Sunday.” And the Building Superintendent has been instructed to find her, even in the



Ded Rranxburgaj is the primary caregiver for his wife, Flora, who has M.S. He also has two children, Eric in high school in Southgate and Lawrence, a student at U of M in Dearborn. ~MIC photo/Mark Doyal

pulpit, if government officials arrive.

For now it is Michigan United that deals with official matters between the family, lawyers and Immigration. In the meantime, the congregation moves forward with support and hospitality. In the midst of the upheaval of anything resembling a normal routine, Jill and others take care of the things that make for home. She provides grocery money but leaves trips to the Macedonian market to the Rranxburgaj sons who shop with the list their father supplies. She remembers one exchange, when Ded asked, “May I have permission to buy Pepsi? My boys like Pepsi.” She gave assurance that was okay and was later pleased with Eric’s happy report, “I got Pepsi. Thirty-six cans!” A little bit of freedom and grace in a grocery bag is part of what sanctuary involves.

It’s been a week since the family walked through the doors of Central United Methodist Church in Detroit. No one knows how long they will stay. But as long as they are guests, they will be loved and cared for. Why would a church make such a commitment? “Jesus said, ‘I was a stranger and you took me in,’ and the Old Testament said clearly, ‘You were foreigner in a foreign land,’ so treat foreigners like brothers and sisters,” Pastor Zundel reflects.

When someone left a comment on Facebook, “You are breaking the law and that’s against the Bible,” she reports thinking, “This is a higher law. This is protecting the vulnerable and the weak and I think that’s what Jesus called us to do.”

Bishop David Alan Bard, episcopal leader for the Michigan Conference has voiced his support for the church. “The action of Detroit Central will cause consternation among some and will be cheered by others,” he remarks. “While we as a country work to make our immigration system more sound and sane, while we also work to keep our nation safe and secure, we would do well to focus on offering kindness and compassion in the name of Jesus Christ. We should extend mercy to those who have worked hard to be good community members here in the United States.”

Caitlin Homrich-Knieling asserts that community support is vital for an



Ded and Flora were married in a civil ceremony in then Communist Albania. They celebrated their love in a church service once in the U.S. Their wedding picture is on display in their living quarters at Central UMC. ~MIC photo/Mark Doyal

individual like Ded to be granted a Stay of Removal by ICE. Such a stay may be for one year or until his care is no longer necessary. A determined and worthy individual who clearly has strong support—letters, calls, emails, persons present at events on his or her behalf—has a better chance of being granted a Stay of Removal.

She and Pastor Zundel offer this list of ways persons may give support to the Rranxburgaj family:

- Donate to food and housing expenses with a check payable to Detroit Central United Methodist Church UMC with memo to “sanctuary.” Mail to 23 E. Adams, Detroit MI 48226;
- Write a letter to Rebecca Adducci, Director of the Detroit ICE Field Office supporting the family and urging a Stay of Removal; DHS, ICE Office, 333 Mt. Elliott St, Detroit MI 48207.
- Write Representatives and Senators encouraging immigration reform;
- Contribute goods or services (e.g. transportation) for the family by

emailing Pastor Jill Zundel at revdrjill@hotmail.com.

Pastor Jill encourages both those who would support her guests and those who would support ICE to seek common ground. “I understand that some want him deported,” she observes. “But in the midst of all the arguments can we all work together to fix a broken system?”

Caitlin adds, “We need to understand that while this family’s story is compelling, it is not exceptional. Every immigrant family depends on each other just as much as this family does. At some point every family must depend on each other.” Common ground.

Detroit Central is believed to be the oldest Protestant Church in Michigan, founded in 1810. During its 200+ years it has been many things to many people. Ded Rranxburgaj and his family are among the most grateful to walk through the church’s open doors.

“Now I am here at this church,” Ded says. “Thanks for the very nice people who save my life. Perhaps this is my last chance coming here. I hope people know what’s going on with my family.”



GRAND TRAVERSE DISTRICT ... There's new "Central Wear" at Traverse City: Central UMC. Kids model tees and hats that encourage, "All the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the places you can" ... with a smile!



ALBION DISTRICT ... The Rev. George Ayoub, Michigan Camp Exec visited Jackson: First UMC to celebrate camping. The congregation presented a \$10,000 check for capital improvements at Lake Michigan Camp, site of the church's Family Camp for 40 years.



KALAMAZOO DISTRICT ... (L-r) Revs. Joe Shaler (Otsego UMC) and Mike Tupper (Gull Lake UMC) really got into District Superintendent Dwayne Bagley's discussion of the book "Canoeing the Mountains" (thanks to some Camp Sunday props).



DETROIT RENAISSANCE DISTRICT ... Faith @ The Movies continues at Flint: Court Street UMC. A trip to the theater mid-week and then themed worship on Sunday. Pastor Jeremy Peters preaches January 14th as "The Greatest Showman."



SAGINAW BAY DISTRICT ... Rev. Scott Sherrill gets in on the action at Vassar: First UMC as families make "cars" to get ready for the next Faith, Food and Fun Night.



GRAND RAPIDS DISTRICT ... The Young Adults at Grand Rapids: First UMC had a great time playing BINGO with the church's neighbors..

Snapshots of Vitality



DETROIT RENAISSANCE DISTRICT ... New stained glass at Rochester Hills: St. Luke's UMC. "It will add to the beauty of the front of the church and inspire passerby folks to feel invited to join us."



BLUE WATER DISTRICT ... It was a hot time at Lake Orion UMC when the church gathered for the Chili Cook-Off. Food, fellowship and friendly competition as chefs vied for the coveted Golden Chili Trophy.

Benton

from p. 3

and on Jurisdictional committees. All of these experiences led to these key lessons:

Never do ministry alone. Work as a team; it's more fun and productive. Do whatever it takes. It is not about you, it is about the mission. Folks are folks...love them unconditionally, encourage them constantly and speak to them with honesty and with authenticity...they too want to succeed and be part of making a difference.

What is it that nurtures, sustains and guides you in your work?

My passion is to serve Christ in all I do. I have a deep faith and sense of call. I love people and working together to accomplish incredible things for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom of God. Because of my love of the out of doors, I am regularly "wowed" by God through nature. I serve out of a moderate, orthodox, evangelical theological worldview which values the healthy creative balance of Wesleyan personal and social Holiness. I desire to build, repair, and restore people and places of community, for the sake of the Kingdom of God and the transformation of the world. I believe those who do not share my same view have learned that I still trust and respect them and they, in turn, have extended the same relationship to me.

How would you describe the role of the Director of Connectional Ministry?

The Discipline is clear about this. The role is to be the keeper of the vision, constantly press toward the alignment of resources, accountability, collaboration and continual reassessment. The keys are in the title, connecting people and process and programs so that

ministry moves forward in fruitful and meaningful ways, making disciples transforming the world.

What is your vision for the Michigan Conference?

I have the lay and clergy leadership of nearly 800 congregations who share this responsibility with me! My task is to help connect and equip them in ways that multiply their talents. I work in tandem with the Bishop, Conference and District Lay Leaders, District Superintendents, Directors and other



Conference Staff so that resources are shared, communication is widespread, new ideas are generated, gifts are identified and deployed. The new Conference Leadership Council is the connecting point of all these many resources and opportunities so that ministry moves forward in between the sessions of Annual Conference.

As the Michigan Conference takes shape, what goals do you have?

I have a "First 100 Day Plan" that I had outlined, expecting it to be initiated July 1, 2018. However, I am starting immediately because my

colleague, Jerry DeVine, is transitioning to Superintendent of the Lansing District. That has altered the reality of implementing some of those ideas given the urgency of completing work on the 2019 Budget, preparation for 2018 Annual conference and staffing work ahead. Yet the goals are still the same: *be collaborative, be relational, be available, be flexible, be myself.* Implementation of these goals will begin as the Bishop initially brings all the directors together after which we spread out our influence into the circles we

each coordinate. I believe part of my role is help each circle see its interrelatedness. I will watch for anyone or anything that seems to set up as a silo and then help reconnect and realign.

What will it take to shift to a "Director style"?

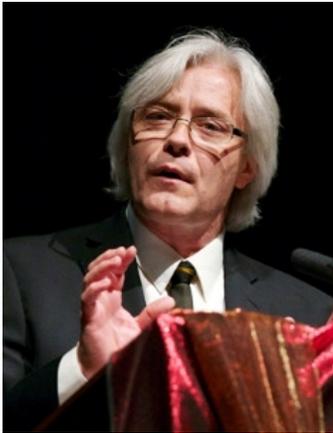
In addition to what I already stated as goals, I am an action-driven and vision-focused leader who is highly collaborative and clearly decisive in my style. I strive to be relational, available, flexible, and authentic along with being non-anxious, optimistic, and bold. I remain balanced through lighthearted humor.

What excites you and challenges you about the future of The Michigan Conference?

I am excited by the synergy as we unite our gifts toward a common purpose. We have an opportunity to no longer be divided in structure, finance or vision, but instead have a common vision, guided by our episcopal leader, connected through a common structure, utilizing a vast variety of diverse gifts and resources across the state. On the challenge side, I see a fear of risk, a clinging to the familiar, a defending of what was instead of embracing what could be. We will need to constantly remind ourselves to not say, "Well, we did it this way," and constantly reframe our future with, "What and how do we feel God is calling us to do this now?" We will need to engage in rigorous, prayerful and transparent discernment in order to address unhealthiness and ineffectiveness in the interest of adaptive change.

What do you believe God desires for The United Methodist Church in Michigan and beyond?

To be faithful and fruitful. To be adaptive to the changes that are rapidly happening in the culture today. To be persistent in prayer, to be extravagant in our generosity, radical in our hospitality, passionate in our worship, risk-taking in our mission and service and intentional in our faith development. These aren't new ideas, but they truly are the basics. "This is a Day of New Beginnings" is a hymn that I think captures the spirit of this moment in The Michigan Conference.



Perspectives on Hope

Rev. Dr. Jerome (Jerry) DeVine
Outgoing Director of Connectional Ministries, DAC

I was about eight-years-old when I first gazed upon a young amateur artist's rendition of the painting "Christ of St. John of the Cross" by surrealist artist Salvador Dali. My older sister, now a professional artist with a studio, had painted her variation of that stirring work at the age of about 13. It hung on the hallway going up the stairs of our home at that time. As a very spiritually oriented and impressionable young boy I was captivated by the painting.

My sister's version did not have the Christ on the cross, since she had not yet mastered drawing the human form at that young age. However, in her rendition the cross still loomed high in the cloudy sky overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and the empty boat on the shoreline entered into my inner consciousness.

I had shared once before in a blog that this visual image became a central part of my initial call to ministry when I was 13-years-old. It has now once again become a poignant and important reminder and guide for my life and calling. I find myself on a new shoreline as I transition from eight years as the Director of Connectional Ministries, and now begin a new appointment back on the appointive cabinet as a District Superintendent. According to the Book of Discipline I am shifting from being the "steward of the vision" of the annual conference to now being the "chief missional strategist" of the district. I look forward to some engaging conversations with the clergy, laity and churches of the emerging District #5 on what they envision a "chief missional strategist" to be as we shape a way of ministry and direction together.

As I prepared to walk out of our home to drive to this year's appointive cabinet retreat my wife looked at me with an understanding face and said, "And so it begins!" We have been down this road before when I served for five years as the District Superintendent of the Albion District. As I sat in the second floor meeting room at our Lake Huron Retreat Center examining the listings of local churches and the names of pastors to be considered for possible changes of appointments I had a distinct empathy for what it may mean for them, their relationships, their local churches and the ministry potentials for God's vision as new shorelines come into focus. Some of them may say, "And so it begins once again!" when they receive a phone call from one of the district superintendents in the weeks and months ahead. To fulfill God's call and vision in our connectional way of life requires openness to discover new shorelines. It also calls upon us to leave boats behind us if "by your side I will seek other seas."

Just as the clergy are invited to "seek other seas", so too are laity in each of our local churches. If your congregation is going to be going through a change of pastoral appointments or a change of staffing, how open will you be to leave your boats of preference and comfort in order to follow Christ's call to a new approach to transforming your community? How will you help make the transition of leaders as smooth and life-giving as possible? While you may not have to itinerate physically like your pastors you can "seek other seas" in your understanding of your call to discipleship in your church and community.

By the time you read this blog you will already have seen the further announcement of changes of conference staff, with some continuing and other new positions being opened for new ministries to emerge. All staff portfolios are being refocused on the new Michigan Conference vision that deepens our commitment to Christ-Centered Mission and Ministry, Bold and Effective Leaders, and Vibrant Congregations. New staff will be leaving some boats behind them and following the Holy Spirit's guidance to new shorelines and new seas of transformative ministry with our new nine district leadership teams and our local churches. Staff people that are continuing are also being realigned in their focus in this same direction.

While I will no longer be in that particular ministry team, I now have both the opportunity and the responsibility to partner with them and my district leaders to develop the missional strategy to equip and guide the 88 local churches I will be superintending in the new District #5, which includes most of my churches in the current Lansing District, the 1/5 of the Heartland District churches that I will be blessed to work with, and even a few new churches from the current Crossroads District, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, and Albion districts.

The hymn, "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore", evokes our sense of call from God. If we sit with those words and images, and let the tune play out in our heads, we will also find that it is a clear reminder that to be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ leads us into a pathway of discipleship. Discipleship moves us out from simply being cared for by grace and into a giving of ourselves in that grace in the world.

I invite and encourage you, in a season of change, to meditate on the words of the hymn to hear and see where God might be calling you to leave your boats on the shoreline behind you and by God's side to seek other seas. Amen.



Lord, you have come to the lakeshore looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones; you only ask me to follow humbly. O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me, and while smiling have spoken my name; now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me; by your side I will seek other seas. *

Ingathering of goods at Annual Conference for MMDC

Midwest Mission Distribution Center is trucking to Michigan May 31-June 3, 2018. A 26-foot trailer will be parked at the site of the 2018 Annual Conference in Acme, Michigan.

Conference members are asked to focus primarily on Personal Dignity Kits. Go to www.midwestmission.org for complete instructions on contents of the kits and how to pack them.

The following items may also be brought in bulk to be loaded on the trailer: glue sticks, dry erase markers and erasers; blue or black pens; 1-subject spiral notebooks. In addition, churches may send along any other kits or donations they have for delivery to MMDC.

Further instructions forthcoming. Start now with collection of goods. The UMCOR Relief Supply Network consists of nine depots, including the Midwest

Mission Distribution Center (MMDC). Since it was founded in 1999, MMDC United Methodists across the Michigan Area have sent tons of UMCOR materials for packing and thousands have travelled to Illinois to pack them.

The January 2018 newsletter of the Midwest Mission Distribution Center is full of information, starting with the stats for 2017 ...

UMCOR Kits shipped: UMCOR Kits Shipped: Health Kits – 11,761; Layette Kits – 1,635; Cleaning Buckets – 14,287; Bedding Kits – 336; School Kits – 3,089; Birthing Kits – 28,653

MMDC Kits and Projects Shipped: Student School Bags – 13,335; Teacher School Bags – 115; School Desks – 284; Personal Dignity Kits – 36,456; Bikes – 391; Sewing Machines – 923

Summary of Operations: Number of Volunteers – 2,314; Volunteer Hours – 33,217; In-kind Donations – 668,703 lbs; International Shipments – 29; Domestic Shipments – 201; Total shipped out 909,031 lbs

International shipments made to 15 countries plus U.S. Territory of Puerto Rico

Long-time MMDC Executive Director Pat Wright retired in 2017 and Chantel Corrie has taken over her position. Her prayer for MMDC: “MMDC’s light in the world continues to shine brighter and touch more lives for Christ.” Email Chantel at chantel@midwestmission.org.

The Center has not moved. However, the postal service has assigned them a new mailing address: 1001 Mission Drive, Pawnee, IL 62558. Phone MMDC at 217.483.7911.



Since opening in 1999, the Midwest Mission Distribution Center near Springfield, Illinois has welcomed hundreds of volunteers and processed tons of relief materials from the Detroit and West Michigan conferences. ~mmdc photo

Michigan loves United Methodist Committee on Relief

UMCOR Sunday (formerly One Great Hour of Sharing) is what allows UMCOR to act as the arms and legs of Christ's church, moving toward the most vulnerable in their darkest days.

This year the offering is taken March 11. Convinced that all people have God-given worth and dignity—without regard to race, religion or gender—together UMCOR and its supporters are assisting those impacted by crisis or chronic need ... everyday.

UMCOR will be able to offer aid in Jesus' name to those who suffer because of the generous giving of United Methodists on UMCOR Sunday. Gifts pay the administrative costs of UMCOR which allows all other donor dollars to respond 100% to designated needs.

Speaking of designated needs. Michigan has given. In 2017 Michigan United Methodists gave over \$1.2 million to domestic and international disaster response through the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

And Michigan has also received. Over the past four years a total of \$800,000 has been granted to projects in Michigan including the Northwest Detroit Flood



The Rev. Jack Amick, a clergyman from the Detroit Conference, is currently serving UMCOR's Director of Sustainable Development. He was on the scene when Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines. ~umcor photo

Recovery; Flint Water Emergency; and now Midland Flood Recovery. Two UMCOR case managers are giving families hope in mid-Michigan after torrential rains in June of 2017.

The Rev. Jack Amick, a clergyman from the Detroit Conference and Director of Sustainable Development for UMCOR, describes how dollars given to UMCOR make a difference.

"The three main humanitarian principles that undergird all our work are that the dignity of disaster survivors should be maintained, that we do no harm, and that we serve with impartiality." Amick calls well-implemented humanitarian assistance, "sacramental, a physical reminder that God loves all."

According to Amick, UMCOR is in the abundance business. "We're told that we will receive a full measure, pressed down, shaken, and flowing over ... are we prepared to provide those who suffer that same kind of abundance?" he asks.

UMCOR response begins with the vulnerable in a community, whether that community is Midland, Michigan or Manila, Philippines.

"In the story of the Good Samaritan," Amick concludes, "Jesus reminds us that our prime goal is to help people, without regard to religion or nationality."



The Rev. Robert C. Smith was a global ambassador for UMCOR following his retirement from the West Michigan Conference. His legacy lives on in strong support for disaster relief. ~mic photo/Kay DeMoss

United Methodist membership tops 12.5 million

HEATHER HAHN
United Methodist News Service

The United Methodist Church's global membership now exceeds 12.5 million.

These membership figures come from the most recent annual conference journals sent to the General Council on Finance and Administration. The vast majority of the journals are from 2016 with some from 2017 or earlier years including one from 2013.

The Rev. Gary Graves, secretary of the General Conference, used these totals in calculating how many delegates each conference sends to the denomination's top lawmaking assembly in 2020.

"When no statistical files were included, when they were incomplete, or when the statistics included were out of range from previous years, the journal served as the starting point for a conversation with the episcopal office of each affected annual conference," Graves said.

The total professing membership, reflected in what Graves collected, is 12,557,214. That's up from the estimated 12.4 million members in 2013 — the last time the secretary of the General Conference calculated delegations.

The 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis will have 862 delegates — half clergy and half lay. Of those delegates, 55.9 percent will be from the U.S., 32 percent from Africa, 6 percent from the Philippines, 4.6 percent from Europe and the remainder from Concordat churches.

The 10 Concordat delegates come from the Methodist churches of Great Britain, Mexico, the Caribbean and the Americas, and Puerto Rico. They are Methodist denominations with which United Methodists have particularly close ties.

The largest single delegation — with 50 people — will come from the North Katanga Conference in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The largest U.S. delegations — with 22 each — will come

from the North Georgia and Virginia conferences.

The 2020 General Conference also will include delegations from five new annual conferences created by 2016 central conference meetings. These are the Kenya-Ethiopia, Uganda-South Sudan, Rwanda Provisional and Northeast Nigeria conferences, all in Africa, and Hundred Islands Conference in the Philippines.

Graves determined delegate counts using a statistical formula based on the number of clergy and professing lay members of each annual conference.



The 2016 General Conference approved legislation that specifies the secretary makes those calculations based on the most recent conference journals submitted to the General Council on Finance and Administration.

"This helps ensure that journals are now submitted, as has been the requirement for many years," Graves said. "It also indicates that the statistical tables included in the journal are submitted with the approval of the annual conference."

The numbers in the journals show the denomination's overall growth continues even as the church has seen its U.S. membership slide.

A more recent picture of that decline comes from U.S. figures the General Council on Finance and Administration published on its Data Services website.

The website's information comes not

from journals but from statistics local churches submit each year, which generally show more recent data than collected in journals.

According to this data, U.S. membership dropped below 7 million in 2016 to about 6.95 million people. That marked a decrease of about 1.6 percent from 2015, roughly the same percentage decrease seen in the last two years.

U.S. average weekly attendance fell to just under 2.66 million — representing a 3.3 percent decline. All five U.S. jurisdictions reported decreases in both membership and worship attendance. However, there are bright spots in the data.

The Dakotas, Northwest Texas and Red Bird Missionary conferences all reported slight increases in worship attendance.

Overall, U.S. churches saw 108,071 new members join last year by profession of faith or faith restored. That figure includes people who completed confirmation or were previously unchurched for some time. Another 38,443 new members joined by transferring denominations.

However, that didn't offset the net loss of 115,884 members.

The church, which still is 90 percent white in the United States, also saw a slight increase in its ethnic diversity. In 2016, the denomination added 282 more Hispanic/Latino and 32 more Pacific Islander members. It also saw an increase of 1,148 more multiracial members.

Much of the 2016 membership losses resulted from churches removing long inactive members from their rolls or correcting previous data. Another 90,613 were removed from the rolls because of death, or as United Methodists would say, they joined "the church triumphant."

Churches reported just 22,930 members withdrew because of joining another denomination. The percentage of such transfers actually dropped nearly 10 percent in 2016.



Pray 40 days with Wesley

Are you looking for personal growth and a sense of community during Lent? If you ever feel like you miss out on the journey of Lent in your busy life, arriving at Easter and Jesus Christ's wonderful gift unprepared, then this daily devotional class and discussion group can help.

You are invited to take a little time each day for 40 days with Methodism's founder, John Wesley. Through daily studies that include prayer, scripture, readings from John Wesley, reflection, journaling, a blessing, and online discussion, you will grow in faith individually and with others in community.

Expect to spend about 30 minutes to an hour every day. The study is available from February 14, 1 pm to April 1, 6 pm ; you pick the time of day which works best for you.

Each participant will need to purchase their own copy of *40 Days with Wesley* by Bishop Rueben P. Job, available from Cokesbury or Amazon.

Make this the year you fully experience the meaning in the journey of Lent. Price: \$25. Go online to Beadisciple.com to register.

The instructor for the online class is Pamela Deck, a United Methodist Christian educator who loves helping churches and individuals equip disciples and connect faith to real life.

A peek inside the book, *40 Days with Wesley*, reveals chapter titles like, "Listening for God," "A World of Darkness," "Holiness of Life," and "Opposition Along the Way."

A sample prayer: "Creator God, Author of all that is and Lover of all that you have made, deepen our awareness of your mighty acts past and present ... invade our minds, senses and hearts like a quiet sunrise, a refreshing rain, a beautiful bouquet, a commanding voice, a trusted companion, and a loving touch — because we want to know you and remember who you are with every breath we take."

The reflection that follows asserts: "Commitment to a God that is too small will stifle any hope for a transformed world and dull our efforts to bring such a world into being ... our prayers, our hope, our trust, our work and our very lives are at risk when we follow a God too small."

Widen your world with this online study during Lent.

News in Brief

WHERE TO FIND NEW APPOINTMENT LISTING



The Michigan Appointive Cabinet is hard at work with the annual round of pastoral moves. A listing of the appointments, including retirements, may be found on the news website; www.news.michiganumc.org. Most recent appointments are listed in the left corner of the homepage; then click the button for the full list.

CONNECTIONAL TABLE WELCOMES JERRY DEVINE

The Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai now serves as the Chief Connectional Officer for The United Methodist Church. And the person who is stepping into her place on the Lansing District of The Michigan Area has also been named to fill the vacancy she leaves as a member of The Connectional Table. The Rev. Dr. Jerome (Jerry) DeVine has officially joined the Connectional Table and awaits assignment to a focus team and additional sub committees. He will serve through the present quadrennium.



COMMUNICATORS NAME TOP STORIES

For the second consecutive year, the work of the Commission on a Way Forward in addressing the church's debate over homosexuality was considered the top news story by church communicators. Second was the denomination's response to a number of natural disasters worldwide in 2017. The Judicial Council's ruling on the election of a gay bishop, United Methodist response to gatherings of white supremacists and Global Migration Sunday rounded out the top five. The Commission had its seventh meeting in January. In that session they refined three possible models for the future of the denomination. The Council of Bishops will have a special meeting in February to review the commission's work. The commission has two more meetings scheduled this spring. The bishops have a deadline of July 8 to submit their petitions to the special General Conference in February 2019.



Valentines and ashes ... what to do February 14th

ABIGAIL PARKER HERRARA
Young People's Ministries/
Discipleship Ministries

Forget "Happy Holidays" vs. "Merry Christmas". In February, we will have the first of only three showdowns that occur in this century: Ash Wednesday vs. Valentine's Day.

For churches celebrating St. Valentine's Day as a feast day, this battle was decided centuries ago: They called it for Ash Wednesday. Culture, on the other hand, probably remains open to debate. I mean, when the clash of the two only occurs three times in a century... does Ash Wednesday get an automatic win because it comes out of nowhere to claim the 14th of February or does Valentine's Day, the work horse of the 14th take its usual position? Obviously it's not a battle... culturally we have a clear winner! Who is going to choose a fast over a feast?

When I read articles from pastors lamenting Ash Wednesday losing to Valentine's and our culture's inability to engage the holy, I wonder why we so often shift to the language of winners and losers? Does the church have to be "right" and the culture "wrong" when our High Holy Days and Holidays collide? Are there places of intersection that help us see God in the culture around us and help those outside of our church rituals meet Christians in a new way?

On the face of it, it doesn't seem like the cultural celebration of Valentine's Day and the church's celebration of the beginning of a holy fast for Lent can go together at all. One swears off chocolate, wine, feasting, and decoration;

the other asks for lavish meals, gifts, gaudy red outfits, and a lot of kissing. One celebrates God's eternal love for us even when we don't deserve it, and the other revels in romantic love between partners. One relentlessly points out our failures as a people and our need for God's grace, while the other asks us to lift up what we love about the people in our lives, perhaps asking us to overlook flaws.

Long-standing church traditions and holy rituals often invite us to turn inward and away from the surrounding culture. This can be a good thing, but what happened when our in-house traditions become the primary way we connect with God? It can cause the church to become judgmental of the people we view as outsiders, the very people we are called to love with the grace God gives us! Engaging in our culture during the holiest seasons of the year can open our eyes to God's work around us.

A good way to figure out how to meet the culture in its holy seasons is to start by listing the good things about the cultural activity in question. What are some of the good things our culture celebrates on Valentine's Day? Love: romantic love, familial love, and the love between friends ... the gifts of the people all around us ... the ability to make time and space in our lives and calendars and bank accounts for the people we feel are important to us ... the hope of relationships growing stronger ... our need for relationships.

There are many places in this list where Ash Wednesday



fits. Ash Wednesday certainly names our need for relationship. It reflects our struggle within our bodies to both ignite the fire of passion and dampen it when that fire burns inappropriately. The hope God has in us, and God's relentless pursuit of us, is like a passionate lover willing to forgive our flaws.

The question I'm pondering for my church setting is: If we are beginning a time of fasting to meditate on God's love on a day when many people are being called to feasting in a celebration of love, how can our fast produce more love in the world? We could:

- ♥ Leave Valentine's for people, reminding them of their worth.
- ♥ Invite people into our traditions in meaningful ways. There are a lot of people who are feeling lonely on Valentine's Day. Have a simple meal that evening on your own, or at the church and invite people for whom bread, soup, and other people would feel like a celebration.
- ♥ Celebrate marriages. A

lot of people get married on Valentine's Day. Could your church go to the court house and give small gifts to newly married couples?

- ♥ Celebrate parents and host a "parent's night out" the weekend before or after Valentine's Day or even on Valentine's Day itself.
- ♥ Celebrate single people. A lot of people contemplate their feelings of loneliness and unworthiness on Valentine's Day. Could your church invest in counseling services for people feeling depressed and lonely, and offer information about these reduced rates on Valentine's Day?
- ♥ Offer something for people exploring romantic love; tickets to a movie or performance, safe rides, favorite date ideas.

What can you do on this Valentine's Day with ash on your forehead and a box of chocolates in your hands?