

VIII. REPORTS

A. MICHIGAN CONFERENCE CABINET DEAN'S REPORT

Good morning, Bishop, Colleagues, Conference! I bring you greetings on behalf of the people and churches of the Marquette District which is surrounded by three of the Great Lakes; where our geography includes approximately one third of the state of Michigan; where the waters are bluer than the oceans; where people enjoy life at the same latitude as the Bishop's hometown of Duluth; and where we just this past year celebrated and supported their first new church start since 1978.

Friends, it has been a joy to serve as the first dean of the Michigan Area Cabinet for this past year. I've had the privilege to serve on one of the best teams in the annual conference. Even on the hardest of days, the people who share in this special ministry of superintending with me, really do care about our local churches first and foremost. We know that you are central to the mission of the Church. Our hearts are filled with a longing to see vital centers of mission and ministry throughout the Michigan area where disciples of Jesus Christ are nurtured, developed, and sent forth to a world that is desperate to hear a good word; a simple word; a word of truth: "God loves you!"

In 2012, the General Conference declared that district superintendents are expected to be the chief missional strategists for their districts. Since that time, your DS's have worked hard to live into that role.

I will confess that the task is not always easy. There are always distractions that abound in the work of the superintendency. On some days, it is easier to feel like a fire chief than a chief missional strategist. It is more tempting and perhaps easier to go around putting out blazes that someone else started whereas being the chief missional strategist has caused us to have to think about what fires we might just let burn so that we can see some new life coming down the road. It's always easier to throw water on the blaze than to wait and see what new growth might be possible after a controlled burn.

About a month ago, depending on your location within the state of Michigan, the morel hunters came out of their homes and headed to their favorite hunting grounds. With their bags in hand, they were looking to snatch up some of the tasty treats. Now I don't know much about hunting for morels and no one has ever given me the location of his or her favorite hunting grounds, but I've heard that in the years after a forest fire, the soil in those locations is best for finding morel mushrooms. The other day another colleague told me to look under fallen trees. I'm sure that a biologist could tell me why that happens, but I like to think that whatever happens is yet one more sign that God brings new life in the face of what appears to be death and an end.

As chief missional strategists for the district, your district superintendents seek to identify the places where we see signs of new life or hope for new life, even when there are times in which we must first face the reality of death. That's not easy work. Colleagues and friends, we've stood by the bedsides of those that know they are dying and look forward to the life that is to come. We've stayed with those who've lived a good life and come to the end with a sense of hope as they step into eternal life. We've also stood by the bedsides of those who've been terrified of death and are looking for a word of assurance that is hard for them to believe in that moment. In this way, the work of the superintendency is not too different from the work of a pastor in a local church.

Throughout the past few years, district superintendents have not only sought to identify those places where new life is being called forth, but we have also intentionally sought to live together as an example of the new life that is offered to us in this Michigan Area. We felt that if our area was going to be ONE Michigan Conference, we would strive to live into that reality first.

As an appointive cabinet, four years ago, we started meeting for a combined January retreat which begins our appointment season. For the first couple of years, we did our work separately. We worshipped and ate together, but we worked separately. We used the same location, but had separate agendas and meetings. Beginning in 2016, we began meeting together and working on appointments together, but there was still more

of a separate nature to our work. We ran two to three agendas at the same time. There was the Detroit agenda, the West Michigan agenda, and the combined agenda. That didn't last long before we realized we needed one agenda together for the Michigan Area. It was just too difficult to be thinking as two different bodies. We knew we needed to work more as ONE.

Then in September, as if we were not experiencing enough change already, we received a new Bishop. Can you believe it? Last July, Bishop David A. Bard was appointed to serve among us beginning September 1. As with other episcopal transitions, there was a time of wondering among cabinet members how this would all work out. In no time, Bishop Bard caught on to our new way of operating and got on board with how we do things in Michigan. Actually, friends, we discovered a bishop who continued to listen and to lead.

Bishop, I didn't know much about you when you were elected. Dawn and I were on vacation and watching the livestream of the Jurisdictional Conference. I knew that I would have to work closely with a new bishop. I remember reading your bio at the time and thinking, "This is the Bishop we need in Michigan." And Bishop, we thank God that you have come to serve among us for such a time as this! Thank you for your leadership in these past few months and at this first annual conference of your episcopal career. You have led us well and will continue to do so. Please know that you have our prayers as you lead us.

As we approached our January appointive retreat a few months ago, who would have thought that we would make some 120 appointments and ensure pastoral leadership for upwards of 850 churches across the state of Michigan? And yet, by the grace of God, your cabinet has come together to do just that. At the same time, we've had difficult conversations with churches and pastors about what the future holds. We've also committed ourselves to hold hope-filled discussions about what could be done differently.

At our fall retreat, we even had to talk about how fewer district superintendents may be covering more churches and more territory so that resources can be reallocated for making disciples of Jesus Christ in order that we might see the world transformed beginning in the state of Michigan.

Superintendents have had to rethink what it means to be the Church. In doing so, they have developed regional church models, trained certified lay ministers, supported the development of new faith communities, and helped to identify resources so that new ministries might be developed in local churches.

This has not been easy work. It was not without bumps in the road when we sat down and decided to work together. There have been pauses along the way when we've discovered that at times we think, perceive, and even hear things differently. There have been stops and the need for a break at meetings from time to time when we're just not listening to one another. As committed as the cabinet has been to working together, sometimes it has been hard. And yet, we've been committed to this relationship that God has called us to for such a time as this SO THAT we might equip and connect through Christ-centered mission and ministry, bold and effective leaders, and vibrant congregations throughout the Michigan Area.

You know what though? We're not the first to do the hard work. Cabinets before us have done hard work, too. Annual conferences that preceded this one have done hard work. Clergy and laity who came before us have done hard work. The business of disciple-making, the business of the Kin-dom, is sometimes hard work.

I wonder if perhaps Jesus knew the hard work that would be before us as disciples when he saw the crowds that had flocked to receive a good word or healing and turning to his disciples he said, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" (Matthew 9:37, NRSV)

People throughout our world need what we have come to experience in Jesus Christ. They need us to see them through Jesus' eyes of compassion and love. They're ready and waiting, hungry for the bread of life upon which we feast. Brothers and sisters, just look out into the world around you.

We know there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done when we see the harassed and helpless in urban areas decimated by the poor decisions of elected officials throughout the state as well as in our rural towns and villages where access to resources and quality education have left children hungry and without hope in classrooms that are falling down around them.

We know there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done when the people of Flint are still in need of clean water, safe neighborhoods, and so much more. We know that there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done when people are homeless in Detroit and Lansing and Grand Rapids as well as in our small town communities throughout the state.

We know that there are fields to harvest and work to be done when Volunteer in Mission teams are sent out from the Michigan Area to build churches, repair homes, and bring hope to places where disaster has brought about a sense of hopelessness.

We know there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done so long as heroin addiction remains an epidemic and people think that the way to treat the disease of addiction is through incarceration rather than offering treatment options that break down systems and cycles of addiction.

We know there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done when churches welcome those who already look, act, and speak like they are saved, but cannot figure out how to welcome the stranger, give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, or visit those who are sick and in prison.

We know there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done as long as people are turned away from Jesus by those claiming to bear his name because they are labeled as “incompatible” rather than given the title that belongs to each and every one of us; the title that is the irrevocable promise of a God who loves humanity everyone no matter what; the title that defines every human being on the face of the earth; that title, “Child of God.”

Hey! Beautiful people! Don't you know that you are beloved? Don't you know that your neighbor is beloved, too?

Oh, friends, there are fields to harvest and there is work to be done so long as one person, one life, one human being has not come to know that undeniable truth that he or she is a “precious child of God,” loved by the One who created, redeemed, and sustains our lives, and there is nothing anyone can do to take that away. Or as my good friend and colleague, Jeff Nelson would say, “God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it!” NOTHING!!!

Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” But listen closely to the next lines of our scriptures from earlier, my friends. “But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if NOBODY tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?”

In one of my favorite Peanuts cartoons, Charlie Brown is pitching the championship game. All of the other kids are standing around him at the pitcher's mound trying to be supportive in their own ways. Someone shouts out, “Get this last man out, Charlie Brown, and the championship is ours!” Another says, “You can do it, Charlie Brown. We're all behind you!” Lucy says, “That's right, Charlie Brown. We're with you. Pitch it to 'im, boy! Strike him out...” And then she whispers in his ear, “You Blockhead!”

Then something must have stirred within Charlie Brown because in the very next frame, all of the kids are arching their necks and looking up at the sky as they proclaim, “It's a fly ball!” Another kid begins to shout, “Catch it, Charlie Brown!”

Linus says, “Catch it, and the championship is ours!” Then someone asks, “Have you got it, Charlie Brown?” “Don't miss it!” shouts Linus. “Get under it, Charlie Brown!” hollers Lucy.

As the kids start talking to one another, you hear things like, “Isn't this exciting?” and “What if he drops it?” And Lucy says, “If he drops it, let's all kick him!”

Others say, “If Charlie Brown catches this fly ball, we'll win the championship!” “Just think of it. . . we'll be CHAMPIONS!” “We'll all get our names in the paper!” “And they'll give us a gold cup!” “And pins and buttons, and pennants. . .”

In the very last frame, all of the kids have moved in close around poor old Charlie Brown as they shout in unison, "DON'T DROP IT!!"

And that my friends, is what it's like to be a leader in our day, isn't it? At times, anyway, it feels like that, doesn't it? Susan Beaumont hit the nail on the head for us not only in our annual conference but also in our local churches, didn't she? This is what it means to lead in these liminal moments in our lives together as an annual conference and as a local church. How do you lead when all of the voices are shouting around you?

Perhaps, Jesus really understood what this time would mean for us when he said, "The harvest is plentiful (lots of people need to know this great love that we have come to experience in Jesus Christ), but the laborers are few." Sometimes leading can be a lonely place, can't it?

As a Michigan Area and now as a Michigan Conference, we have committed ourselves to working together because we are convinced that we are stronger together in ministry and mission to the Michigan area and the world. But what shall we do when the pop up is hit and everyone is standing there expecting us to catch the ball that we just pitched?

Go back to the good news. "The harvest is plentiful!" Jesus didn't say, "The harvest is scarce." He didn't say, "The harvest is lacking this year!" He didn't say, "The harvest has rotted off the vines." He said, "The harvest is plentiful!" The fields are ripe for picking. The world is ready to hear a word of hope, a word of good news, a word that builds up rather than tears down, and a word that cherishes every human being for who we are, "precious children of God."

The harvest is plentiful! The fields are ready. And God chooses us to send out into that harvest. Will you go with me? Though at times you don't know how to harvest the fruit, will you go with me anyway? Though at times you're tired from trying to figure the latest piece of harvest machinery, will you go with me?

Several years ago, there was a young boy named, Will, in one of the churches that I was serving. He must have been about three years old while I was there. Each Sunday, Will would stand in his pew at the back of the sanctuary when I would give the benediction. As I stretched out my arms, he would stretch out his to offer me a blessing in return. One week after I had just returned from vacation, his mother stopped me to say, "Hey, I have to tell you this story." She said, "Pastor, last week we came to church while you were on vacation. It wasn't long before Will started looking around and tugging on my shirt sleeve." She then said, "When I asked him what he wanted, he asked, 'Mom, where's Jesus?' After a moment of trying to think how I would answer that question, I realized that Will was looking for you, Pastor."

My wife, Dawn, who was standing nearby, cautioned Will's mom that my head was big enough as it is. Will has grown up quite a bit since that time almost fifteen years ago now. Yet, I continue to think of him from time to time. Will blessed me each and every Sunday, but that day, he reminded me that even when I think I'm going about a simple worship ritual, I'm still out sharing in this abundant harvest to which God sends us by God's grace. I knew each and every Sunday that Will was watching and saw Jesus in me. I was watching, too. And I saw Jesus in the fields that were ripe for harvest. I saw Jesus in Will.

Looking out into the fields with compassion in our eyes and in our hearts, we hear, "And how is anyone going to tell them unless someone is sent to do it?" Perhaps today, we might say, "It's time to play ball! Go catch it, Charlie Brown."

And now, Bishop, colleagues, and friends, since this is the second dean's report I've given before an annual conference and my third year in a row in this capacity in one way or another, I've got some work to do in another field. It's time for me to go play ball! And let me tell you a secret: we're going to win this game, together!

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth
District Superintendent, Dean of the Michigan Conference Cabinet

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B. DESIGN TEAM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



DESIGN TEAM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

A new thing is on the horizon! Legislation for the new Michigan Conference is ready to be acted upon at Annual Conference 2017. This work represents over two years of prayerful discernment and hundreds of hours listening to clergy and laity across the state, via email, web, and 13 different listening sessions with hundreds of United Methodists participating. The Design Team proposes a new structure that provides a clear vision for Michigan United Methodists to move in a common, more focused direction.

The 45-page Plan Of Organization document in the Legislation Book lays out the vision for the new conference. It offers a more flexible and nimble structure that aligns resources and focuses on equipping the local church. The plan will create vibrant congregations that have a transformational impact on the communities in which they live and serve.

Vision

The purpose of the Annual Conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God. — *Book of Discipline of The UMC 2016*



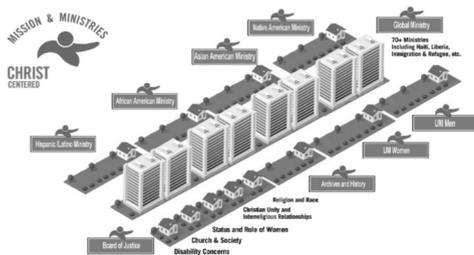
The Michigan Conference equips and connects through Christ-centered:

- Mission & Ministry
- Bold & Effective Leaders
- Vibrant Congregations

This vision will help to inform strategies, align resources, make decisions, evaluate ministry, and shape what we are known for across the state.

Structure

The proposed structure meets the requirements of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. It is also reflective of the new vision and aligns with the three components of that vision. The structure is designed to create greater unity of our common Christian witness across this state and around the globe. The restructure of leadership, districts, facilities, and policies are proposed with that goal in mind. Extensive time has also been given to the areas of pension and health care, and a plan for the new conference is progressing.



Picture it!

Our guiding image for the new conference is analogous to a plan for a community composed of three major neighborhoods. Each is aligned with one aspect of our Christ-Centered Vision. See the example at the left. Each neighborhood is comprised of “blocks” of leadership. Each block is made up of distinct homes of ministry and mission. Many of these homes also have multiple ministry gardens that serve as fruitful extensions of their ministry.

Leadership

The Bishop will lead the annual conference and will be advised by two leadership teams; The Conference Leadership Council (CLC) and Appointive Cabinet. The CLC is a 20+ member team responsible for aligning conference resources with the vision statement. It is comprised of four clergy members and five lay persons nominated by the annual conference. They are joined by an Episcopal Representative, Conference Lay Leader, Dean of the Appointive Cabinet, President of the Council of Finance and Administration, and a representative of the Division on Religion and Race of the Board of Justice. The CLC also includes the various Directors of Connectional Ministry, Clergy Excellence, Congregational Vibrancy, Communications, Treasurer and Administrative Service, and Benefits and Human Resources. The Appointive Cabinet will appoint pastoral leadership to congregations and serve as Chief Missional Strategist for the newly-configured districts.

Districts and Facilities

It is proposed that the Michigan Conference be comprised of nine districts. *The Book of Discipline* empowers the conference to set the number of districts, but gives the bishop the authority to set the district lines. A task force will be established to assist the bishop in this responsibility. Disciplinary requirements, Judicial Council decisions, geography and natural affinities like travel, culture, and economics are all factors considered in this proposal. Reducing the number of districts will allow resources to be invested in a staffing model intended to strengthen local churches. The Episcopal Office will remain at the current location with additional space being leased nearby. The proposal celebrates and values current staff, yet also allows room to equip our new conference with the talent necessary to achieve our goals.

Conclusion

July 2018 is the anticipated date by which the new Michigan Conference will essentially begin to function, with final alignment happening no later than January 1, 2019. We encourage you to read the entire structure document. It represents more than two years of deep listening, discernment and visioning. It celebrates our diversity and aligns our resources directly with the actions needed to fulfill our vision. It allows a larger and more racially and theologically diverse pool of clergy leaders for appointments. It removes duplication and inefficiency. We also encourage you to visit Design.MichiganUMC.org to read more about this process that began more than 4 years ago. It has involved countless numbers of people. Take a moment to share your thoughts and prayers or ask questions. And please, continue to pray for our state and the new Michigan Conference. May God bless our coming together! And may our coming together help bless, to an even greater extent, the communities in which we serve!

A Brief Overview Of Design Team Voting Items

Rules of Order

The proposed rules are the result of collaboration between the Design Team, the West Michigan Conference Rules of Order Committee, and the Detroit Conference Committee on Reference and Daily Procedure (ReDaP). The proposal is a reflection of existing rules the conferences already have in common. There are also some changes, such as the elimination of the “response petition” process that has been a part of the West Michigan rules. Instead, opportunity for amendments will take place in Legislative Committees and/or on the plenary floor. Districts will no longer select Lay Equalization members. Instead, Lay Equalization members will be selected by the Board of Laity. There will also be proportional representation for each church based on one lay member for every 173 members (the previous ratio in the Detroit Conference was 1/233 members). This action will increase the representation for local congregations. The new rules also propose that there be no limit on ballots for the General and Jurisdictional Delegates, which currently has a six ballot limit.

Structure

The proposed structure focuses on equipping and connecting local congregations for vibrant ministry. For this reason, some agencies are consolidated and have the flexibility to create ministry teams/task forces. Administration and programmatic agencies will work closely together, aligning Vision, *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016* requirements, and available resources to create effective ministries in our communities. The new structure of 49 boards and agencies, with 403 positions, will contribute to and allow for new ideas and ministries to emerge. One net result of the new structure is that 574 persons who currently serve in the combined structures of the Michigan Area will now be available to contribute to ministry in their local congregations and districts.

Re-Districting

Please see the report and rationale that accompanies the two related legislation Items #3 and #4.

Council on Finance and Administration Policies

These proposed policies reflect the collaborative work of the Joint Council on Finance and Administration (CFA) task force. The policies include actions and guidelines that have effectively served the Conferences and have guided the CFA's in their fiduciary responsibilities. The most significant changes are in the apportionment formula to be based on a congregation's expenditures and the use of the term “Ministry Shares” as the name of the formula.

Joint Distributing Committee: Pension and Health Benefits

The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016 mandates the existence of this committee when two or more conferences are uniting. This team has been meeting for over two years in preparation for the smooth transition to a single comprehensive benefits plan for the Michigan Conference. The nine points of their motion establish the parameters around which this change will take place. Additional details are provided in the rationale and will be outlined during Annual Conference on the strategic and attentive ways in which affordability, sustainability and compassion find a workable financial and benefits balance.

Human Resources Policy

The net increase when combining two conference staff results in meeting a new legal compliance threshold. The Area Personnel Committee, in consultation with conference chancellors, and persons with HR expertise, developed a new policy to meet these legal requirements. This single policy reflects material from several existing HR policies in the Michigan Area. Future implementation, interpretation and maintenance updates of the policy will be managed by a single entity, the Human Resources Committee.

Parsonage Guidelines & Flexible Housing Policy

These two documents underwent a comprehensive review and revision in 2009 in the Michigan Area. These new documents are updated with *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016* paragraphs and quotes.

Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics and Guidelines for Our Life Together

Previously developed by an Area Board of Ordained Ministry, Cabinet, Episcopal Office and at-large member task force, the covenant and guidelines have functioned well. The documents now reflect *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016* language.

Policy for the Protection of Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults

Another collaborative Area task force reviewed the two conferences existing protection policies. The new policy was written with many of the same valuable components included and has been extensively reviewed by the Conference Chancellors for the necessary legal implications and protections.

Extension Loan Funds

Items #13 and 14 address the funds that three separate legal entities administer on behalf of the Conferences. These two action items put in motion a process for the consolidated administration of these funds and the direct allocation of some funds for particular development as determined by designated oversight bodies. Please read the rationale of these two motions for further details.

Nominations

Once the Michigan Conference structure is approved to effectively start on July 1, 2018, the Area Committee on Nominations, outlined in the motion, will develop a slate of nominations to present to the 2018 Annual Conference for approval.

Michigan Conference Design Team,
Rev. Glenn Wagner and Rev. Marsha Woolley, Co-Chairs



—WMC Photos