

MICONNECT

Michigan Area of the United Methodist
Church News & Information

Print Edition

MI Magazine

Year-end 2018 Review

Michigan United Methodists shine God's light together in 2018



Conference lay leaders John Wharton (Detroit) and Anne Soles (West Michigan) light the unity candle at the close of the 2018 Michigan Annual Conference. After 50 years, Michigan's United Methodists were one. ~ mic photo/Hannah Hazen

KAY DEMOSS Senior Editor-Writer

In June of 2017 the Michigan Annual Conference adopted the plan put forward by a hard-working Design Team. Names of new directors and

new superintendents were announced at year-end who would help move forward the vision of one Michigan conference.

Then in 2018 clergy and laity across the state began to live

into that plan. More staff members were named. Districts began to organize as did the United Methodist Women. In June the Annual Conference ended with a ceremony that celebrated the union.

The last six months of 2018 found Michigan United Methodists involved in three major endeavors ...

First, individuals and local

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Year-End 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 850 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

As 2018 came to a close, many of us watched portions of the funeral services for former president George H. W. Bush and some of the news specials about his life and career. Along the way, we encountered an acronym: CAVU – clearance, and visibility unlimited. It was something President Bush learned as a Navy pilot during World War II. I imagine CAVU was a joy to hear when flying.

Not long after that, I was in Washington, D.C. for some continuing education with the North Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops, followed by two days with our General Board of Church and Society, finding out about their work and having the wonderful opportunity to meet the Chaplain of the United States Senate, Rev. Barry Black. It was a great trip, except for the flight back to Lansing. My plane from D.C. left late and I did not have a great deal of time between connections. I was worried about making it, and the flight itself was one of the bumpier I have experienced.

I need not have worried, though. My flight from Chicago, O'Hare to Lansing was also delayed, by over eight hours! A trip that was supposed to leave at 9 p.m. instead left Chicago at 5:45 a.m. Curling up on airport seats and sleeping for 30 minutes at a time is not the most fun I've ever had. The reason for the long delay was the opposite of CAVU. Lansing was experiencing significant fog.

As we turn the calendar to this new year, we are all aware that delegates will be gathering for a special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church next month. Important decisions will be made about who we are going to be moving into the future. Whatever decisions are made, expect there to be hurt and disappointment, and some people may choose to leave the denomination. Just what will happen is unknown. Peering ahead we do not find CAVU conditions, but rather dense fog. Some days, thinking about all this, it feels a little like trying to sleep at O'Hare airport. By the way, did you know airports are rather noisy even in the middle of the night?

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In February 2018 the Council of Bishops met in Dallas to receive reports on the plans proposed by the Commission on A Way Forward. The majority of bishops affirmed the One Church Plan. The plans will now be acted upon at the special session of General Conference that meets in St Louis, Feb. 23-26. ~COB photo

Bishop Bard names Flessner Northern Waters DS

LANSING, Michigan | January 7, 2019 – The Northern Waters District of The Michigan Conference will welcome a new district superintendent beginning July 1, 2019.

Bishop David Alan Bard today announced the appointment of the Rev. Jodie Flessner, currently serving as the pastor at Caledonia United Methodist Church, to be the next district superintendent for the Northern Waters District. She follows the Rev. Anita Hahn who has served the maximum of eight years as a district superintendent.

“In discerning a person to succeed Rev. Hahn, I wanted a person who also has a passionate faith in Jesus Christ and deep desire to help the church flourish in these changing times,” said Bishop Bard. “I wanted a person who has a solid record of leadership in local congregations and the wider United Methodist Church. In appointing the Rev. Jodie Flessner, I found such a person. Rev. Flessner has leadership experience in congregations, cooperative parishes, in the conference and the wider United Methodist Church. She brings to this position a deep faith, a pastor’s sensibility, experience with

creative forms of ministry in rural areas, and a passion for helping the church be its best. I know she will work well with her colleagues and enhance our shared ministry as The Michigan Conference.”

Bishop Bard also praised current District Superintendent Rev. Anita Hahn who served the Grand Traverse District, one-fifth of the Heartland District, and finally in the newly formed Northern Waters District. “In the midst of significant changes in our Michigan Conference, not to mention significant changes in the religious landscape of the United States, Rev. Hahn has led out of her deep faith in Jesus Christ and her passionate heart to reach new people in new ways with the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ.” Bard continued, “Her compassion, creativity, enthusiasm, and warm-hearted faith have been a gift to me, to the Cabinet, and West Michigan and Michigan conferences.”

The bishop added, “I hope you will join me in expressing gratitude for both Rev. Anita Hahn and Rev. Jodie Flessner, and in praying for them both in this time of transition.”



Rev. Jodie Flessner

Follow the 2019 appointments on michiganumc.org

Bishop Bard and the Cabinet are now entering into a new season of appointment making.

How can one learn about the new appointments being made?

As appointments are received by Conference Communications, they are listed on the News Site of the Michigan Conference.

Go to news.michiganumc.org. Strike the News/Events tab at the top of the homepage. The New Appointments link is at the bottom of the drop-down menu. Take that link to a person-by-person chronological listing of appointment changes.

A printed list of the appointments announced at the 2018 Michigan Annual Conference can also be found on the Conference website.

Take this link to a pdf of the full list: <https://michiganumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Appointments-2018.pdf>.



The Revs Jodie Flessner (center) and Peggy Paige (left) were in Portland, OR in May 2016 to further the work of the United Methodist Rural Advocates at the 2016 General Conference. ~ Facebook/UMRA

Michigan delegates prep for 2019 General Conference

MIconnect has published a series of interviews with the top four Michigan Conference delegates to the 2019 General Conference. Here are excerpts of Diane Brown's conversations with Nichea Guy and the Rev. Dr. Charles Boayue. The full interviews may be found at news.michiganumc.org.

Nichea Guy is the director of Discipleship Pathways at Grand Rapids Trinity Church and the chair of the Michigan Conference Commission on the Annual Conference.

Her preparations for the Special Session of General Conference involve considerable reading, including the 93-page report from the Council of Bishops with the three plans put forth by The Commission on a Way Forward, along with her morning yoga, scriptural readings and prayer.

Her primary focus, however, has been on hearing United Methodists across the state, particularly at many of the 11 listening sessions held by Michigan Bishop David Bard. "The listening sessions are a high priority for me," Nichea

said. "I tried to go to as many as physically possible. I'm one who needs to hear the voice of the people, regardless of whether I agree with them or not. I need to hear what their questions are."

Through the listening sessions, Nichea has heard many questions and aspirations for the church. "I've been surprised to hear people don't want the church to split. There has to be a way that we can be the church together, still call ourselves United Methodists and follow those practices that make us feel complete and whole. How can we be one?" she said.

"I think together we can provide a new vision and hope. Collectively we can be change-makers if we discern together through a healthy process an outcome we can live with. We can model how to disagree yet be respectful. Because we are consistent, faithful followers of Christ who are willing to take that wherever we go.



Nichea Guy (left) shares in a moment of prayer at the 2016 General Conference. Others left-right: Bishop Donald Ott, Rev. Melanie Lee Carey, and Ruby Anderson. ~ mic photo/Mark Doyal



Rev. Dr. Charles Boayue participates in a presentation by the General Board of Global Ministries at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, OR. ~ umns photo

The head of the General Conference delegation from the Detroit Conference is praying the United Methodist Church will remain united once the February 2019 Special Session is completed. "We live in a world where we've never been perfect as a church," said the Rev. Dr. Charles Boayue, Jr., the Greater Detroit district superintendent and the first clergy person elected for the current delegation. "We can move in the direction of perfection, but we cannot break up the church."

He further explained that while the 864 delegates at the General Conference meeting are charged with making decisions about the direction of the church, he believes the delegates won't solve the world's problems with one decision.

"Years ago, we didn't allow women to be ordained, then we changed that," Charles said. "But even today we haven't solved the whole problem. Similarly with race. The Church is addressing the problems, but they haven't been solved yet.

"God considers the church to be the holy church. But it doesn't mean the church is perfect. The church is us, so the church can't be any more perfect than we are. I don't think the answer is to give up on the church and create other churches."

At the February session, "I'm looking forward to the movement of God's Holy Spirit, which I still believe is alive and well," he said. "The presence of the church in the world brings light into darkness. I hope we strengthen the presence of the United Methodist Church in the world and not give up until we succeed."

Charles had an optimistic message for Michigan United Methodists. "St. Louis isn't the final day in the witness of the life of the church," he said. "It is one day. Do not leave the church as there isn't any other place that will be more perfect. Stay on the journey together. Before St. Louis and after St. Louis, the church will be in God's hands. That's the best place to be."

Home Words Bound ... renew your heart

REV. BENTON HEISLER

Director of Connectional Ministries, West Michigan

My article this month is largely comprised of the words of John Wesley. They come from a devotional study titled “*Renew My Heart*”.

The news is full of countless challenges, degrading rhetoric, exaggerated statements. Few, if any, creative solutions to real challenges are being provided by wise men and women with one of the most powerful governments in the word at their disposal. While they fail, we continue to pay them, yet those who truly and consistently produce, protect, process payments and are stewards of our park resources are not paid. God help us!!

At times, I question the moral courage and moral character of those we have elected to lead in our government, Democrat and Republican alike! COME ON PEOPLE, DO YOUR JOB AND FIND SOLUTIONS, FORM CREATIVE COMPROMISES AND MAINTAIN A CIVILITY THAT LEADS YOUR PEOPLE.

In the meantime, remember the words of Luke 12:20 will one day be applicable to us all, “This very night your soul is required of you.”

So here are all the questions John Wesley stacked around this verse. He pictured them being asked of us as we met God face to face. They bear a time of reflection by each of us:

“How did you employ your soul?”

How did you employ the body with which I entrusted you?

Did you employ your health and strength in a vigorous pursuit of that better part which none can take away from you?

Above all, were you a steward of my grace going before, accompanying and following you?

Did you employ your memory in treasuring up what would be for My glory, your salvation and the advantage of others?

Did you store up what you had learned from my word and your experience of My wisdom, truth, power, and mercy?

Was your imagination employed in awakening your pursuit of wisdom and holiness?

Was I the object of your love?

Was all your desire unto Me?

Was I the joy of your heart, the delight of your soul?”

I plan to print these questions and place them in the devotional reading material I use each day. They are powerful reminders of what it takes to be a disciple of Christ.

Perhaps if we all pray more and Facebook post less, new solutions to many of life’s challenges will be revealed.

Perhaps if we serve more and are self-centered less, generosity will overcome greed.

Perhaps if we call on the name of Jesus more, and call each other derogatory names less, hope will truly replace hate.

I am ~~willing~~ going to give it a try. I look forward to joining you on this journey to wholeness in Christ.

“If you make my Word your home, you will indeed be my disciples. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free (John 8:13 New Jerusalem Bible.)”
Each article I write for this column is based in the guidance of a Scripture passage. I pray that these reflections, stories and information will assist you in your own witness and service as a Disciple of Jesus Christ.



2018 from p. 1

churches followed the lead of new personnel, learned new district names, places and faces. Secondly, Bishop Bard listened as people across the Area responded to the work of the Commission on A Way Forward during 11 Connectional Conversations. Thirdly, Michigan's partnership with UMCOR deepened during disaster response efforts with Puerto Ricans, and flood survivors in Midland and the Keweenaw Peninsula. A grant from UMCOR initiated the search for a full-time Disaster Recovery Coordinator for the Conference.

Here's a month-by-month look at the highlights of how Michigan United Methodists made disciples and transformed the world in 2018.

January

Threatened with deportation to Albania, on January 16, Ded Rranxburgaj and his family began living in Detroit: Central UMC. At the start of 2019 they remain in sanctuary there.

Michigan partners rejoiced as a United Methodist, George Manneh Weah, was sworn in as the president of Liberia on January 22.

Also on January 22 Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai started ministry as the chief connectional officer for The United Methodist Church. She leads the Connectional Table.

February

Bishop David Bard announced the names of Associate Directors and ministry Coordinators.

Detroit and West Michigan United Methodist Women announced the transfer of ownership of the United Methodist Community House in Grand Rapids from UMW to the UMCH Board of Directors.

March

Michigan Conference staff completed the move out of old headquarters in Grand Rapids and Flint to offices in

Lansing/DeWitt.

A ten-member VIM team from Grand Rapids First UMC was among first responders to areas of Puerto Rico ravaged by Hurricane Maria.

April

New districts began to hold organizational meetings. Nine new district names emerged during these actions.

Michigan United Methodists were among those who shared memories of the conference in 1968 that formed The United Methodist Church.

Michigan Area UM Camping announced the hiring of new camp directors: Trisha and Greg Farrell (Judson Collins Center) and Dana and Duane Hunt (Lake Michigan Camp).

Wesley Foundation of Kalamazoo named Rev. Jess Davenport as their new director effective July 9, 2018 replacing Rev. Lisa Batten, who joined the Conference staff as Coordinator of Young Adult Initiatives.

May

Bishop David Bard, on behalf of The Michigan Conference, presented a \$55,000

check to Flint Water Recovery for continued operation of three Help Centers.

Bishop Bard joined Rev. Jill Zundel and others on a nine-day march of 90 miles from Detroit to Lansing. The march called on ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) for a stay of removal for Ded Rranxburgaj, living in Detroit: Central UMC under threat of deportation.

Rev. Tim Kobler was named the new director of the Wesley Foundation at the University of Michigan as the Rev. Robert Roth retired.

An UMCOR grant enabled hiring of two case managers, one in Detroit and the other in Grand Rapids, to care for Puerto Ricans displaced in Michigan by Hurricane Maria. Mano a Mano (Hand to Hand) was completed in December 2018.

Three hundred United Methodist Women from Michigan celebrated "The Power of Bold" at the UMW Global Assembly in Columbus, OH.

June

The Michigan Annual Conference met at Grand Traverse Resort May 31-June 3.



Bishop David Bard joined the Rev. Jill Hardt Zundel and others who marched from Detroit to Lansing in May to urge government to keep families together. Ded Rranxburgaj and his family have been living in Detroit: Central UMC since January 2018. ~mic photo/Mark Doyal

◆After two-and-a-half years of work by the Design Team, members said goodbye to the Detroit and West Michigan conferences and began life as one. A visit by “Mr. Rogers” celebrated togetherness.

◆The Good Samaritan was the topic of conference preaching and the focus of TOM Talks was ENGAGEwith.

◆Awards were made: John Buxton Leadership to Ruby Anderson; One Matters Award to Southfield: Hope UMC; and the Lynn Grimes Spirit Award to Rev. Sherri Swanson. The Detroit Conference was recognized as being among the Top Ten Conferences for missionary support, health initiatives, and international disaster relief.

◆Nine churches were closed. Twenty-nine pastors retired. Three Deacons and five Elders were ordained and another nine Elders were commissioned. Seven were recognized for completion of Course of Study.

◆Conference offerings totaled over \$56,000 and a 2019 budget was passed that was \$222,242 less than 2018.

◆Social resolutions were approved calling for: ban on private ownership of AR-15s; 17 year-olds to be tried as juveniles; an end to the U.S. support of Saudi action in Yemen; and support for the Poor People’s Campaign. A message of “Unity in Diversity” was sent on to the 2019 General Conference.

A “Father’s Day Flood” in Michigan’s Copper Country buckled roads and filled basements with rock and sand. Relief and recovery efforts were mounted in the Houghton-Hancock area.

The Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) moved their national office to Detroit: Central UMC.

July

The nine new districts of The Michigan Conference began operation on July 1.

Two young people from Michigan — Izzy Nowak (Pinconning) and Ciere Turner (Detroit: Conant Avenue)—attended the Global Young People’s Convocation in Johannesburg, South Africa. Izzy was a delegate of the North Central Jurisdiction.



A “Father’s Day Flood” struck Michigan’s Keweenaw Peninsula dumping 8-10 inches of rain overnight. The topography of the area caused flash floods that destroyed roads and filled basements with rocks and mud. Early response was done by the community and in October an UMCOR grant enabled the hiring of two disaster case managers to assist in recovery. ~photo courtesy of Scott Lindenberg

Rev. Bernard Randolph, holder of the West Michigan Conference Cane (oldest Elder in the Conference) died July 21st at 102.

August

United Methodist Retirement Communities (UMRC) and Porter Hills announced their plan to consider coming together under shared board governance to serve older Michigan adults in 22 counties.

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry announced the renewal of a \$64,000 Young Clergy Initiative grant to The Michigan Conference. The funding will continue the EncounterMICall program that currently employs 18 interns in churches and non-profits in the state.

September.

A state-wide relief supply drive was mounted to provide aid to those affected

by Hurricane Florence.

Three new Global Mission Fellows-US2s began service in Michigan. Assigned by the General Board of Global Ministries, they are: Asti White (coordinator of intentional community and justice at Wesley Kalamazoo); Emily Burns (community organizer Kalamazoo: Sunnyside UMC); and Jinnia Siironen (case manager at the NOAH Project in Detroit).

The Michigan Conference received the Golden Yam Award for the greatest number of new ministry sites and new US2s of any conference in the UMC.

Bishop Bard starts a road trip with 11 engagements for Connectional Conversations about the 2019 special session of the General Conference and the Way Forward.



GREATER DETROIT DISTRICT ... Rochester: St. Paul's UMC raised over \$47,000 to build a Tiny Home with Cass Community Social Services. Framing is now complete.



NORTHERN SKIES DISTRICT ... A light shines in the darkness in God's Country Cooperative Parish.



HERITAGE DISTRICT... Bishop David Bard was at Dexter United Methodist Church on January 11 for the Grand Opening of their new multi-purpose room. The event celebrated the completion of a four-year project.



MID-MICHIGAN DISTRICT ... Don we now our holy apparel ... the Rev. Hillary Thurston-Cox, pastor of Wacousta Community Church, models her Christmas sweater.

Snapshots
of Vitality



CENTRAL BAY DISTRICT ... Sunday School kids at Frankenmuth UMC created some fantastic Christmas murals.



EAST WINDS DISTRICT ... "Faith at the Movies" viewed Spiderman: into the spider-verse. Then Flint: Court Street worship featured spider webs, spidey masks, and acolytes in Spiderman hoodies.



MICHIGAN UM CAMPING ... Good eating at Lake Huron Retreat Center. Newburg United Methodist Church started the 2019 retreat season with an overnight experience, enjoying bananas foster for dessert and rich fellowship around the table.



NORTHERN SKIES DISTRICT ... "Pastie Lady" Virginia Bell on the job at Paradise United Methodist Church. Roll that dough, Virginia!



HERITAGE DISTRICT ... Ypsilanti: Lincoln Community UMC hosted One Starry Night. "We experienced anew the Village of Bethlehem and a wonderful time of fellowship."

MIDWEST DISTRICT ... The kids of Community UMC in North Muskegon are discussing compassion and generosity and doing a hands-on service project. One Sunday they decorated brown bags for Kids Food Basket.



Michigan Conference profiles of leadership continue

In July 2018 the Michigan Conference entered into a new staffing model. Leaders have been introduced over the past six months. The Revs Lisa Batten and Kathy Pittenger are the most recent to be interviewed. Excerpts of those profiles are shared here. Read the full story on the news website: news.michiganumc.org

In July 2018, the Rev. Lisa Batten began her ministry as Coordinator of Young Adult Initiatives. Meet the **Rev. Lisa Batten ...**

I am a second career pastor, having served 2007-2018 at the Wesley Foundation of Kalamazoo as the Director and Campus Pastor. There I learned that God calls us each in a variety of ways for a variety of ministry. I haven't served in a local congregation and have not seen myself as the pastor of a local church.

I also discovered that community organizing is a great model for ministry. At Wesley we build community every fall, and again (maybe to a lesser degree) each spring. We used the model of training up 8-12 leaders to recruit and nurture 8-12 peers. Each leader oversaw a particular

ministry and asked others to join them in that work. Sort of like Jesus calling the 12 and then the 12 go out and tell the Good News.

I think about my new role in thirds. One third is relating to and resourcing Wesley Campus Ministries, including the Division of Higher Ed, connecting through the North Central Jurisdiction and General Church. One third oversees young adult intern programs including, EncounterMICall, Mission Intern, Global Mission Fellow-US2 as the Affiliate Coordinator. The final third relates to and resources local congregations who are doing or hoping to do ministry with young adults.

Currently I am researching all of the young adult opportunities in our conference so that we can spread the word and also see where there are holes in the ministry we offer.

My hope is that we develop a culture in which young adults want to be part of the church, where their gifts and leadership is welcomed. I hope we create a culture of call for young adults to understand



Thirteen leaders from Michigan were among the 250 educators who attended the CEF Curious Church conference held in Des Moines, IA in October 2018. The Michigan group was led by Rev. Kathy Pittenger. ~ courtesy Kathy Pittenger

vocation. I hope we begin to understand that young adults have much to teach us about how to be church.

The **Rev. Kathy Pittenger** is the Coordinator of Children's Initiatives for The Michigan Conference. She helps to call and equip young disciples of Jesus Christ. She describes her work ...

After graduating from seminary, I started as a direct lay hire at Waterford: Central UMC. After being commissioned as a Deacon in 2008, I was appointed to CUMC and served there for 12 years.

My ministry role at CUMC was focused mainly on children and family ministry and lifelong faith formation. Much of my leadership in the church was empowering and encouraging others to be in leadership – whether that be with children's ministry on Sunday mornings, during Vacation Bible School, as mentors for confirmation, during special family events, or with parents for faith formation at home.

I have learned about the importance of building relationships first. Another

important aspect of the ministry at CUMC was building relationships in the community, and I focused on creating a partnership with a local elementary school.

I love when children discover something new and the way it makes their face light up, especially when it is in relationship to Jesus and faith. I love asking questions, thinking outside the box, looking at a challenge from several different perspectives, and being creative. I love encouraging people and being a cheerleader for Children's Ministry Champions. I am excited for the opportunities to encourage, equip, and be a resource for the leaders who are planting seeds and making a difference in the lives of children in their churches, communities, and world.

I may not be able to solve or fully answer all questions. But I hope to start conversations and connect people with others who are asking similar questions. I hope to link churches with those who have best practices as well as create and curate relevant resources.



Lisa Batten holds the "Golden Yam" from General Board of Global Ministries. In 2018 The Michigan Conference had greatest increase in the number of YAMs (young adult missionaries) and new sites. ~ photo courtesy Lisa Batten

Bishop from p. 2

Yet there is something else that draws me. I think of the poem of Wendell Berry.

*When despair for the world grows in me/ and I
wake in the night at the least
sound/ in fear of what my life and my children's
lives may be....*

*I come into the peace of wild things.... For a
time/ I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.*

In the midst of the unknown, the uncertain, the fearful, in the midst of all the noise and discomfort, I invite us all to find some different places where we know grace, the grace of God in Jesus Christ. For those of you who have attended the fall listening sessions, the names of these places will sound familiar.

*Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy,
love for one another, a tender heart,
and a humble mind. (1 Peter 3:8)*

Go to a place called humility.

Humility is not about feeling bad about yourself. It is about knowing yourself, your gifts, your skills, your beauty, your strengths, your weaknesses, your blind spots, your stubborn places. Humility also knows that we can always learn more about the wonder and mystery of life, and the love and grace of God. We can still see more broadly, feel more deeply, think more imaginatively, and love more profoundly.

Go to a place called hope.

God is not yet done with God's church. The United Methodist Church may go through a hard time but the mission we have identified of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, that is, bringing people into relationship with Jesus Christ so that their lives can be different and the world can be different, that mission continues. God still calls each of us to that work. God empowers each of us for that work. Forms and structures may change, but God's love and our ability to know that love, show that love, and grow in that love, does not change.

Go to a place called heart.

There is fog up ahead and fearful things

along the way. We all feel some fear, but we need not be defined by our fear. There is fog up ahead and fearful things along the way, but we can, in God's grace "be joyful, though you've considered all the facts" (Wendell Berry). We can be open-hearted and gracious, even when many want to pull us in other directions.

Go to a place called wisdom.

"Thinking is hard. Fear and blame are easy." (philosopher Martha Nussbaum) We are called to think more deeply than we often do, think more deeply than perhaps we are even comfortable with. Are we at a moment where the danger is "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25), or a moment when the more appropriate word is "let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (Romans 14:5)? What reasons do we offer for our own point of view, and are we listening deeply to others who may differ? In all our thinking are we able to focus on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable." (Philippians 4:8)

I invite you in the coming weeks to find places of humility, hope, heart, and wisdom, places where you can rest in the grace of God.

As the new year begins, we will quickly find ourselves in the church season of epiphany. Epiphany is a celebration of light, a celebration of a star that brought wise ones from the East to the place where Jesus was born. In the Bible, there are stories of light that shine so brightly and powerfully that people are blinded. In the story of the Magi, the light seems to shine a bit less brightly, maybe appearing through cracks. Why else would the wise ones stop to ask for directions? The rays of light of God's grace are sometimes spotlight bright and sometimes like the light seeping in under a door. Places of humility, hope, heart, and wisdom will sometimes be bright and easy to locate.

They may sometimes be harder to detect. Find them. Find those places of grace. Regardless of what happens at General Conference, letting the light of God's grace touch us more deeply, profoundly and beautifully is always needed, needed for our own healing, needed for the healing of the church, needed for the healing of the world.



Bishop David Bard spent the fall of 2018 listening, as he visited 11 sites around Michigan to present and engage around the work of the Commission on A Way Forward. ~mic photo/Kay DeMoss

2018

from p. 7



Nine Michigan Earthkeepers were commissioned by the General Board of Global Ministries in November.



The first annual meeting of the Michigan United Methodist Women was held in Petoskey in October.



Terry Euper led a VIM trip to Liberia. The highlight of the visit was dedication of a well honoring Billie Rench.

October

Thirteen educators from Michigan traveled to Des Moines, Iowa for the “Curious Church” Conference. It was the 50th anniversary observance for the CEF organization (Christians Engaged in Faith Formation).

The Conference announced the hiring of two UMCOR case managers — Marci Vivian and Dennis Leopold. Located in Hancock, MI, for the next 12 months they will assist those suffering from the Father’s Day flooding.

The first meeting of the combined Michigan Conference United Women was held in Petoskey with the theme, “Have Courage! Embrace Change and Grow!”

Bishop Laurie Haller and a delegation from the Iowa Conference visited the dedication of the Ubuntu Center at Africa University in Zimbabwe. While a D.S. in West Michigan, Haller helped raise \$500,000 for the building of the hospitality center on campus.

November

The United Methodist Committee on Relief granted \$204,700 to The Michigan Conference to provide two-year funding for a full-time Disaster Recovery Ministries Coordinator.

A nine-member team from Michigan returned from a VIM trip to Liberia. They renewed relationships with covenant partners, worked on projects and dedicated a well in memory of the late Millicent “Billie” Rench.

On November 12 the General Board of Global Ministries commissioned 44

new Earthkeepers. Nine of those persons are from Michigan working in a variety of projects that care for the planet.

The General Board of Global Ministries announced that retired missionary, the Rev. Ut To, led Vietnamese United Methodists into a new denomination he is organizing. To’s clergy credentials in the Michigan Conference were surrendered to Bishop David Bard and supporting churches were asked to cease all funding for To. The Vietnam Initiative continues with strong new leadership. (See page 13.)

December

Two Michigan pastors joined 300 faith leaders in a walk to the U.S.-Mexico border on Human Rights Day (Dec. 10) organized by the American Friends Service Committee. Revs Jill Zundel and Patty Gandarilla represented the UMC General Board of Church and Society.

The decades-long mission giving models of the West Michigan and Detroit conferences— Six Lanes of the Advance and Spotlight Church — come to a close at the end of 2018. A new program, EngageMI, introduced at Annual Conference, begins January 1, 2019.

United Methodists everywhere start a new year facing a pivotal General Conference session in late February. In his New Year’s message, Bishop David Bard encouraged The Michigan Conference to stay focused on God’s love. “I invite you in the coming weeks to find places of humility, hope, heart, and wisdom, places where you can rest in the grace of God,” he said. (See full text page 2.)

New life for United Methodist Church in Vietnam

ELLIOTT WRIGHT
General Board of Global Ministries

I believe the Vietnam Mission Initiative is experiencing a new birth," said the Rev. Sam Peters, a United Methodist pastor from Ohio, as he returned December 2 from Ho Chi Minh City.

Peters was one of several mission partners from the United States attending the Nov. 27-29 annual meeting of the nearly 20-year-old United Methodist Vietnam Mission, related to the General Board of Global Ministries. The meeting measured the extent of indigenous commitment to being "United Methodist" in the wake of action by a retired denominational missionary to form a competing Vietnamese "Methodist" denomination. The Rev. Ut To, a clergyman of The Michigan Conference, surrendered his clergy credentials to Bishop David Bard in November.

One hundred clergy and laity from 50 churches attended the annual meeting. The emergence of new, young leadership impressed Peters. The visit, his third to the Vietnam mission, gave him a sense that the stressful transition was "a necessary experience for the ministry to move forward with more strength, clearer vision and empowered leadership."

"There was a hopeful, energetic spirit as we gathered just before Advent," said Bishop Hope Morgan Ward of North Carolina. She is the bishop assigned to Vietnam and presided at the conference.

"The annual meeting was very good, very positive, very interactive, very hopeful," the bishop said. Ward praised the collaborative leadership style of the Rev. Nguyễn Lập Tuy, who has emerged to lead the executive committee as president of the mission initiative.

Tuy called attention to the hopes of the Vietnamese United Methodists for expanded theological education; more and better church buildings; more ministries for children, youth and women; more social ministries, and better pastoral care for pastors.

In response to questions about the number of churches that may have followed To, West Ohio's Vietnam

Coordinator, Roberta Eddy, explained that most United Methodists in Vietnam participate in house churches. Eddy estimated that perhaps 40 to 50 groups have identified with To's new organization. She noted the difficulty of definitive statistics across the history of the initiative. "Five churches from the highlands we didn't know existed showed up for the conference, bringing with them enthusiastic worship," she said.

In the two-day consultation of Vietnamese leadership and U.S. partners following the annual meeting, the Rev. Paul Kong, who leads Global Ministries' Asia office, asked the participants, "Do you want to be United Methodist? If so, why?" The responses were a high point of the gathering.

"Each of the leaders spoke personally of his/her journey," said Ward. "The words repeated 'open' and 'grace' – 'open' to all at communion, 'open' to leadership of women, 'open' to all. 'Grace' prevenient and free to all. They spoke of the pain of the past year, but the resolution to stay connected in The United Methodist Church."

The bishop's words echo Peter's

remarks. "It was encouraging," he said, "to see the new leadership move forward in a clear Wesleyan way to further the ministry efforts of The United Methodist Church Vietnam."

Administrative matters for the Vietnam mission can be difficult. The United Methodist Church is not recognized by the central government as a religious entity. Legal status has been denied while efforts continue for recognition. Some local authorities offer recognition in a limited way.

Thomas Kemper, Global Ministries' head, was asked about tensions over property between the mission and the To group. He replied that the focus was primarily on the United Methodist Center in Ho Chi Minh City, built in large part by funds from West Ohio and Global Ministries. He said that lawyers are looking into ownership issues. Both the mission and the To group currently use space in the facility.

Immediate goals of the indigenous Vietnamese United Methodist leadership include strengthening their organization and stepping up training for leaders themselves. These focus areas will be important in emerging partnership efforts, according to Ward and Eddy.



Rev. Nguyễn Lập Tuy, president of the Vietnam Mission Initiative. ~umcmision/Myungim Kim

United Methodist top five stories for 2018 listed

SAM HODGES
UM News

The struggle to hold The United Methodist Church together despite longstanding division over homosexuality was the denomination's top news story of 2018. Church communicators and United Methodist News staffers vote annually for the top five United Methodist news stories.

Here's a detailed recap of the top stories and related articles:

First: Looking for a way forward

For more than 40 years, The United Methodist Church has faced serious internal disagreement over how accepting to be of homosexuality, with ordination of gay persons and same-sex unions as flashpoints.

At the 2016 General Conference, amid open talk of schism, delegates asked the bishops to lead through the impasse. The Council of Bishops got permission to appoint a 32-member Commission on a Way Forward. Later, the bishops called for the special session of General Conference to consider possible changes to church structure and law, as recommended by the commission.

That group wrapped up its work this year with a report that included three legislative options to be considered by the special General Conference. Most bishops recommended the One Church Plan, but at least one bishop was unhappy with how the results of the deliberations were presented and reported confusion about whether all three plans were being sent as legislation to the General Conference. The bishops ended up issuing a clarification.

The Judicial Council heard oral arguments about which legislation could be considered at the special gathering. The council ruled that all legislation related to the "call" of the conference could be put before the delegates.

In October, the council issued another crucial ruling, this time on the constitutionality of the One Church, Traditional and Connectional Conference plans. The council noted that several Traditional Plan petitions would need to be changed to avoid violating the church constitution.

Through the year, annual conferences held listening sessions about the commission's work and the legislative options before the special General

Conference. Some conferences and caucus groups endorsed plans, and new legislative options emerged, such as the Simple Plan and Modified Traditional Plan.

Delegation chairs reported on the high level of interest they were seeing across the church and shared their hopes and anxieties about the St. Louis gathering.

Second: Asylum and immigration

United Methodists' commitment to welcoming the stranger could be seen through individual churches offering shelter to those at risk of deportation. One man stayed for months at a United Methodist church in North Carolina, but was arrested and later deported after reporting for an appointment with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Some of the church's members were arrested while protesting his treatment.

The Trump administration's generally tougher approach to immigration prompted protest statements from bishops and others within the denomination. United Methodists assisted in caring for immigrants along the border of California and Texas.

United Methodists were among about 300 clergy marching in San Diego on Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day, to protest the fence separating the U.S. and Mexico. Michigan pastors, the Revs Jill Hardt Zundel (Detroit: Central UMC) and Patty Gandarilla (Centro Familiar Cristiano UMC), participated as representatives of the General Board of Church and Society. Two of the United Methodist pastors were among those arrested.

The Council of Bishops called for compassion toward those in the Central American migrant caravan arriving at the U.S. border.

The rhetoric and policies of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions regarding immigration led some of his fellow United Methodists to seek church law charges against him. They did not succeed, and Sessions would later resign at the request of President Trump.

Third: Natural disasters

California wildfires hit in two seasons and different parts of the state, wiping out one



Members of the Commission on a Way Forward converse as they complete their final commission meeting on May 23, 2018, at the Upper Room chapel in Nashville, Tenn.—COB photo/Maidstone Mulenga

community and devastating several others. United Methodists were among the victims and among those offering shelter and other relief.

Hurricane Michael clobbered the upper Gulf Coast, claiming lives and homes and damaging United Methodist churches and parsonages. The massive storm caused problems throughout much of the Eastern Seaboard and prompted a major relief effort by the denomination's Alabama-West Florida Conference. Earlier, Hurricane Florence brought flooding rains to parts of Georgia and the Carolinas, including areas still recovering from storms of the recent past. One North Carolina district was particularly hard hit.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief was a constant in the denomination's relief and recovery work in the U.S. and beyond, including helping in the Philippines after Typhoon Mangkhut. UMCOR made significant grants to The Michigan Conference for flood recovery efforts in the Keweenaw Peninsula (\$100,000) and for the hiring of a Disaster Recovery Coordinator to work in the state (\$204,000).

Fourth: Missionaries detained

Three United Methodist missionaries, Miracle Osman of Malawi, Tawanda Chandiwana of Zimbabwe and Adam



United Methodist leaders kneel in prayer before the border wall separating the U.S. from Mexico in San Diego. The group was taking part in a multi-faith call for migrant justice. Michigan pastors Rev. Jill Hardt Zundel and Patty Gandarilla were reps from the Board of Church and Society. ~ umns photo/Mike DuBose

Shaw of the United States, were detained at police checkpoints in the Philippines while joining in an international, ecumenical fact-finding investigation of alleged human rights violations.

All three faced long delays in leaving the country, and Chandiwana was detained for eight weeks, including time spent in a detention center in Manila.

The United Methodist Board of Global Ministries organized an online petition drive calling for the government to allow the missionaries to leave, and more than 18,000 people, from more than 100 countries, signed. The Council of Bishops issued its own statement, and by July, all three missionaries had been allowed to return to their home countries.

Fifth: Response to mass shootings

Certain place names, the sites of mass shootings, became disturbingly familiar in 2018. Parkland High School in Florida and Santa Fe High School near Houston were among them. So were the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the Capital Gazette newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland, and Thousand Oaks, California.

United Methodists responded in various ways, with clergy offering counseling and speaking at prayer vigils. The denomination was well represented at the March for Our Lives after the Parkland massacre.

Bishops called for prayer and action. The Florida Conference, under Bishop Kenneth Carter, conducted a successful campaign to get 5,000 letters written to public officials, urging them to enact legislation to curb gun violence.



Tawanda Chandiwana exhibits a broad smile as he arrives home in Zimbabwe following a 56-day detention in the Philippines. ~ umns/Taurai Emmanuel Maforo

Flint Court Street sponsors a visit from Deaf Santa

Deaf children in Flint were able to share their Christmas wishes with Santa, thanks to the people of Court Street United Methodist Church.

“This was one of those events that just sort of falls in your lap if you’re connected to the community and ready to respond when your neighbors call,” says the Rev. Jeremy Peters, a pastor appointed to Court Street UMC. “A parishioner who works at the Flint Children’s Museum learned that the museum wanted to put on this Deaf Santa event, but they didn’t have a sponsor. She knew that the church is

working hard to be more visible and connected to the community, so she asked the museum to give us a call.”

After that initial phone call the event quickly snowballed. Rev. Peters said, “Yes!” to the request immediately.

“We’ve spent a lot of time in the last couple years working to articulate the core values of our congregation,” he says. “Two of those core values are inclusiveness and encouraging children. For us it was a no-brainer – I knew that if I said yes, God and the congregation would figure out how to make the money happen.”

When the United Methodist Women learned about the event, the donations started rolling in. The church soon had enough money to make the event completely free, including museum admission and souvenir pictures with Santa.

The event attracted media attention. As Deaf Santa was setting up and getting ready to meet with the children, two television news crews and a passel of journalists arrived at the museum.

The Rev. Christy Miller-Black, a deacon serving as Court Street UMC’s Minister of Christian Education, was on

hand to answer questions and give interviews. “What a gift, to have the chance to appear on the evening news and tell the world that we as a church are working to include all of God’s children!” she says.

The response to the event was so positive that Court Street UMC is talking about possibilities for sign-language interpretation in worship.

“You never know what God is going to do when you focus on your core values and get out into the community,” says Rev. Peters. “Miracles happen when we answer the phone and say, ‘Yes!’”



Deaf Santa greeted children at the Flint Children’s Museum with the help of Court Street United Methodist Church. The Rev. Christy Miller-Black was on hand offering hospitality. ~ photo courtesy of Jen Peters