

The Mission Imperative
Cabinet Dean's 2019 Report
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Michigan Conference – The United Methodist Church

Bishop & Mrs. Bard; Fellow Members and Guests of the Michigan Conference; I greet you in the precious name of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord. I am grateful for the privilege to have been Dean of the Bishop's Cabinet this memorable year. It is a joy to serve alongside our Bishop, and these extraordinary superintendents.

This is a unique year to give the Dean's Report and, in some ways, a unique kind of a dean – a dean born outside this country who brings a unique set of eyes, ears, and perspective to any conversation. In this one year, 2019, the Michigan Conference came into being and the denomination is deeply involved in conversations about schism. At a time like this, what would you expect me to say about the Michigan Conference and the work of your Cabinet? While I could spend this time lamenting all the sad commentaries on the collective behaviors and divisive rhetoric that characterize the current climate across our Church, I would like to take another approach.

Yes, we are not of one mind on human sexuality. Sometimes we think too highly of our minds. Truth is we differ on a range of issues, including race, gender, ethnicity, justice, equality, and guns. Yet, your Cabinet hopes that, despite deep differences, we can still be one in the mission of God. The mission of God is an equal opportunity employer. Progressives, traditionalists, centrists, liberals, conservatives, old, young, women, men, children, youth, young adults, red, yellow, black, and white are all invited to participate in God's mission! The Apostle Paul, in the 12th chapter of Hebrews, invites them to lay aside their pre-occupations and set their priority straight. Without clarity of purpose, they would soon be consumed by their divisions. His reminder: you cannot run the race without focus. Put "*first things first*" to avoid "*majoring in the minors while minoring in the majors.*" The race is the mission. Participation requires patient endurance because God gets to call the shots, not us! And people who have wielded power for too long struggle to understand this.

We implore you not to be fearful of the future, but to put your hands in the hands of the One who holds the future. Schisms or not, of one thing we can be certain, that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” [Romans 8: 38-39 KJV]. This Dean’s Report is a reminder that “*crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, but the Church of Jesus constant will remain.*” Your Cabinet is committed to God’s mission as the Church’s primary purpose and joins you in conviction that God will bring to completion the good work begun in us.

We became one conference in Michigan for the sake of God’s mission, not our own. And in every district across this conference, congregations and individuals are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world! From the **Greater Southwest District’s** 103 congregations where faithful disciples labor day and night to bring hope to the hopeless and salvation to the lost, to the **Central Bay District** where children, youth, and young adults are being shaped for the long journey of life under the protection of God, Michigan United Methodists are on the move to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.

The 94 churches of the **East Winds District**, organized into 14 Mission Zones, sent a VIM Team to engage hurricane recovery work in Puerto Rico in January 2019, and operate three significant mission sites: Flint Water Recovery and NVEST (which move homeless to housing); South Flint Soup Kitchen; and Blue Water Free Store and Ministry Center.

Building upon two historic Methodist Colleges within the boundaries of the **Heritage District**, ten mission zones (each with ten churches), have been established. A day-long work camp, “*Heritage Goes to Camp,*” was held at Judson Collins Retreat Center. Young and older adults came together to clean the campsite and build closer relationships. To assist smaller-member churches with opportunities for their youth, the Heritage District will send a 30-member team of youth and adults on a week-long mission trip to Cass Community Social Services in Detroit this summer.

The **Mid-Michigan District** vision, “*creating the spaces and leaders through which God’s hospitality and wholeness can thrive in communities!*” is being realized through three core values: engaging local churches in transformational Christ-Centered Mission and Ministry in their communities; identifying, equipping, supporting and deploying Bold & Effective Leaders; and creating and partnering with processes that form Vibrant Congregations. Missional hub charge conferences, lay leadership forums, clergy praxis sessions, and multiple community engagement ministries are beginning to form across the district.

From Salem Bradley Indian Mission in the South to Pentwater and Barryton Faith in the North, the **Midwest District** seeks to reach new people who hunger for the Lord’s presence in their lives. Many churches are active in Kid’s Hope, food banks and inviting those who are hungry to share a meal under their roof. Pastors participate in Reach Networks, building relationships and discovering new opportunities for mission. Churches meet to share mission goals. Flat River Outreach Ministries (F.R.O.M.) is one example of how churches work collaboratively with other agencies to help persons in need. Churches realize that the harvest is plenty; but the workers are few.

With focus on Dream, Engage, Inspire, Repeat, the **Northern Waters District** continues to help the local church build effective relationships to make a difference in the lives of the people God has called us to serve. The district seeks to live by the words of John 1:14 from the Message, “*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.*”

The **Northern Skies District** celebrates Pickford UMC for increasing worship attendance from 90 to 187 in five years; God’s Country Cooperative Parish for purchasing, renovating and soon dedicating a local school in Newberry to be its Mission Center; and the Ministry of Pam Quayle, District Administrative Assistant for 25 years of faithful service to the churches of the Marquette and Northern Skies Districts, as she retires this year. The district faces challenges like the Father’s Day Floods of 2018 on the Keweenaw and the challenges of navigating a large geography. Connectional support and the use of Zoom technology as a meeting platform have brought people together.

The **Greater Detroit District** vision is *“Preparing People for the next revival.”* As the population, cultural, and industrial center of the State where Michigan meets the world, the annual district conferences bring together 500 local church leaders for training, fellowship, and ministry celebrations. There is excitement for New Church starts at French UMC in Birmingham, Centro Familiar Cristiano in Melvindale, Vietnamese Ministry of Madison Heights, Berkeley: First, Open Door Worship at Rochester: St. Paul’s, new worship community at Cass Avenue, building expansion projects at Troy: Korean and at Royal Oak: First, as well as the re-population and redevelopment of the City of Detroit. We are discovering the increasing need for more ways to reach people with the saving Word of God.

Although we see *“in a mirror dimly”* [1 Corinthians 13:12], let’s keep the mission alive – alive in young people crying out for time-out from our prolonged doctrinal bloodbaths; alive in daily struggles of small membership churches to connect with persons who long for meaning, purpose, direction, and fulfillment in life. The mission is alive in J-FON offices where immigrants seek help to establish stable lives. The mission is alive where large-membership churches stretch their resources to assist those living on the margins, and wherever the Church reminds the world that red and yellow, black and white are all precious in God’s sight! The mission is alive because it is God’s mission. Bishop Desmond Tutu once said that *“mission is to the Church as burning is to fire. A church that is not in mission is not the Church.”* Whether the UMC splinters into pieces or stays together, one thing is certain – God mission is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow until Christ comes in final victory.

Friends, the world gains nothing from our endless bloodbaths over doctrinal orthodoxy and ecclesiastical control. This broken world hungers and thirsts for relevance, meaning, purpose, direction, fulfillment, life, salvation, and destiny. The Church’s mission is make a straight path in the deserts of this world for our God! The hungry and thirsty need the love of God which far surpasses human understanding. This they cannot be satisfied by traditionalism or progressivism. This world needs a faithful Church – anointed by the Holy Spirit to lower mountains of injustice, exalt valleys of dried bones,

level playing fields for all people, smoothen crooked places, proclaim release to captives, give sight to the blind, heal broken hearts, set at liberty the oppressed, and declare the acceptable year of God's favor!

This mission is imperative because without it the journey leads nowhere worthy of the travel. Sinners still need a Savior; the sick, healing; the lost, redemption; the oppressed, liberty; and the perishable, imperishability! The mission drives faithful people to justice that rolls like mighty waters and righteousness like ever-flowing streams! It beckons the dispossessed to lift their eyes to the hills; admonishes the learned to *"lean not [their] own understanding;"* encourages the sinner to flee from the wrath that is coming; reminds the sojourner *"this world is not our home;"* and whispers to the ostracized *"God so love the world that God gave God's only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life!"* God's mission is necessary, urgent, indispensable, and imperative as long as *our imprisoned spirits* lay fast bound in sin and nature's night; as long as we (in the name of traditionalism, progressivism, or any other *isms*) continue to demonize each other while claiming to be brothers and sisters of the same household of faith. One philosopher wondered *"what is the greatest distance a person would have to travel in this life to attain ultimate fulfillment?"* Some said it is the distance from the Earth to the farthest reaches of the galaxies. The philosopher disagreed with this assertion by concluding that *the greatest distance one would have to travel in this life to attain ultimate fulfillment is the distance from the head to the heart.*

Our mission as United Methodists is participation in God's redemptive, restorative, and salvific mission to welcome back home, to that ultimate fulfillment, all who are lost. Sisters and Brothers, we are *"treading where the saints have trod. We are not divided, all one body we. One in hope and doctrine, one in charity."* Let us remain caught up in this amazing mission, realizing that it ain't over till God says, *"It's over!"* Amen!