



Report of the Conference Lay Leaders

2020 Virtual Michigan Annual Conference

Monday, July 27, 2020

John Wharton and Anne Soles

JOHN WHARTON

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. I'm John Wharton, one of your conference lay leaders and we have been asked to speak at annual conference. Anne Soles and I are very grateful for the opportunity.

I'd like to take a few moments to talk about an important aspect of vital congregations—a strong partnership between the laity and the clergy. When the Board of Laity meets, our district lay leaders talk about what is happening in the congregations in their districts. One common element is that the vital congregations show strong ministries because of the partnership of the laity and clergy.

Our pastors are sent to lead our congregation, but they can't do the work of ministry alone. They bring a sense of vision, but the laity can also share in developing the vision for their congregation. Both clergy and laity are charged to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Working together we can support a variety of ministries, and you've heard the saying many hands make light work. Even the early disciples knew the importance of increasing the number of people performing ministry.

Acts 6: 1-4. Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

These early disciples knew that they needed help in ministry. They looked for those that were "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Have you looked at the ministries of your congregation and seen places where you could lend a hand? We each have different skills and talents. Some may have financial skills; some may have experience in human resources; some may have particular talent in care giving ministries. In addition to what I would call vocational talents, we also have spiritual gifts. In several places in the Bible, we are told that God gives each of us Spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 12: 4-11. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same

Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

This scripture tells us that God gives each of us a “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” There are many opportunities for us to use these gifts in ministry and it is all for the common good.

Do you know what are your spiritual gifts? If you have not had the chance to look at your spiritual gifts, I'd encourage you to take one of the classes in the Lay Servant Ministry program. These classes give us a chance to learn more about ways that we can serve. If you don't take a class, may I suggest a short book we have used in one of those classes.

It's titled Your Spiritual Gifts Inventory and is written by Charles V. Bryant. It's a list of short questions to find areas to which you are most inclined. At the end, you can see how you scored and there's a brief description of each spiritual gift, including references to scripture.

Let me finish by saying that I hope each of you look for areas where you can support the ministries of your congregation. Working together, laity and clergy can provide vibrant programs and ministries. It's a key foundation for vital congregations!

ANNE SOLES

Thanks, John. Thank you, Bishop,

I would like to thank each of the members of Board of Laity. This has been quite a year. Their work has been above and beyond their original remit! We sit down together --District Lay Leaders, UMW President, Lay Servants and UMM and try and make sense of things on the districts and from the conference. That sense has changed across the year. The catch phrase at each meeting has been “Guess what”. Thank you all for making things work. I think this is called “adapting” Whatever it is, thanks for your flexibility.

The church—when you get down to it—is 98% laity! We have pastors, we have district superintendents, we have committees. Methodists have a system for everything. We've taken some ribbing for that over the years. But those systems can and sometimes do work. When you get right down to it, making disciples is making one-to-one connections. How is it with your soul? The spirit of love flows through the touch, one person to another. And don't we know that now!

To be a disciple, John Wesley's General Rule calls for private acts of mercy --- flood buckets, how to use ZOOM, bringing a casserole, and making a phone call. Each disciple is called to private action. It might be sharing conversation. It might be sharing a chainsaw. As disciples we have gifts and skills to share. As laity, we each have a toolbox. Sometimes with some pretty interesting tools inside. Praise the Lord of double

entry bookkeeping ---among other tools. Discipleship does not stop with our private acts.

Wesley calls for public acts of justice. How is it with our community? And Guess What? We have some challenges. Virus lock down, social distance in the hardware store, old fault lines of inequality and racism exposed. How is our community? And the answer comes back “a little tattered” “I hope it holds together!” “We need some changes here” Do we have a toolbox, a tool shed, hardware store for all this?

The author William Least Heat Moon wrote a book call “Blue Highways” in praise of those two-lane highways usually blue on the map. Traffic flows both ways, lots of stops and local attractions. You don’t save much time on M-46 or 115, US 2 across the UP or US 12 down state. Those blue highways and local roads spread out to every corner and every driveway. Traffic in both directions.

And at that driveways (or apartment lobbies or nursing home entrances), the hardest, most expensive connection in communications is the last mile. Post your number on a billboard – will they call? Dig a cable, will it make it to the house. Give an iPad, can they use it. Last mile barriers, building a network takes time and tools. This moves at “walk speed” not warp speed.

Jesus walked. He was a blue highways man. He was always stopping to talk with the likes of Zacchaeus who may have been a “wee little man” but Jesus saw him in his tree. He saw the woman at the well in detail. He didn’t send a mass mailing or a tweet.

Jesus calls us to be disciples and to make disciples in the same slow manner. No shortcuts and lots of labor. Even fishers of men don’t catch on every cast.

Disciples need worship-private prayer and public worship. We trust in this grace and we need this life-giving renewal. But the last mile is still there and calling. As you listen to a sermon or connect with Facebook Live with a thumbs up, there is still the “making” to do. Church is a verb and “making” has come to include mending and patching and reweaving community fabric as well.

Tip O'Neill, speaker of the house way before Nancy Pelosi, famously said “all politics is local”. Almost right. For disciples, all church is local. The transformation of the world begins with the making of disciples. With the one-on-one connections. With last mile of connection. With the messages of love and concern, hope and joy that travel on these two lanes of connection. That’s the work of it.

Guess what? We have some changes coming. I do not know “what’s next”, only that we have the tools, we have the charge, quite literally have the charge, spark of energy, of insight and power to bring light and hope and even comfort. Although you don’t want to be too comfortable as we have also learned in the last year.

We give thanks for this year past and a message of hope for the year ahead. John and I were privileged to light the new conference candle last year. It is burning today, brighter perhaps as the world has grown darker. So, we say – go forth in confidence. And keep your tool kit with you.