

2021 Michigan Annual Conference

Report of Director of Connectional Ministries | Rev. Paul Perez

June 4, 2021

Greetings, Michigan Annual Conference! It is my honor to serve as your Director of Connectional Ministry.

When I accepted Bishop Bard's invitation to serve in this role, I felt the weight of this position -- a weight made heavier by the challenges facing our denomination and our world AND made heavier by being a Mexican-American, Deacon, in his very late 30s and all the weighty firsts that identity represents for this role. I am grateful for Bishop Bard's support, the support of our Conference staff, and the prayers and well wishes I received from so many of you across the state. Thank you.

We live in a challenging time, but also in a time of great possibility. At this moment in our denomination's life, I believe the Annual Conference is the most functional connectional structure and the place where the United Methodist Church will find its way into the future God is calling it to.

With that "both/and" reality of challenge and possibility, I want to say a few things about Sunday's focus on child hunger.

We are in the midst of a historic public health effort to vaccinate for COVID-19. The development and distribution of not only one, but multiple vaccines in under a year is a momentous scientific achievement and a testament to the commitment of scientists, public health experts, and health care workers around the world.

We are beginning to emerge from the global pandemic, but the world we are returning to is not the same. We are in a "new normal." It will take time for us to heal and recover. The impacts of COVID-19 -- physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual -- will be felt for years to come.

One of those impacts is FOOD INSECURITY.

Food insecurity is a lack of a stable and reliable means for getting the food that people need.

To put it simply, people in Michigan are hungry.

COVID-19 disrupted the food supply chain and caused record setting unemployment across the state. An initial report from the State of Michigan's Food Security Council reveals the number of people who are food insecure increased during the pandemic by 38%.

Children in Michigan are especially affected.

The number of children who are food insecure increased by 63% over the past year. This means over half the children living in Michigan do not have enough food to eat on a regular basis.

I want to affirm the work of many of our churches and our UM-related non-profits in Michigan who are in ministry with their communities addressing food insecurity -- operating pantries, feeding programs, and actively seeking to disrupt the cycle of generational poverty. Thank you for persevering through the pandemic and creatively finding ways to continue your essential, front-line ministries.

During this year's Annual Conference, we are taking one small step to respond. Proceeds from our 5th annual 5K will benefit: Blessings in a Backpack, Weekend Survival Kits, Feeding America --West Michigan & Upper Peninsula, Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, and South Michigan.

Walk, Run or Ride in a 5K (3.1 miles) anytime between June 3 and June 6. Thanks to our generous sponsors, 100% of your \$35 registration fee will be donated to child hunger relief across the state. Donate at: michigaumc.org/2021virtual5k

Additionally, The Rev. Kathy Pittenger, our Conference Children's Initiative Coordinator, has curated resources for you to learn more about food insecurity in the State of Michigan, discover ways you can

collaborate with organizations addressing hunger in Michigan communities, and advocate for expansion of anti-hunger and nutritional programs and to raise the minimum wage.

You can find these [resources on our Conference website](#).

Together as a Conference, we take these small steps. I hope they are first of many, as we discern together how we, Michigan United Methodists, can heal and recover from the impacts of COVID-19 and address the root causes of poverty in our communities.