

2021 Michigan Annual Conference Lay Leader Report

Annette Erbes | Sharon Appling | Jesse Robbins | Celia Peters June 4, 2021

Thank you, Bishop. Greeting, friends in faith! As we begin this time together, I offer heart-felt thanks to you, the laity of the Michigan Conference, for continuing to “Sing the Lord’s Song” amidst the challenging times of this past year and for doing so faithfully, creatively, and boldly in the name of Christ.

Psalms 146:1-2 says: “Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.”

On the screen is a sampling of some of the ways ministry has been lived out by the laity of our conference during this past year. On days when it was difficult to find one’s voice, let alone sing a joyful song, laity have continued to praise God by reaching out in love to and with their neighbors. The Lord’s song has been sung faithfully and creatively through virtual worship, virtual VBS, online Sunday School, Zoom Bible studies, more Zoom Bible studies, Trunk or Treat, Community Prayer Wall, food pantries, care visits, 5 K walks, and in far more Snapshots of Vitality than can be shown here today. (We celebrate the witness churches make through the good use of Facebook and other social media.)

Praise God for these acts of service, witness, and love!

As we consider additional ways we are called to “Sing the Lord’s Song” in the coming year, I challenge us to “Claim Our Call and Find Our Voice” as laity in ministry. How are we as laity called? The Book of Discipline in paragraph 127 reminds us that laity are called by God to carry out the Great Commission, serve in mission, share our faith experiences, and live out our faith every day.

The Board of Laity reflects that “Laity are Called to” serve, lead, assist, support, be encouragers, love, live like the Kingdom of God is real, be God’s hands and feet in the world, pray, witness, and give all to the Glory of God, and more. I wonder how you might finish this sentence... “Laity are Called to...”.

Our Michigan Conference is blessed with many faithful, bold, and creative laity living out their call to ministry. I have asked several friends in Christ across the conference to share their call from God and how they are living out their call as lay persons. Let’s hear from Sharon Appling and Jesse Robbins...

WHY I WAS CALLED TO LAY LEADERSHIP - SHARON APPLING

My faith journey was a winding road trip. Often, I asked God, “Are We There Yet?” Baptized at age five, my faith journey began. My mother was Methodist. Dad believed in active participation in the neighborhood Church regardless of denomination. My seven siblings and I were imprinted with the belief that “neighbors, anyone in need, are family”. Generosity became a road sign. God, “Are We There Yet?” The gift of teaching God’s purpose for all was cultivated. I was allowed to assist with VBS, youth ministry, and Sunday School. One defining day, Pastor asked Mother to bring me to his office. I was fourteen years old. Rev. Jones asked me to teach a class with which he was experiencing problems. The students were unruly with short attention spans, asking questions that tended to derail his lesson.

I answered, “Yes!” Determined to tame this with a love for Bible study, I prepared an engaging Noah’s Ark lesson, with songs, gestures, and pictures. Mother walked me back to Pastor’s office a week later. He introduced me, and to my surprise, this was the senior missionary society of women! These ladies adopted me, sharing how God had saved them from life’s storms. Interactive Bible Study was for all ages! Teaching God’s Word led to impactful mission, faith formation, discipleship, Evangelical outreach, and lay servant training. I heard God’s call...Not as clergy, but as CERTIFIED LAY MINISTRY!

WHY I WAS CALLED TO LAY LEADERSHIP - JESSE ROBBINS

It was during a mission trip in high school that I first felt God calling me to ministry. Over the next several years of prayer God's call led me to Youth Ministry. I was blessed to work with youth at The Vietnamese United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids for a couple of years before coming to Stevensville United Methodist Church where I have been for the past 7 years.

It is a privilege to work with youth, walking with them as they explore their faith and grow into disciples for Jesus. Serving with youth has provided me the opportunity to spend summers working in New York and South Dakota, lead week-long service trips all over the United States and Guatemala, given me the opportunity to be involved with committees at church and so much more. As much fun as we have, the most rewarding part is being with students through the important events, some joyful like graduation and others heart breaking like the loss of a sibling.

I can say with confidence that following my call has brought me joy. It has not always been easy and following your calling definitely requires some sacrifice, however it continues to be the most rewarding work I have ever done. I am excited to see what God has planned next.

POEM INTRODUCTION - ANNETTE ERBES

Thank you, Jesse and Sharon, for sharing your witness with us and for living out your call from God as you, "Claim Your Call, Find Your Voice", and Sing the Lord's Song.

Friends in faith, as we look ahead to the coming year, I invite all of us to Claim Our Call and Find Our Voices. John Wesley's directives in "Directions for Singing" (as found in the United Methodist Hymnal) can provide guidance for us as we live out our call as laity.

When Wesley calls us to "sing with good courage", we are encouraged to be bold and effective leaders.

"Lift up your voice with strength" challenges us to lead with the strength that we gain from our faith in God.

An important directive to sing in harmony and "strive to unite your voices" directs us to work as laity and clergy together in our neighborhoods and communities, each sharing the gifts God has gifted us with in unity, love, and action. We are at our best when we lift our voices in harmony together.

If we "have an eye to God in every word you sing", I believe unity is within our reach as disciples of Jesus.

And "sing in time" instructs us to keep up the tempo as we move our ministries ahead, in rhythm with the current needs around us.

Listen first for God's voice. Discern a ministry which captures your passion. Find the main melody of purpose, "So that..." God's love is both heard and experienced. Share the melody of your ministry with others: collaborate, brainstorm, share insights. And fine tune your ministry: evaluate, adjust, seek input, and add a descant of a new variation.

This past year, in conjunction with colleagues in ministry, I have begun to Claim my Call from God to examine my own intercultural awareness. In the coming year, I will listen humbly and intentionally to my brothers and sisters in Christ, gain insights into my own understanding, and hear the melodies of other cultural differences across nationality, gender identity, race, and cultural communities. I will seek to actively engage in efforts to increase my intercultural competence, write the lyrics of my own cultural identity, and use my voice to engage and advocate with others. I invite you to join me on this journey of building a Beloved Community.

In closing, I have invited a member of our Board of Laity, Celia Peters, to share the song of poetry with us. Celia will be reciting her original poem, "Questions."

"QUESTIONS" - CELIA PETERS

What is a call?

Is it an audible thing?

Like the way a bird draws your ear in the morning?

A shout from a friend,

A shout of warning that begs you to hear and to halt what you're doing?

Maybe it's a visible something,

A stop sign, a turn right, a "go this way" with thousand-watt lights and bright fluorescents that begs your attention?

A beckoning, there to pull you away

From a danger just around the bend?

Maybe it's not even a tangible thing,

More a sense of something, a feeling this thing is right,

A silent thing that comes in the night and gives your words wings

And leaves your heart light and then slips away when the night turns to day?

What is a call?

What does it do?

Does it put a hand on your back and pull you aside, give you a map and impart some advice?

Is it nice?

Does it sit up and demand your attention?

What do you reckon?

What is a call?

Or rather, what is your call?

That's a more personal matter.

Is it personal?

Do you hear a voice greeting you like an old friend?

See an odd action, a kind moment, and then

Do you follow and hold it and find a happy end?

What is your call?

Do you welcome it inside?

A call to worship and guide?

A call to a certain kind of ministry?

A call to serve?

Are you listening?

Are you sure?

What is a call?

And will you answer?

CLOSE - ANNETTE ERBES

Thank you for sharing your gift with us, Celia. Friends, Claim Your Call, Find Your Voice, and Sing the Lord's Song this day and every day. Amen.