

# 2021 Michigan Annual Conference General Conference & NCJ Report Laura Witkowski & Kennetha Bigham-Tsai June 4, 2021

**Laura:** Grace and peace Bishop Bard and the Michigan Annual Conference. I am Laura Witkowski, co-chair of the Michigan Delegation.

**Kennetha:** And, I am Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, co-chair of the Michigan Delegation.

**Laura:** Elected at the 2019 Annual Conference, the Michigan Delegation is the youngest and most diverse ever elected in this state. As the first delegation for the newly-created Michigan Annual Conference, we have committed ourselves to working as one delegation, letting go of our previous geographical roots.

**Kennetha:** 2020 was an eventful year filled with uncertainty. We began our service expecting a General conference in May of 2020. We began getting to know one another. We developed a vision statement, and began reading the 1,061 pages of information and legislation in the Advance Daily Christian Advocate (the ADCA). It wasn't too long ago that the talk was of the *Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation*. Michigan was the annual conference that voted to place that legislation on the docket for the 2020 General Conference.

**Laura:** Remember that? We held a Special Session of the Annual Conference on March 7, 2020. More than 1,000 people filled the Goodrich Chapel at Albion College. Little did we know, that as we gathered shoulder to shoulder, the Coronavirus pandemic had already reached the United States. We continue to thank God that no one became ill because of that event.

**Kennetha:** Eventually the pandemic did reach Michigan, and we began to shut down. Our delegation began meeting by Zoom. We held off on some of the events we planned because so many were engulfed in responding to this worldwide health crisis.

**Laura:** Eventually, the Commission on the General Conference decided to postpone General Conference. And we began the long wait. It has since been postponed twice, and a Special Session that was to be held on May 8, 2021 also was cancelled. So yes, dust has been gathering on our ADCAs. But we have not been idle.

**Kennetha:** Three babies have been born to members of our delegation. We have celebrated with Megan Walther on the adoption of Maxine, who was born in June of 2019. We have celebrated with Joel Fitzgerald on the birth of Samuel a year ago. We have celebrated with Christina Wright, who was married in August of 2019 and gave birth to Ezra a little over eleven weeks ago.

**Laura:** We also have mourned with members of the delegation who lost loved ones. Christina's father died in January of 2020, and Diane Brown lost her mother that October. Brenda Dupree lost her beloved husband, Lou, in January of 2021, and Charles Boayue's father died on March 6, at the age of 100.

**Kennetha:** We have prayed for and supported one another through deaths, weddings, new babies, job changes, moves, flooded cities, and illnesses, including cases of COVID in some of our own families. We look forward to the day that we can meet in person and hug our colleagues. Maybe that day will come soon.

**Laura:** In the midst of all of this, we have prayed for our annual conference. This annual conference has grappled with the impact of a pandemic that has taken untold lives. We have been devastated by the

recent fires in Calumet and the floods in Mid-Michigan, including the collapse of the Edenville Dam, causing epic flooding in the villages of Sanford and Edenville and the city of Midland.

**Kennetha:** We also have prayed for those who have experienced trauma in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. As a delegation, we cannot ignore the unrest in this country. Our delegation is individually and collectively participating in anti-bias and anti-racism work. With the help of Brittney Stephan, each of us completed the Intercultural Development Inventory and have been working through our Intercultural Development plans, beginning the work of dismantling racism in The United Methodist Church.

**Laura:** We have taken seriously our commitment to serve our annual conference and the whole church. Paul Perez and Kennetha embarked upon a visioning effort called Out of Chaos, Creation. Joel Fitzgerald has served on the board of Wespeth. Nichea Guy, Charles, Jackie Euper and Kennetha have served on the North Central Jurisdictional Episcopacy Committee.

**Kennetha:** Laura has provided valuable service as Vice Chair of the NCJ Mission Council. Jen Peters, Diane Brown, and Joy Barret have worked hard on not just one, but two virtual annual conferences and a special session, since we were elected. Brad Bartelmay has served on CFA and Paul has been appointed our new DCM. Sherri Swanson, Megan and Christina have served on the Board of Ordained Ministry. Ruby Anderson, Ruth Sutton and Nichea have been active in UMW. Matt Weiler has taken a new appointment at Kalamazoo First. And, Hoon, Gordon, and Lisa have served in their local churches, in camping and campus ministries, and in other ministries of the church.

**Laura:** As a delegation, we have constantly sought connection. We met with the Minnesota delegation, with whom we share Bishop Bard. We attended the Pre-General Conference Briefing in Nashville and met with other NCJ delegates in Illinois, and with local churches--Troy UMC and Big Beaver. We also have worked with delegates around our worldwide connection on the future of the UMC. For instance, we affirmed the Christmas Covenant and continue to support the Protocol.

**Kennetha:** As we wrote in a March 2021 statement,

*Recognizing the need for contextual ministry and connectedness in mission, the Michigan Delegation supports regionalization, especially as it is imagined in the Christmas Covenant...we believe that the regionalization it envisions will move us away from U.S.-centrism and allow for contextualization in mission and ministry throughout our global church.*

*In line with the decision of the March 2020 called Special Session of the Michigan Annual Conference...the Michigan Delegation affirms its original support for The Protocol and stresses that this complex piece of legislation should be dealt with at an in-person session of the General Conference."*

**Laura:** In all that we have done, we have tried to stay true to the vision and values we developed when we began. Our vision statement reads,

*The Michigan Delegation to the 2020 General and North Central Jurisdictional Conferences aligns its mission with that of the United Methodist Church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Our vision as a delegation is to listen; to lead the Michigan Conference into a more just and inclusive church; to continue the reconciling work of Jesus Christ in whatever new things emerge; to challenge ourselves to follow in the way of Christ; and to live into the catholic spirit of John Wesley.*

**Kennetha:** We value a strong foundation. We recognize our foundation is in Jesus Christ, and we seek to strengthen it through continued prayer, reading of scripture, listening, and reflection. We also find strength and support in our relationships with each other and with our churches and congregations and we seek to deepen those relationships.

**Laura:** We value holding all in sacred worth. We understand diversity and inclusion as the road to true equality. We know that we must actively seek these things and put real work into analyzing and

*dismantling racism, colonialism, sexism, and all other -isms that continue to separate us from true communion and community with each other.*

**Kennetha:** *We value compassion, honesty, and realism. We are working through difficult and painful issues. Our hearts break with those who hurt just as they soar with hopes and dreams for the future. We strive to listen to and understand the many voices and hearts both inside...and outside ...the church—those we have helped, those we have neglected to help, and those we have hurt. We especially seek to hear the voices and hearts of our LGBTQIA+ siblings.*

**Laura:** We sought to live into this value when we stated in March:

*... whereas the Michigan Delegation is committed to a more just and inclusive church and to continuing the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, we call our bishops, colleges of bishops, and the Council of Bishops to continue to hold in abeyance any charges related to sexual orientation or gender identity, to the provision of same-sex marriage or holy union, to the ordination, commissioning or consecration of LGBTQIA+ persons or to other matters related to our impasse over sexual orientation.*

**Kennetha:** Our leadership values are clear,

*We value servant leadership. We understand our unique role as leaders and listeners. We hope to better understand ourselves and our conference as we lead. We value the diversity in our delegation and our conference as we recognize that there are voices yet unheard.*

**Laura:** *We value the journey. We know that there are more issues to address than the ones immediately before us...in the spirit of moving on to perfection, we will continue the journey of leading the Michigan Conference to improve ourselves and our churches in all the ways we fall short of true, Christ-like love and inclusion.*

**Kennetha:** What a journey we have been on. The intensity of our work as a delegation may have lasted longer than we anticipated, still we are committed to fulfilling our service to the Church and the Michigan Conference.

**Laura:** As co-chairs of the delegation, we are so grateful for the service of our delegation colleagues, for the guidance of our Bishop, and for the support of this annual conference.

**Kennetha:** As Philippians 1: 3-6 reads,

*We thank our God every time we remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of our prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.*

**Laura:** *We are confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ," ... or whenever General Conference actually happens.*