

**Michigan Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church
2023
Bishop David Alan Bard**

Friday, 3:30 p.m. State of the Church/Conference

Good afternoon again, friends. I have been asked to say a few words about the state of the Michigan Annual Conference. During my opening sermon, I offered a few comments on this which I will expand briefly here. I also want to encourage you, if you have not yet done so, to view the video reports for annual conference. These provide additional perspective on the annual conference, enhancing what I will share in the next few minutes.

Denominational Transitions: You are all aware, and some of us painfully aware, that we are in the midst of a significant change in The United Methodist Church. General Conference 2019 provided a path for churches to leave The United Methodist Church through “disaffiliation.” A new expression of Methodism, The Global Methodist Church, has launched and is moving forward. Our Board of Trustees, in keeping with ¶12553, developed requirements for disaffiliation, many recommended by a smaller disaffiliation task force I convened. The Trustees developed requirements and a process for disaffiliation. The process is clear, and I am grateful for the work of our district superintendents, my special assistant John Boley, and the Trustees – particularly the chair, Carolin Spragg, for their work on this matter. Later in our session we will vote on the disaffiliation of 60 churches who have or are in the process of fulfilling the requirements for disaffiliation by June 30. We have announced a special session of the annual conference for November 30, to be convened virtually, for the purpose of voting on additional disaffiliations. Not all disaffiliating churches are joining the Global Methodist Church, though this seems the destination of many.

Without getting too deep into the weeds, I want to acknowledge that ¶2553, the disaffiliation paragraph, expires December 31, 2023. “Disaffiliation” will disappear from The Book of Discipline. I want to assure you that even when that is the case, there will be a window of opportunity for those of you who may have been waiting until General Conference in 2024 to make decisions about your continued relationship with The United Methodist Church to make that decision. It is the better part of wisdom to put a pause on churches leaving between January 1, 2024 and General Conference, in order to see what may come from General Conference, but know there will be a pathway for exiting with requirements mirroring ¶2553.

At our clergy session yesterday, we approved the withdrawal of some of our clergy from the Michigan Conference and from ministry in The United Methodist Church. While I will not be appointing clergy to serve in the Global Methodist Church, I have policies in place, with the consent of the Board of Ordained Ministry, that will allow such service in a transitional period. I have also made provision for retired clergy to be hired, but not appointed, to serve churches of other denominations. In all this my intent is to combine kindness and fairness with clarity and firmness.

We have the choice this week, to set a tone for this difficult time. I understand the frustration, disappointment and anger some express in the face of misinformation shared about the continuing United Methodist Church, the amplification of isolated events, and the sense of hurt over churches leaving. I understand the sting some have experienced when long-time friends and colleagues offer biting words and cold shoulders to departing clergy. We do not agree, and our disagreements are deep. Might our love and compassion be deeper? I am not asking you to discard your feelings, but to take care in how you may express them or act upon

them. I am not asking that we ignore misinformation, but to respond in ways that retain a measure of kindness. This is a painful time, a difficult time, hard travelin'. Might we work to be our best in the midst of this? Acrimony and bitterness will not enhance the work of Jesus Christ.

Annual Conference Budget and Staff Restructuring. The departure of churches is only one factor in our conference proposing significant reductions in our budget and accompanying staff changes and restructuring. Church closings are another factor. And perhaps as significant as any factor is our payment of ministry shares. As Brad Bartelmay reported, our receipt rate for ministry shares in 2022 was approximately 72%. We need to do better, friends, and that involves a cooperative effort by annual conference staff and committees to make budget reductions, reduce the number of districts, and restructure our staff, and intentional work on the part of all our congregations to increase their giving to our shared ministry as a conference and as a denomination. To those churches that have paid ministry shares in full, please know of my deep gratitude. For those churches who have been working toward that goal, thank you. For all ministry share giving, I am grateful. This is our shared work and deserves our shared support.

Budgets are not just numbers. There are people involved, and making staff changes in line with the budget has been challenging and painful. By the end of the year Sonya Luna, Paul Perez, Brittney Stephan, Christie Miller White, Dirk Elliott and Alice Townley will no longer be on the Michigan Conference staff. Please express your appreciation this week for their good work. There will be seven districts and seven district superintendents moving into the future, more

oversight for each superintendent. Dr. Jennie Browne will now be in a combined position as Director of Connectional Ministries and Clergy Assistant to the Bishop.

We will find our way here. Expectations for conference staff will need to be adjusted. There may be some things we've done in the past that we need to leave behind or find new ways of accomplishing. Again, may we be gracious toward one another in the midst of all this change.

Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism Work. And we continue to seek positive ways to move into the future. This spring we launched our anti-bias/anti-racism work. This is important and essential work as our nation becomes more diverse. It is essential work for evangelism. It is essential work for our own spiritual development. Thank you to you who have begun this work using these tools that our ABAR team, working with many others, developed.

And let me be clear about a couple of things. We do this work not out of response to "woke ideology" or "secular social justice" forces. To simply assert that any examination of our history that looks honestly at where we have segregated, oppressed, discriminated and propagated racist thinking, to simply assert that this is "critical race theory" and dismiss all honest attempts to grapple – labeling them foreign to our work, well that is unhelpful and intellectually dishonest. We do this work because we are the church, the community who names the name of Jesus, who proclaims that Jesus Christ seeks to bring into one community persons from all of humanity. Jesus Christ breaks down dividing walls and seeks to create beloved community. Many of Paul's letters are about the challenges of bringing together diverse people into community. That's why we do this work.

And it is helpful to be clear that this can be difficult work, challenging work, hard work. To honestly grapple with our history can be painful. We've not always loved our neighbor, nor heard the cry of the needy. We've not always seen the image of God in others who look different from us. Our history is a mixed bag of wonderful moments – moments of love, compassion, justice, caring, the calling forth of high ideals, and difficult moments of segregation, oppression, diminishment and cruelty. To ignore either is untruthful, and we are people who trust that the truth sets free in Jesus Christ.

Difficult days. Hard travelin'. And God is not done with us yet. And new every morning is God's love. So we move forward, trusting in the love of God in Jesus Christ, trusting that though the challenges are great, God is greater, trusting that there ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, or to prevent our working on God's purposes.