

MICHIGAN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

STRATEGIC PLANNING TASK FORCE



A VISION TO RUN WITH

Foundational Document

Strategic Planning Task Force

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The Mission of the Church and the Purpose of the Annual Conference

Write a vision, and make it plain upon a tablet so that a runner can read it [alternative translation: a reader can run with it].

Habbakuk 2:2a

Only new thinking can lead to a new dawn.

Zadie Smith, *Intimations*, 11

The Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world.

“The Baptismal Covenant

III,” *United Methodist Book of Worship*, 106

The immediate work of this task force is to help the Michigan Conference think anew about its vision, mission and priorities in the context of the third decade of the twenty-first century, to write a vision and make it plain so that we can “run with it.” We offer this “living” document to the Conference Leadership Council (CLC), recognizing it offers “strategic directions” more than a “strategic plan.” It points the way toward further specific implementation work ahead.

We find ourselves in a rapidly changing time as the world struggles with the coronavirus pandemic, our nation is again engaged in racial reckoning, religious participation in the United States declines as the number of those claiming no religious affiliation is the fastest growing religious category in our country, and our denomination remains on the verge of significant re-structuring and likely separation. Even as we find ourselves in a rapidly changing world, and know of our need to think anew, we also want to ground our reflections in our Christian theological tradition. Central to a United Methodist understanding of the church is mission and connectionalism.

The Wesleyan and pietist traditions that have come together to form the United Methodist Church focused less on “thinking about the church,” modestly adapting the scriptural, ancient, reformation, and ecumenical understandings of the church, and more on “being the church,” channeling their creative energies to novel forms of evangelism, discipleship, and ministries of compassion and justice. Mission was and still is central to a United Methodist understanding and practice of church. (see “Sent in Love: a United Methodist Understanding of the Church”).

John Wesley was convinced that God formed the people called Methodist and entrusted them with a unique and sacred task to “spread scriptural holiness and to renew of the nation,” and charged it to share its unique spiritual gifts with the church and the world. Gifts which included its particular understanding of sanctification, its particular practice of small groups and Christian conferencing, and, perhaps for Wesley most of all, its particular missionary zeal for to share the love of God experienced in their lives with others.

For United Methodists, the “... church does not exist for its own sake. As an expression of God’s activity in the world, it is sent out to share the apostolic faith with others and to be there for the good of others.” (Sent in Love, ¶20). Affirming the early creeds (e.g. “The Apostle’s Creed” and “The Nicene Creed”), we believe the church is a community called and empowered by the Triune God with a mission and purpose; personal and social transformation, human fulfillment and care for creation, soul work and social change, bearing witness and building a newer world.

Early in our Book of Discipline, we find this now familiar statement: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (¶120). On the following page we find a longer description of the process for fulfilling this mission: *We make disciples as we: (1) proclaim the gospel, see, welcome and gather persons into the Body of Christ; (2) lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ; (3) nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing; (4) send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and (5) continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.* (¶122)

Where does all this happen? “The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs” (The Book of Discipline, ¶201).

If the local church is the most significant arena for disciple-making, what is the purpose of the annual conference in United Methodism? “The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God” (¶601). While recognizing the centrality of local churches for the mission of the church, we simultaneously affirm “the annual conference is the basic body in the church” (¶133). A distinguishing feature of United Methodism is that we are a connectional people. “Connectionalism in the United Methodist tradition is multi-leveled, global in scope, and local in thrust. Our connectionalism is not merely a linking of one charge conference to another. It is rather a vital web of interactive relationships.” (¶132)

While local churches are the most significant arena for disciple-making, the annual conference starts local churches and has the authority to determine when they are no longer serving the purpose for which they were formed (¶2549); the annual conference can uniquely hold local churches accountable for their ministry while also connecting them together in ways that enhance the transformative ministries of the church; the annual conference has a responsibility to encourage the vitality of each of its local churches; and the annual conference is responsible for evaluating those who will be its clergy, assigning those clergy to their places of service, and holding clergy accountable for their ministry.

Current Missional & Connectional Challenges

Statements about the mission of the church, connectionalism, and the role of local churches and annual conferences need to be placed in the context of missional and connectional challenges facing Michigan United Methodism in 2020. We must clearly understand these challenges and resolve to respond to them if we are to determine how to live out our mission, and how best the annual conference can equip and connect local churches for the transformative disciple-making ministry of the church.

Missional challenges include: (1) the coronavirus pandemic; (2) the current nation-wide movements confronting systemic racism; and (3) declining religious participation in the United States as the number of those claiming no religious affiliation is the fastest growing religious category in our country.

Connectional challenges include: (1) Michigan Conference's financial situation; (2) organizational models that fail to account for newer possibilities and incorporate contemporary technologies; and (3) likely possibility of denominational restructuring and split.

Missional Challenge #1: Coronavirus Pandemic

In December of 2019, an epidemic broke out in Wuhan, China of a new coronavirus that had never previously been seen in humans. On January 21, 2020 the CDC confirmed the first US case, while scientists in China confirmed that the case could spread from human to human. By February 2020, the World Health Organization had issued a global health emergency and assigned the viral disease a name (COVID-19). Only one month later, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and, on March 13, 2020, the US went into a travel lockdown. Since then, states across the US have imposed their own internal states of emergency with varying limitations on physical gatherings, intra- and interstate travel, commerce, wearing of masks, and other considerations, all with the intent to control the spread of the virus. Guidance to faith communities has been issued by local, state, and federal authorities, as well as denominational leaders; this guidance has largely only been advisory and not mandated by law.

COVID-19 is primarily spread by respiratory droplets. When individuals infected with the virus cough or sneeze, the droplets can become airborne. Singing has been shown to have the same effect, and in several cases around the country, attendance at worship gatherings and choir rehearsals where asymptomatic infected individuals were present has caused fatal outbreaks to spread both within local churches and beyond to their communities. Because of their inherent nature to gather people together and praise God through song and worship, churches represent a high risk for disease spread.

Faith communities have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways. Many have transitioned their worship and discipleship activities online. Others have adopted a hybrid approach of gathering leaders to film worship and teaching and disseminating this across social media. Still others

gather in person, requiring masks on all attendees and refraining from singing. Very few gather as they were before the pandemic broke out.

Until an effective, safe, and universally available vaccine is available, the COVID-19 pandemic will not be eliminated. Measures like mask wearing, physical distancing, and avoiding large social gatherings can prevent the spread of COVID-19 and facilitate control of the pandemic. Another promising control measure is the use of rapid tests. Rapid tests are nasal cavity swabs, blood pricks, and/or saliva (spit) tests that can produce results in less than 15 minutes and that are highly sensitive (at least 95% confident that a 'positive' test result is accurate) and highly specific (at least 95% confident that a 'negative' test result is accurate). Rapid tests can identify infected individuals who show no signs or symptoms of COVID-19 but could still transmit it to those around them.

Churches and faith communities have entered a 'new normal.' While corporate worship, fellowship, and 'being the church' may never go back to how it was before March 13, 2020, the simultaneous use of several control measures may be effective at allowing for the resumption of in-person worship and other gatherings. How and whether these control measures are made available, cost-effective, and regularly monitored and enforced will all inform how effectively COVID-19 is controlled and, eventually, eliminated. Local churches that take seriously Christ's command to love their neighbor as they love themselves are embarking on new approaches to 'be the church' without spreading this deadly disease.

Missional Challenge #2: Confronting Systemic Racism

In response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd the summer of 2020 erupted with protests calling for justice, an end to anti-Black racism, a reckoning with the history of white supremacy in the USA, and a radical rethinking of policing and the criminal justice system. In many places, including Detroit, daily protests have continued uninterrupted for over three months. Protestors, many of them young, have marched, chanted, danced in the streets, and, at times, endured tear gas, physical attacks and arrest. The persistence of the protesters is a powerful testimony to the centuries of anger and pain born by Black Americans who have struggled for the abolition of slavery and the end of segregation and Jim Crow, but, in the wake of police violence and mass incarceration, are still faced with the tragically enduring question: do Black lives matter?

In Detroit and other cities across Michigan and the nation, activists from indigenous, migrant, and queer and transgender communities, women-led organizations, and unions have joined with the Black Lives Matter movement, witnessing to the intersecting and shared systems of oppression affecting the wellbeing of their communities, and preventing the incarnation of the Beloved Community.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church define racism as: "the combination of the power to dominate by one race over other races and a value system that assumes that the dominant race is innately superior to the others." It names racism as a sin which "plagues and hinders our relationship with Jesus Christ, inasmuch as it is antithetical to the gospel itself" (The Book of Discipline, ¶1201).

The church is not immune to racism. Racism is a discipleship issue. Insofar as the United Methodist Church has adopted and still uses the strategies and tactics of white supremacy, it has compromised the gospel and fallen short of Jesus's call to faithful discipleship. The United Methodist Church, as a white dominant institution, segregated Black people. It sought to assimilate indigenous Latinx and Asian people into white culture. It excluded women and LGBTQIA plus people from leadership and full membership. While contemporary United Methodism has embraced the rhetoric of diversity and representation, white male heterosexual experience continues to dominate in its worship, its faith formation, its institutional structures, its distribution of resources, and its missional and evangelical outreach.

For people of color and other marginalized people, especially those outside the church, the questions remain: Is United Methodism just another religion captive to racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, nationalism? Does it have a life-giving word for me and my community?

In his powerful book, now over fifty years old, the African-American writer James Baldwin penned these words to his nephew about white people: "You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.... And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means, that we, with love, will force our brothers [and sisters] to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it." (The Fire Next Time, 22, 23)

The United Methodist Church, if it is to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, must be able to affirm that it has a life giving word for each and every person and public proclaim and enact its repentance from oppressive values and practices and conversion to gospel values and Christian discipleship. This sacred task will take all of its members engaging in acts of courage and love.

Missional Challenge #3: Rise of the Religiously Unaffiliated

Recent data collected by the Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life in their 2014 "Religious Landscape Study" now estimates that 22.8% of people in the United States claim no religious affiliation. This group of people, commonly referred to as "nones," is the fastest growing religious demographic in the USA.

These nation-wide statistics hold true for Michigan. The Pew Research Center reports that 24% of adults in Michigan identify as religiously unaffiliated, commonly referred to as the "nones." A few of these "nones" (3% of adults) are atheists, a few (3% of adults) are agnostic, 17% of religiously unaffiliated adults identify as nothing in particular. The data shows that these numbers are stable across race, gender, socio-economic, and education level. When compared across age groups, younger adults were more likely to religiously unaffiliated; 37% of people ages 18-29 are among the "nones."

Nancy Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University, argues that greater numbers of religiously unaffiliated are related to three demographic trends are challenging inherited forms of congregational life based on geographic stability, households of heterosexual married couples with children, and in-person community building:

(1) greater geographic and job mobility among young adults – the US Census tells us that every five years 15% of the nation’s population is moving. Roughly a third of 18-35 year olds move in a five year period and 66% of 21-29 year olds will be in their current job less than two years.

(2) households no longer fit the “church mold” – heterosexual, married couples with children are the most likely demographic to attend church. In 1950’s this group constituted 50% of all USA households, today only 21%.

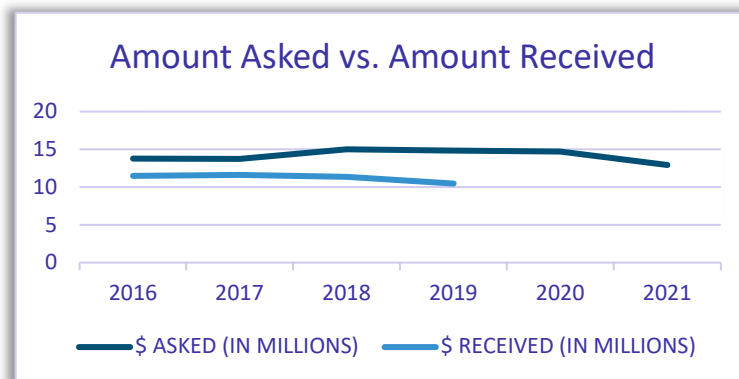
(3) community no longer depends on geography – more and more people are finding and forming communities online and across increased geographic distances.

(“Who Are The Nones”, Lecture at Boston College, February 25, 2016)

Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, Ministry Innovation Fellows at Harvard Divinity School and co-founders of the Sacred Design Lab, research the emerging way religiously unaffiliated Millennials are joining and forming organizations in search of belonging, becoming, and experiencing themselves as part of something more, something beyond themselves. Thurston and ter Kuile argue fitness communities like CrossFit and Soul Cycle, maker spaces, and alternative faith communities at the margins of institutional religion are filling the void that was once filled by traditional forms of congregational life.

Connectional Challenge #1: Michigan Conference’s Financial Situation

Over the last few years, the Council on Finance and Administration, working in conjunction with the Director of Connectional Ministries, has made efforts to reduce the conference common budget (i.e., the total ministry share asking excluding contributions for pensions and health insurance premiums) without significantly affecting core ministries and staffing. Yet, there continues to be a gap between the amount of ministry shares asked and the amount received.



We expect that economic turmoil accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic will have a deleterious effect on the finances of local churches and that this effect will in turn cause ministry share payments to

drop even further. Indeed, through the first seven months of 2020, the conference has only received \$5.14 million, compared with \$5.82 million received through the first seven months of 2019.

The drop-off is particularly pronounced in the Greater Detroit District. Through the first seven months of 2020, Greater Detroit churches have remitted only \$570,000, compared to \$800,000 paid through the first seven months of 2019.

In 2019, only 59% of the conference's churches paid their ministry shares in full (up slightly from the 58% that paid in full in 2018). Because the conference makes up for the ministry share payment shortfall by including an allowance for unpaid ministry shares in the budget, this has the practical effect of punishing churches that are committed to paying in full – something that has not gone unnoticed by churches that pay in full.

The CF&A is concerned that the decrease in ministry shares paid will continue to accelerate, due to continued economic and denominational instability, necessitating further budgetary reductions. While the reductions so far have had minimal substantive effect on the conference's ministries and staffing configuration, there are limited additional cuts that can be made without substantive changes.

Connectional Challenge #2: Newer Organizational Models and Contemporary Technology

The United Methodist Church was founded in 1968. It adopted organizational models that seemed appropriate at that time, forming general agencies and specifying significant committee structures for annual conferences and local churches. Over time, while making significant attempts to modify mandated committees and structures, the church remains captive to organizational thinking that is more hierarchical, bureaucratic and proscriptive than flat, nimble and responsive. Even as the Michigan Conference was born, and deeply desired to create a workable structure for its intended ministry, we were not able entirely to escape the ~~the~~ organizational thinking still deeply entrenched in our denomination. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the adoption of new technologies for meeting and connecting which require us to think in fresh ways about our conference structure, programming, staffing, meeting patterns and building needs.

Connectional Challenge #3: Denominational Restructuring and Split

The 2019 Special Session of General Conference met to address the decades long conflict over the role of LGBTQIA+ people in the life of The United Methodist Church. The General Conference adopted a series of resolutions commonly referred to as "The Traditional Plan." This action proved divisive across the connection, provoking strong responses ranging from support to criticism to outright rejection. The Michigan Conference took several official actions at its 2019 Annual Conference in response to passage of the "Traditional Plan." The Michigan Conference took a straw poll; passed an resolution entitled "Aspiration for The Michigan Annual Conference;" supported General Conference petitions to "Create Central Conference in North America;" the Clergy session affirmed a Board of Ordained Ministry statement affirming candidates without regard for sexual orientation or gender identity; and voted two openly LGBTQIA+ people into provisional membership. The Michigan Conference is not of

one mind on these decisions. In response to these actions, three congregations choose to disaffiliate at the 2020 Annual Conference and more Michigan United Methodists have publicly announced their intent to join the Wesley Covenant Association in creating a “traditional” Methodist denomination.

The 2020 General Conference was set to take up several plans for denominational restructuring and/or split. Prominent among these plans was the Connectional Table’s Regional Conference, which would create more regional governance in North America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, and the “Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation,” a mediated plan for division of denominational assets and creation of possibly three separate denominations. Bishop Bard, at the request of the Protocol leadership team, called a special session of the Michigan Conference in March 2020, which voted to forward the Protocol legislation to General Conference. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, General Conference was postponed until the fall of 2021.

While the future is still uncertain, The Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church in the coming years will most likely be smaller, after congregations and members depart to join other emerging Methodist denominations. It will also, most likely have greater consensus about the full inclusion of LBGTQIA+ people in the worship, governance, and ordained ministry of the church. The Michigan Conference may find itself relating to the General Conference in different ways as the denomination restructures to allow greater regional governance around the world.

Running with the Vision – Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century

The challenges facing the Michigan Conference can and do seem overwhelming. And yet these challenges do not have the last word. Jesus’ ministry was born from struggle; Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry was in response to Roman occupation, poverty, and the excesses and dysfunctions of religious leaders. Jesus passionately offered forgiveness, liberation, and healing to the least, the last, and the lost. Powerful movements in Christian history have responded to similar challenges; the desert fathers and mothers of the 4th century, the Franciscans of the 12th century, the Protestant Reformers of the 16th, the Civil Right leaders of the 20th century.

Early Methodism was forged in the midst of profound challenges as England and Western Europe transitioned from the late Middle Ages into the early modern period. It was a time of great social, political, economic, and religious upheaval. Methodism cultivated a passion for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God with those who were often left out and at the margins during this time of intense change.

Today we face no less a challenge. Social, political, economic, religious; our nation and the world finds itself and its own time of major change and upheaval. As Michigan United Methodists we, like the founding members of our tradition, must once again cultivate a passion to share the love of God with those who are most affected by the changes facing our society.

We recommend the following foci and recommendations for the Michigan Conference of The United Methodists Church to run with our vision and face the challenges of the 21st century:

Sharing God's Love with Others

Renewed Passion for Personal Faith Formation & Sharing

In his latter days Wesley worried that the people called Methodist would lose their spirit, their zeal, their fire, their passion to share the love of God with other people. Have Michigan United Methodist lost our zeal?

We call on Michigan United Methodists to deepen their life of discipleship and attend to the spiritual practices of our tradition to nurture a passion to share their experience of God's love. This is less of a programmatic mandate and more of a personal plea. A desire to renew within ourselves of the founding missional of zeal of our Methodist forbears for the 21st century.

It means we should be attentive to Michigan United Methodists who share the burning and aching heart of Jesus Christ. For Michigan United Methodists who have a dream of sharing God's forgiving seeking the liberating and healing love with your communities and with the world.

It also means that we must adopt a posture of listening and learning. Particularly to those who are absent from our churches. Those whom mainstream United Methodism on his so long ignored and excluded. Young people, people of color, and LBGQTQIA+ people.

FOCUS

- Invitation to renewal of personal spiritual practices to cultivate both the mind and heart of Christ.
- Nurture United Methodists who have the call, passion, vision, and skills for forming creative, innovative ministry with their neighbors in their local communities and around the world.
- Following the leading of the Holy Spirit, redouble our ministry and mission to all people as they seek community, personal and social change, and connection to deeper meaning and purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I.A. The Conference renews the expectation that every local church and ministry setting is a place where people are experiencing, growing in, and sharing God's love with each other and their community.

I.B. To facilitate this on-going renewal of ministry within the Michigan Conference, we will foster a culture of deep support and healthy accountability for local congregations and their pastoral leaders.

I.B.1. The Cabinet, in consultation with the CLC, will set holistic vibrancy benchmarks focused on sharing the faith with new people (e.g. worship attendance and baptisms/professions of faith), deepening discipleship (e.g. participation in small groups across all age groups), and connecting with the local community (e.g. participation in community based ministries and collaboration with community organizations). Local churches and ministry settings will regularly assess their effectiveness based on the identified benchmarks. Local churches and ministry settings unable to

meet these benchmarks will engage in a ministry assessment process (e.g. “Roads to Vibrancy,” paragraph 213 assessment) that provides a plan for greater effectiveness which could include the initiation of new ministries or new methods for ministry, the need for new pastoral leadership, being part of a vital merger or circuit ministry, or taking steps toward leaving a legacy. Such actions should be the rule, rather than the exception, for local churches that are not meeting benchmarks.

I.B.2. The Cabinet, in consultation with the CLC and the Board of Ordained Ministry, should set holistic vibrancy benchmarks for effective clergy leadership in local churches and ministry settings focused on sharing the faith with new people (e.g. worship attendance and baptisms/professions of faith), deepening discipleship (i.e. participation in small groups), connecting with the local community (e.g. participation in community based ministries and collaboration with community organizations), and engaging in life-long learning toward greater effectiveness. Clergy will be evaluated using these benchmarks through tools and processes developed by the Cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry (including the eight-year review process as per ¶350 and annual reviews). Clergy unable to meet these benchmarks for effectiveness will develop a plan for leadership growth that could include targeted continuing education, formal coaching, request for an appointment change, and, in some cases, vocational reassessment leading to a change in conference relationship. Such actions should be the rule, rather than the exception, for clergy who are not meeting benchmarks.

I.C. To assist churches, ministry settings, and clergy in meeting their vibrancy benchmarks, a conference-wide communication initiative will be developed to share the conference’s vibrancy goals, compile and share existing vibrancy resources, and celebrate churches and ministries that meet their benchmarks.

Building the Beloved Community

Intentional Equity and the Dismantling of Systemic Racism

In 2019, the Michigan Conference charted a path toward a more inclusive and just United Methodism, aspiring to the full inclusion of LBGTQIA+ people in the life of the conference and intentional ministry with LBGTQIA+ people across the state.

Further, the summer of 2020 renewed the centuries long struggle for racial justice in the USA. In response, Bishop Bard, the Conference's racial/ethnic committees and the Conference's Board of Justice collaborated to form an Anti-bias Anti-racism Working Group.

Regardless of denominational and national developments, the Michigan Conference will need to remain clear in its understanding of who it is and who it wants to be moving forward and provide stability and care for local churches and members in this time of intense change. Specifically, as the UMC faces likely restructuring and schism at the general church and global levels — the importance of the Annual Conference will be even more pronounced and essential to the connectional life of the church in the coming years missionally and connectionally.

FOCUS

- Empowering and supporting the work of the Bishop's Anti-bias Anti-racism (ABAR) Working Group – building common understanding of anti-bias and anti-racism as essential discipleship practices; review of conference policies and procedure; and creation of local church resources.
- Invest in resourcing the Michigan Conference's historically Asian-American, Black, Latinx, and Native American local churches.
- Commit to the actions of the 2019 Annual Conference related to the full participation of LBGTQIA+ people in the life of the Michigan Conference and invest in ministries with LBGTQIA+ communities in Michigan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

II.A. All conference clergy and lay conference/district staff will be required to attend a Conference-organized ABAR training at least once every four years and, will engage in ongoing ABAR work. The goal of this training is for clergy and staff to lead ABAR work in their settings. On-going ABAR trainings should be held for clergy and laity from local churches/ministry settings with the goal of those leaders engaging ABAR work in their settings. This recommendation should be fully funded.

NOTE: The 2021 Annual Conference adopted Resolution #2021-12, "Anti-Bias Anti-Racism Training for Active Clergy, Conference & District Staff."

II.B. The Conference should focus its resources on the creation of new ministries and faith communities with and led by members of communities historically marginalized by society and The United Methodist Church.

II.C. All conference connectional ministries, policies, and procedures should be assessed, in part, by their unique commitments to living in to the vision of this recommendation, including full participation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the life of the Conference and as developed by the Conference's on-going ABAR work.

NOTE: The 2021 Annual Conference adopted Resolution #2021-11, "Training and Support for Cross Racial/Cross Cultural Appointments," as a response to this recommendation.

II.D. The conference's historically Asian-American, Black, Latinx, and Native American local churches showing fruit in baptisms and professions of faith should receive priority funding with respect to conference resources and equitable compensation.

II.E. The director of connectional ministries should work with relevant professional organizations to ensure that ABAR resources, consultation, and coaching are available for local churches and ministry settings, even if this work is not "housed" within the Annual Conference

Development of Leaders

Equipped to Lead the Conference in its New Priorities

In 2015 and 2016, as the Michigan Annual Conference was forming, the Design Team for the new annual conference developed a vision for ministry—and the picture that began to emerge was that of a three-legged stool: “Christ-centered” being the seat of everything we do, and the three legs being “bold and effective leaders, vibrant congregations, and engaging ministry and mission.” All three “legs” were seen as equally necessary for the transformational work our conference is called to do.

Responding to the complex and ever-changing realities of 2020’s global pandemic, economic crisis, acknowledgement of systemic racism as well as the denomination’s uncertain future and declining membership, now elevates the work of leadership development as our main and crucial focus if we are to be relevant. Bold and effective leadership -both lay and clergy- facilitates, equips and nurtures vibrant congregations, for healthy and impactful (transformational?) ministries and mission. Rather than leadership development being just one leg of a three-legged stool, it must now become our primary focus at the conference level, so that our collective ministries statewide might light a path for the living of these days.

FOCUS

- Lay and clergy leadership development with context specific content, learning communities/cohorts, one-to-one mentoring and coaching, and intentional spiritual formation to form leaders who can respond and innovate through the challenges facing the Michigan Conference, especially in online and anti-bias, anti-racist approaches to ministry.
- Incubation of leaders with the call, vision, and skills to form new ministries and faith communities, including through emerging models of shared vocationality, technology, and non-traditional appointments.
- Assessment of current Conference programs to determine alignment with these priorities, which programs can only be done by the Annual Conference, and which programs have reached the end of their life cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

III.A. Developing leaders, as described above and through life-long and relational models, should be the primary focus of Conference ministries and staffing.

III.B. All conference-supported ministries and programs should be evaluated through the lens of these four foci and recommendations, with a special focus on developing leaders, for continued relevance and effectiveness. Those connectional ministries that cannot demonstrate fruitfulness in this manner should be ended, with their resources redirected to ministry efforts that are in line with these four foci and recommendations.

III.C. A new Conference staff structure aligned with these four foci and recommendations, with special focus on leadership development, should be implemented by July, 1 2022 with the following parameters: Four directors should report to the Bishop: Chief Financial Officer (who also reports to the Council of Finance & Administration); director of benefits and human resources; director of communications; and director of connectional ministries. Staff should be hired to support the Bishop, the director of benefits and human resources, director of communications, and Chief Financial Officer. Reporting to the director of connectional ministries, staff should be hired to achieve the programmatic recommendations of this strategic plan and employ staff models of shared vocationality, non-traditional appointments, and partnership with local churches.

NOTE: The Conference Leadership Team (CLC) formed a Staff Restructuring Committee, consisting of Bishop Bard, Brad Bartelmay, Paul Perez, and Ellen Zienert, to address this recommendation and bring a proposal, guided by this recommendation, for consideration by the CLC in Fall 2021.

Financial Sustainability

Through the Redirection of Financial Resources

The need for a financial sustainability in the face of declining membership and declining financial resources is clear. What must be remembered is that financial sustainability is not an end in itself, but a means to fulfilling the church's mission. A financial reset for the Michigan Conference and for its local churches will mean freeing Michigan United Methodists to face the challenges of the 21st century with boldness and creativity.

FOCUS

- A new approach to ministry share calculation and promotion.
- New models of conference staffing that include shared positions with Districts or local churches and contract or short-term, project-based positions.
- Assessment of physical office space needs for Conference and District office given the increasing shift to remote work.
- Assessment of declining local churches to determine how these local churches might gift their assets and resources to new ministries and faith communities that are able to better respond to challenges facing the conference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IV.A. A financial reconciliation process should be undertaken to consolidate designated funds into an endowment fund for Innovation in Ministry, to help the Annual Conference meet its mission and ministry objectives for achieving the recommendations of this strategy document.

IV.B. The director of connectional ministries, supported by appropriate staff and in consultation with CLC and CFA, should create a Conference fund development plan focused on new revenue sources (e.g. grants, pay-for-service, individual donations, etc.).

IV.C. The Council on Finance and Administration should develop a new formula for the assessment of ministry shares. This formula should take into account local churches' need to balance local and connectional ministry and the impact of historic inequalities, while making sure that all required connectional responsibilities are funded. Aligned with this formula, the director of communications and director of connectional ministries, under advisement from CF&A and CLC and in collaboration with appropriate staff, should create and promote an intentional local church stewardship campaign.

IV.D. The total number of districts should be reduced by at least two, by July 1, 2022. District offices should be eliminated (as their leases come up for renewal), and district superintendents and their support staff should work remotely, using local church facilities when face-to-face meetings are needed. A feasibility study examining the financial, legal and ministry dimensions of the change to remote offices should be completed in 2021.

NOTE: The 2021 Annual Conference adopted Resolution #2021-7, "Creation of a District Working Group," which will form a group with the task of creating a proposal for the reduction of at least one district. The proposal will be considered by the 2022 Annual Conference.

If our ministry is to remain relevant, it must be contextual and responsive to the immediate "glocal" context in which we find ourselves. ("Glocal" is a neologism that means being both global and local simultaneously.) Responding to the complex and ever-changing realities of 2020's global pandemic, economic crisis, acknowledgement of systemic racism as well as the denomination's uncertain future and declining membership, now elevates the importance of clear, streamlined ministry. If we are to be relevant, we must change to meet the challenges of our world today.

The foregoing recommendations should not be taken as the total of what is necessary for continued relevance and effectiveness in ministry. Rather, these recommendations should be viewed as the first step in a continuing process of refinement. Our conference has a long history of leaders who rose to the challenges of their age. May we rise to the challenges of our time.