

Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church
May 30, 2024
State of the Church Report
Bishop David Alan Bard

I have been asked to say just a few words about the state of the church, The United Methodist Church and the Michigan Conference. In some ways all that we do together at annual conference speaks to the state of the church. I certainly intended my sermon earlier to speak to the state of the church and where we are going. We will be singing, praying, working and learning together. We will hear some wonderful stories about how God in Christ continues to touch people's lives through our ministries.

But let me begin this report by referring back to the text from I John 3. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed."

We are God's people now, and as followers of Jesus Christ in the stream of the Christian Church of the people called Methodist, we are at an inflection point. In the words of one of our hymns, "This is a Day of New Beginnings." With this most recent General Conference, The United Methodist Church has become more spacious. We have made space for more persons to participate in the life and ministry of the church while staying committed to being a world-wide church. This is still tender space. There is pain among LGBTQ clergy and lay persons who have waited patiently for the creation of new space. There is worry among people who are concerned about changes made in the denomination.

In being a world-wide church we have created new space for decision-making. When the appropriate constitutional amendments are passed next year, no longer will delegates from outside the United States be forced to listen to questions and debate about

pension plans that only apply to United States clergy, or to changes in The Book of Discipline that are only applicable in The United States. A significant change in our understanding of the ministry of Deacons and in the practice of that ministry was approved at General Conference. There are many conferences in Africa that have no Deacons. It is not part of their structure.

We are at an inflection point and it is time for us to refocus our energy and attention on the ministry to which we are called in Jesus Christ, and in saying that I do not mean to say we have not been paying attention to this only that we can focus in new ways. It is time for us to reclaim our Wesleyan way of being followers of Jesus. It is time to renew our lives in Christ, renew ourselves in God's Spirit.

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Let's focus energy and attention on doing this, including on asking ourselves foundational questions. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century? What qualities of character, of heart, mind and life seem central to being such a disciple? How do we nurture those qualities of character, of heart, mind and life? We have our practices – worship, prayer, engagement with Scripture, living out the three simple rules. Are they doing what we need them to do in opening our hearts, minds and lives to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of God's Spirit? If not, what changes may be needed? How are we engaging with those who are not on this discipleship adventure with us? How do we offer Christ in ways that are genuinely loving and respectful?

Part of our Wesleyan way of discipleship is engaging our minds. We need to continue to do that both for our own growth and so that we can engage others outside the church more effectively. Since General Conference I have received letters and in one, from the son of a deceased clergy member of our conference, I was informed how disappointed his father would be in the direction of the church. This man shared that he had long ago left the UMC for the Wesleyan Church where his view of the Bible as inspired, inerrant and infallible was affirmed. Friends, those are not synonyms. Inspired, inerrant and infallible do not mean the same thing. As my friend Bishop Ken Carter in his book Unrelenting Grace, in discussing how we engage in Christian reflection as United Methodists, as Bishop Carter reminds us: “John Wesley’s own heritage saw scripture as a primary source but not an exclusive source; as an Anglican, Wesley taught *prima scriptura*, not *sola scriptura* (Scripture as first but not Scripture alone).

An essential part of the work of the church moving into the future is building beloved community. We follow a Jesus who, in Paul’s words “has broken down the dividing wall.” Creating beloved community, building relationships and community across differences – particularly across the differences that have marked and marred our history – is essential disciple work. We won’t always agree on the precise nature of the work to be done, and I expect that sometimes we will get too caught up in terminology, but the work is essential and will move forward.

I also need to say a word about financial stability. The General Conference cut the budget for our denomination significantly. As a conference we have continued to trim our budget to meet the needs of our churches. We need our congregations to meet us part way

here. Our payment rate on ministry shares is not where it needs to be, and I want to encourage each of you as a leader to know how your church is doing and to encourage connectational giving so we can be in ministry together in meaningful ways.

The United Methodist Church has become more spacious. We can agree to disagree about some things without there being judicial processed hanging over our heads. There is space for persons to exercise their conscience. I also recognize that for some this new space feels too foreign, that there may be some congregations who don't see a way forward in The United Methodist Church. There may also be some congregations that departed and want to re-enter. I am currently working with staff and our Conference Trustees on two policies: (1) Covenantal Closings which would allow for the departure through closure of a congregation and allow it to continue as a different church. Disaffiliation is no longer an option, but we will use very similar requirements. This policy is being developed now. (2) a policy for churches that left and may want to re-affiliate with the Michigan Conference.

Friends, we are at an inflection point. I am convinced that God still has work to do in us and through us. Jesus still wants to reach out through the Michigan Conference churches and ministries to touch the world with love and healing grace. It's time to refocus, to reclaim, to be renewed in God's Spirit.

“But friends, that's exactly who we are: children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows where we'll end up!” We might even say, “you ain't seen nothing yet!”