Delegates Get Down to Business at General Conference

Approximately 1,200 petitions were addressed by delegates during the 2012 session of General Conference in Tampa, Fla. The petitions covered a wide range of topics. Those that were passed will determine the policy and direction of the United Methodist Church into the future. Some of the major decisions included:

- Rejecting all proposed plans for restructuring, but approving to reduce the size of most boards
- Retaining the church’s position regarding homosexuality, and deciding not to adopt language that stated United Methodists are not of one mind on this issue
- Doing away with “guaranteed appointments” for clergy
- Rejecting a proposal for setting aside a bishop to serve as full-time president of the Council of Bishops
- Entering into full communion with a number of historically black pan-Methodist denominations
- Approving making the United Methodist Women an autonomous organization, rather than operating it under the church’s missions agency
- Creating a national ministry plan for Pacific Islanders
- Adopting a $603.1 million budget for the 2013–2016 period, which is lower than budgets of previous years
- Deciding not to divest from three companies whose products are used by the Israeli military in the occupied Palestinian territories

Reflections on General Conference 2012

By Bishop Linda Lee

It is always a blessing to be gathered as the Body of Christ at the site of our General Conference. To be in the midst of those from around the globe, chosen by their peers to represent their voices, their vision, their hopes and their need is reason for all of us to hold on to the hope that the risen Christ continues to be the foundation on which we stand together.

The theme of “Resurrection Revolution” wound its way through the fabric of the Conference—expressed in various ways—from the Council of Bishops message preached by Bishop Peter Weaver in worship services and through the voices of the delegates.

There were some high points where being of one accord prevailed even when we didn’t agree. There were also times of deep and profound disappointment when in the dance between “the system” and those marginalized in it/from it felt rejection again, ostracized again, minimized again, invisible again, in spite of many attempts to be heard. And we learned a few of the deep lessons of what it really means to be a global Church.

But our God is a God of surprises. For example, we decided that there would be no set aside bishop and eliminated what we call “guaranteed appointments.” We attempted to make forward movement as a denomination through revisions to our structure, but none were deemed acceptable. It became clear that something wasn’t working and when the Judicial Council not only ruled the basic plan unconstitutional, but unsalvageable, it seemed to take our collective breath away.

Yet, we are an Easter people. And in this season of Easter, the delegates rose to the occasion with the resiliency of a people who do indeed both know and trust in God; God who is bigger than our plans and who brings all things together for good; God who in Christ Jesus embodies the power to overcome—not only to survive but to thrive. So, we look forward to 2016 with hope and anticipation, because Jesus has not left us, but goes with us along the way, showing us the way to go. And that is the news from which we step into the future to be and make disciples who change the world.

Keep Informed and Stay Connected!

In addition to Reflections, our print newspaper, we also publish a weekly Enews email newsletter, which contains timely information about important UMC events, tips and resources, and more. The Bishop creates her monthly blog, which is available online in print and as a video. Visit www.youtube.com/wisconsinumc to view other videos from the Wisconsin Conference and the United Methodist Church.

Be sure to read and post comments on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/wisconsinumc. Additionally, visit our website at www.wisconsinumc.org for information, tools, and links to all of our communications vehicles. You can sign up to receive Enews or share your story or event by emailing mvirgin@wisconsinumc.org.

The United Methodist Reporter (USPS 954-500) is published weekly by UMR Communications, 1221 Profit Drive, Dallas, Texas 75247-3919. Periodicals postage paid at Dallas, Texas and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to The United Methodist Reporter. PO Box 660275, Dallas Texas 75266-0275.
A mission to keep the dialogue moving

BY SAM HODGES
Managing Editor

TAMPA, Fla. — Early at General Conference 2012, delegates got a tutorial in how to use their voting keyboards. It included a test run, with the instruction to vote for Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck.

And that posed a problem for Chali Kalaba, whose job was to help delegates avoid getting lost in translation.

“I wish Americans used fewer cultural references,” said Mr. Kalaba, a native of Zambia now living in Missouri. “I don’t know how to translate ‘Mickey Mouse’ to someone from Africa. They get hung up on the translation and don’t learn how to use their voting machines.”

Translators or “interpreters” — the preferred term for those working orally, as opposed to translating a text — are an increasingly conspicuous and important part of General Conference.

For the 2012 gathering, there was a team of 148 such persons.

That didn’t include technicians needed to maintain the booths where they worked and the headsets they used.

“Language services” has been a hefty line item in recent General Conference budgets, amounting to $1.2 million this time.

The Rev. Alan Morrison, business manager of General Conference, said the expense has grown as the church has grown outside the U.S., particularly in Africa. Delegates from non-U.S., central conferences now account for about 40 percent of the total.

And that has language consequences. Mr. Morrison noted, for example, that non-English speakers are now found on all 13 legislative committees.

“Swahili went from needing to be translated to being on all 13, “ he said.

One of the challenges has been to find interpreters familiar with Christian language, to help them break into subcommittees, he said.

The 2012 General Conference were alumni of Africa University, the UMC school in Zimbabwe.

Whatever their background, it’s helpful if interpreters know the lingo.

“We try to find folks who are familiar with Christian language . . . but also Methodist language.”

—Don Reasoner

The Poisoned Chalice

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The Historical Society of the United Methodist Church has announced its “Saddlebag Selection,” a recognition of the best book in United Methodist history, biography, theology or polity published during the preceding calendar year.

The award for a work published in 2011 was given to The Poisoned Chalice by Dr. Jennifer Woodruff Tait, published by the University of Alabama Press. The award was scheduled to be presented on May 15 at the Historical Society’s annual meeting in Gettysburg, Pa.

SoSA offers program for 2012 VBS classes

The Society of St. Andrew (SoSA) is offering a new Vacation Bible School mission program, entitled “It’s a Miracle!” Each day of VBS, students are introduced to one of Jesus’ miracles, from feeding the multitudes to cleansing the lepers. Included in the VBS packet: student sheets containing a short Scripture story, facts about hunger and the SoSA ministry, Go Green statistics, mission adventure opportunities and a pencil activity. Also available are song suggestions, craft ideas and snack ideas. All of the pages are reproducible, so VBS leaders may make as many copies as needed. There is no charge. Visit endhunger.org, or call (800) 333-4597.

—Compiled by Mary Jacobs
Soldiers’ Bibles provide a journey through history

By Chris Herlinger
Religion Service News

NEW YORK—The simplicity of the exhibit—copies of the Bible resting in glass cases—can be deceptive. But “Finding Comfort in Difficult Times: A Selection of Soldiers’ Bibles,” a Feb. 3-May 20 exhibition at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York City, is an American religious history come alive.

The exhibit showcases three dozen copies of Scriptures published for members of the U.S. Armed Forces from the Civil War onward, from leather-bound, 19th-century copies to contemporary Bibles clothed in camouflage.

But more than the Bibles themselves—on long-term loan from the American Bible Society—the exhibit tells the stories of the men and women who carried their struggles with hardship, and the place of religion in their lives.

Given the personal histories they contain, “every scripture in the Rare Bible Collection at MOBIA has its own unique story,” said the New York museum’s executive director, Ena Heller.

Efforts to supply Bibles to American troops began in the waning years of the American Revolution. Decades later, in 1817, the one-year-old American Bible Society began supplying Bibles to the crew of the frigate USS John Adams.

Eventually, the society became the most prominent, though not the sole, distributor of Bibles to members of the U.S. military. While most of the Bibles have been intended for Protestants, Catholic versions, as well as Jewish Scriptures, have also been provided.

An early challenge was distributing Bibles during the Civil War. The New York-based American Bible Society opted to supply Bibles to both sides of the conflict, but distributing them to Confederate troops proved daunting. Some were intercepted as contraband by Union forces.

During World War I, General John J. Pershing and President Woodrow Wilson penned messages that accompanied the exhibitors. Some were intercepted as camouflage.

During World War I, General John J. Pershing and President Woodrow Wilson penned messages that accompanied the exhibitors. Some were intercepted as contraband by Union forces.

The presentation page of a Bible published in 1860 is shown in an exhibit of U.S. soldiers’ Bibles at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York City.

PHOTO COURTESY MUSEUM OF BIBLICAL ART

By C. Michael Hawn
UMR Columnist

Frances Elizabeth Cox (1812-1897) devoted herself to the translation of hymns from the German language into English. In total, she published 56 hymns in Sacred Hymns from the German (1841, 2nd edition, 1864).

Though little is known about Cox’s life, her translations remain a testament to her accomplishments. Of the approximately 80 texts she translated, most appear in the second edition of Sacred Hymns. The Companion to the Psalter Hymnal tells us, “Her choice of hymns was often determined by her friend, Baron Bunsen, the Prussian ambassador to England.”

Cox translated the first eight stanzas of this hymn for Orby Shipley’s Lyra Eucharistica (1864). The original German hymn, “Sei Lob und Eh’ dem höchsten Gut” (“Let Praise and Honor be the Highest Good”), was written by Johann J. Schütz (1640-1690).

Schütz, a practicing civil and canon law, was influenced by Philipp Jakob Spener, the father of the Pietist movement in Germany. This German Lutheran movement of the 17th and 18th centuries emphasized, according to church historian James D. Nelson, a “heartfelt religious devotion, ethical purity, charitable activity, and pastoral theology rather than sacramental or dogmatic precision.” Pietism emerged in reaction to the formality of Lutheran orthodoxy.

Several hymn writers were influenced by this movement including Moravian Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, whose evangelical awakenings throughout Europe and in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries had a strong influence on John Wesley and Methodism.

Rather than the distant, rigid God of orthodox Lutheranism, Cox notes in stanza two that the “Lord is never far away.” The Rev. Carlton Young suggests that Cox’s translation “has skillfully maintained the hymn’s balance between the strong and powerful biblical metaphors for God and the warm pietistic [ones such as] ‘As with a mother’s tender hand’” (stanza two).

The joyful tone and the first-person singular perspective found in stanza three also indicate the Pietist perspective. The original stanza three was not included in the UM Hymnal:

What God’salmighty power hath made,
His gracious mercy kenspeaketh;
By morning gow or evening shade,
His watchful eye ne’er sleepeth;
Within the kingdom of his might,
All is just and all is right:
To God all praise and glory.

The Hymnal Revision Committee did not include this stanza “because of the perceived ambiguity if not contradiction in lines five and six between God’s powerful establishment of his kingdom on earth and its attributes of justice and righteousness.”

An early 20th-century American hymn expresses a related idea, but is not as ambiguous. Maltbie Babcock, a New York Presbyterian pastor, states the following in the third stanza of “This is My Father’s World” (1901): “This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seem oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

Cox’s translation of those critical lines five and six of the omitted third stanza may be derived from a very classicist 19th-century British monarch where the very structures of society were foreordained by God, and thus “all is just and all is right.” Within the Anglican Church, Calvinism was very influential and its fervent predestination would have also fueled such a view.

A 21st-century sensibility would see justice in terms of the needs of the hungry, the poor and the disadvantaged, and victims of racism, sexism and other issues—not in terms of predetermined societal structures. Thus, the words may be the same, but most likely the meaning of them is very different.

Dr. Hawn is professor of sacred music at Perkins School of Theology.
Wisconsin Delegates Share Some Insights about the General Conference Experience

- Dan Dick, 1st Clergy Delegate—General Conference is amazing. I wish everyone could experience the best of conference—without necessarily sitting through the tedious and trying parts. But it is glorious to work side-by-side with men and women from around the globe. Even though we may not all agree, we are all brothers and sisters bound together in the love of God. There is a sense of possibility here—not so much on the plenary floor, but in the relationships and community encounters.

- Steve Zekoff, 3rd Clergy Delegate—It is evident that there are differences in understandings of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ. The perspectives that delegates bring from the Jurisdictional and Central Annual Conferences result in struggles coming to common ground on some issues. It is a blessing to be enriched by what all bring to the experience, yet we need to recognize that the diversity within the General Conference means we need to work at being accepting of each other’s beliefs.

- Amanda Stein, 2nd Clergy Delegate—I think about my time in Guatemala and what I learned there—living among the indigenous people, and how those experiences shaped me. Some people have been asking what the Act of Repentance (AOR) is that we’ll be taking part of in Tampa. It is a time for us to remember, repent, and ask forgiveness for a shameful part of our Methodist heritage. On Nov. 29, 1864, Colonel John Chivington, a Methodist minister, led the attack on a Cheyenne and Arapahoe encampment along the banks of Sand Creek where at least 165 were killed.

- Steve Polster, 1st Clergy Reserve—A great highlight at this General Conference was the consecration of Bill and Gwen Gibson from Wisconsin as missionaries, along with several others deployed in mission and ministry worldwide. As exciting as this was, the General Conference also had moments of great disappointment and frustration. When given the opportunity to change our Social Principals, allowing us to acknowledge our differences of thought and interpretation of Scripture, and to affirm our love and care for all people, the General Conference sadly said no. I pray for the day when we as United Methodists will not only acknowledge that we have differences and can remain connected in Christ, but become as inclusive and welcoming of all people, regardless of sexual orientation, as I believe God calls us to be.

- Jen Southworth, Jurisdictional Delegate and MFSA Intern — This is my first General Conference. There’s a steep learning curve here, but it doesn’t take much to recognize the passion and love for God, Jesus, the UMC, each other, justice, peace, the Gospel, and so on, even when we can’t agree how that passion plays out in legislation. Connectionalism is physically visible at General Conference. So, despite the confusion, exhaustion and the frustrating decisions being made as a full Conference, so far the glimpses of hope and excitement have been weightier than the moments of darkness.

Conference Calendar

- May 31st–June 3rd
  - 2012 Wisconsin Annual Conference
  - Chula Vista Conference Center, Wisconsin Dells

- June 3rd
  - Peace with Justice Sunday Offering

- June 10th
  - Golden Cross Sunday Offering

- June 16th
  - Youth Lodge Opening Celebration
  - Lake Lucerne Camp & Retreat Center, Neshkoro

- June 21st–23rd
  - UMW Midwest Regional School of Christian Mission
  - Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa

- June 30th
  - Cultural Competency Training
  - Lake Lucerne Camp & Retreat Center, Neshkoro

- July 8th–12th
  - 2012 5-Day Academy for Spiritual Formation
  - Pine Lake Camp, Westfield

- July 18th–21st
  - 2012 North Central Jurisdictional Conference
  - John S. Knight Center, Akron, Ohio

- July 31st–August 4th
  - UMW Wisconsin School of Christian Mission
  - Westwood Convention Center, Wausau

- August 16th, 18th & September 8th, 15th
  - Think Greater Stewardship Workshops
  - Pine Lake Camp (8–16, 8–18)
  - TBD (9–8, 9–15)

- August 19th–21st
  - New Clergy Orientation
  - Pine Lake Camp, Westfield

For a more comprehensive list of events and training opportunities, visit our website www.wisconsinumc.org

Are You Ready to Think Greater?

We do good works, but what happens when we raise the bar to GREAT works? Think Greater! is a six-week stewardship emphasis for local churches that explores the awesome potential Wisconsin United Methodists have to make disciples and change the world. All congregations in the Wisconsin Conference are invited to take part during the fall of 2012. The Discipleship Leadership Council Resource Teams in conjunction with the Wisconsin Conference Communications Department will prepare and provide all necessary resources to conduct the campaign. Training sessions will be offered August 16th and 18th at Pine Lake Camp, and two additional training sessions will be held on September 8th and 15th at various locations across the state. The campaign materials will be available beginning at the summer stewardship retreat, August 16th–18th, at Pine Lake.
A Preview of Our Wisconsin Annual Conference Session

Clergy, laity, Conference staff, and guests will gather for the forty-third session of the Wisconsin Annual Conference May 31–June 3, 2012. This year, Annual Conference will take place in the Conference Center at the Chula Vista Resort in the Wisconsin Dells. The theme of Live, Give, Love...Beyond All Expectation! will be woven throughout the proceedings as attendees celebrate Wisconsin Conference UMC outreach ministries and partnerships, vote on important legislation, worship and have fellowship together, and determine the direction in which the Conference will move in the future. The following are some highlights of the 2012 session:

- **Workshops**
  Four optional workshops will be available on Thursday, May 31st, from 3:30–5 p.m. in the Chula Vista hotel:
  - *Annual Conference 101*, presented by the Board of Lay Ministry: This workshop is an overview of structure, voting, and resolutions, and provides answers to attendees’ questions about Annual Conference.
  - *Annual Conference Budgeting*, presented by Lisa King and Mark Geisthardt: This workshop explains the 2013 budget and the process used to develop it.
  - *Civil Discourse: Speaking the Truth in Love*, presented by Dan Dick: This workshop explores ways to improve communication, strengthen relationships, and learn healthier ways to disagree and engage in more productive conflict processes.
  - *Creative Worship*, presented by Grace Cajiuat and Bob Butler: This workshop will look at a variety of ways to experience the Scripture, sing the Psalms, and lift our voices in communion with our brothers and sisters in faith the world over.
  - *General Conference Video from United Methodist Communications*  
    A special video co-produced by United Methodist Communications and the Wisconsin Conference UMC Communications Department will premiere at Annual Conference. The video will provide a review of the 2012 General Conference, which took place April 24th–May 4th, when the top policymaking body of the worldwide United Methodist Church met to determine the denomination’s future direction. Look for special appearances by the Wisconsin Conference UMC’s own Bishop Linda Lee, Dan Dick, Amanda Stein, and John Lawson. Copies will be available by request after Annual Conference by contacting Michele Virnig, Communications Director, at 888-240-7328 ext. 269 or mvirnig@wisconsinumc.org.
  - *Bishop Linda Lee’s Ordination Service Sermon*
    Bishop Linda Lee will give a sermon entitled Greater Works at the Ordination service on Sunday, June 3rd, at 9:30 a.m. She will speak about the Scripture of John 14:12—“Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Her sermon will focus on how Jesus chose us to continue his works, and how the newly-ordained elders, deacons, and all children of God can transform the world, because God is always with us. The power of God’s love, of which there is no stronger power, empowers us to do great works. Greater Works, Bishop Linda Lee’s Ordination Service sermon, will be available via live stream during the Ordination Service. Go to our [www.wisconsinumc.org](http://www.wisconsinumc.org) website under Annual Conference to link to the live stream. For churches that want to use the Bishop’s sermon in their service on June 3rd, a downloadable version will also be available on the web page. Alternatively, you can get a free DVD by requesting one from Michele Virnig, Wisconsin Conference UMC Communications Director, at 888-240-7328 ext. 269 or mvirnig@wisconsinumc.org.
  - *Annual Conference Registration Page*
    A web page with important information and updates for the 2012 Annual Conference session is available! Visit [www.tinyurl.com/wac2012](http://www.tinyurl.com/wac2012) to view important information on child care, lodging and parking, Ingathering, mission, and much more.

Other highlights include: a presentation on Experiencing Abundant Community by Peter Block; celebrations of commissioning, retirement, and remembrance; Ingathering; a special mission project with Kids Against Hunger to pack meals that will be distributed to children around the world; and various youth events.

Please pray for and support those who are attending Annual Conference this year as they try to Live, Give, Love...Beyond All Expectation! now and into the future. If you are not attending Annual Conference, but would like to stay informed, you can view a live stream of the plenary and worship sessions by going to [www.wisconsinumc.org](http://www.wisconsinumc.org) under Annual Conference.
People often ask Duke Divinity Professor Lauren F. Winner how she can be so self-revealing in her books, which have chronicled the ups and downs of her faith life.

But talking about our lives with God—good and bad—shouldn’t seem so daring, she says. In Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis (HarperOne), she writes about the period following the breakup of her marriage and her mother’s death, during which she experienced doubt and despair.

Ordained as an Episcopal priest in December 2011, Ms. Winner spoke recently with Faith & Leadership.

In some ways your book is about failure—of your marriage and then your sense of God’s presence. What do you hope people will take from your story?

C.S. Lewis said, “We read to know we’re not alone.” Those of us who are readers find a lot of our companionship, sense of solidarity and not-aloneness through books and through the communion of saints that we can meet in books. For people who are hitting a wall in their spiritual life or who may feel very isolated, I hope that this book will provide a little companionship—ship at the wall.

If, in addition, there’s an insight here or there that someone underlines and thinks is really helpful, that’s great. But if it offers some company to people when they hit their spiritual wall, that would please me.

Do you feel that the act of writing the book was part of what moved you along spiritually?

There were some episodes or characteristics of what was for me a very spiritually difficult time that I understood more deeply through writing about them. We don’t talk especially well in the church about people’s moments of spiritual desolation, and maybe there are Christians who don’t have those moments, but I think most of us have them. It’s actually part of the architecture of the Christian life, not the odd exception.

The communities of which I have been a part are wonderful, nurturing, nourishing Christian communities, yet they do a better job talking about the beginnings of people’s spiritual lives. We have a long history in North American Christianity of narrating people’s conversions as though that’s the end of the matter, when really that’s the prelude to the matter. And sometimes in our communities we say in response to someone’s spiritual desolation, “It’s fine; it’s understandable; we’ve all been there;” but we expect it to get resolved in about six weeks. And if it doesn’t… the person must not be trying hard enough or something, or not doing the right kind of praying or something.

In some mainline communities, we may not talk very well about people’s encounters with God’s hiddenness because we don’t talk very well about people’s encounters with God, period. Pastors are not the only people who have responsibilities in that area, but I think that it might be part of a pastoral office to think about, “Is your community able to talk about people’s lives with God?” If the pastor is not attending to that, it’s probably not going to happen by accident.

What do you mean by that?

I’m an Episcopalian. It is very characteristic of many Episcopal churches that, for whatever reason, people are not at all that comfortable talking about Jesus out in the world. We might say, “I need to grow in comfort in publicly naming Jesus as part of my life.” How much of that are we doing even in our own church community? It’s not only at my job at the bank I’m not talking about Jesus. That’s something that we can keep deepening.

In some ways, your life is integrated to allow you to do that—maybe in a way that a bank teller doesn’t feel comfortable.

Right. But if the bank teller has a Bible study or has a friend over from church, can he or she talk even then about what is actually going on in that person’s spiritual life? If not, might we want to cultivate that practice more? I am interested in the question of how churches can become places where people can speak about all of the corners and crevices of their spiritual lives.

I also sometimes find it a little alarming when people ask me, “What does it feel like to be so self-revealing? Now everyone who’s read this book knows all about your anxiety attacks and your intense loneliness.” Now everyone wants to write a memoir or write a book about their anxiety. But should it seem shockingly self-disclosing to talk about how lonely you sometimes feel? Not that the church needs to become an ongoing therapy session, but I do yearn for the church to be a place where people are able and encouraged and taught to talk about their relationship with God. To the extent that churches do not encourage, teach and welcome people to do that, we are not fully living into our calling as the church.

You were recently ordained. How has that affirmed your sense of vocation?

I was in the ordination process for about a decade, so I stretched it out longer than people usually do. I believe that there are some people who are called in a very specific way to ordination. It is what God wants them to do. The sense I kept getting from God was, “If you want to be ordained, that’s great. I’ll roll with that. If you don’t, that’s fine, too. We can do something else together in no small world for the kingdom.” Yet I feel very much like the office of the priesthood is the office I am meant to be occupying in the church.

I recently read a wonderful formulation from the Orthodox Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov, who wrote that the priesthood of the faithful is devoted to consecrating the world for God, making the world holy. And the priesthood of clergy is devoted to explicating that consecration through and in the sacraments, which makes an enormous amount of sense to me.

What are the spiritual practices that sustain your faith?

Writing has long been a spiritual practice in my life. I feel like the way that I understand and apprehend anything, really, is through writing about it. I think this is related to my sense of being called to the public. Many of my most vital experiences come when I have somehow been exploring Scripture on the page, often for a sermon. So that’s an important piece of my spiritual practice.

Prayer has always been a backbone of my spiritual life, corporate prayer and often—though not always—individual prayer. For the last couple of years, a major piece of my prayer life has been a method of prayer developed by Sybil Macbeth in a book called “Praying in Color,” which is essentially about praying via doodling. This sounds absurd, but doodling prayer has been the only mode of praying I have experienced where an hour will go by and I will think five minutes have elapsed. This particular mode of praying works for me because, A, I have a talent, and sometimes there’s no voice in my head—what I’m thinking in my mind—so I don’t have the capacity to ever notice if I were not praying. That’s the behavior that holds me to the Christian story and allows me to sometimes notice when God shows up. I don’t think that I would have the capacity to ever notice if I were not moored in the patterns and habits of communal life.

This interview earlier appeared on Duke Divinity School’s Faith & Leadership website (www.faithandleadership.com). Reprinted with permission.

‘... Should it seem shockingly self-disclosing to talk about how lonely you sometimes feel?’

Lauren F. Winner, author of Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis.
Commissioning ceremony sends out 40 mission staff

By Elliott Wright
United Methodist News Service

TAMPA, Fla.—Voices of the worldwide Methodist family came together in a Florida church on Sunday, April 29, to bless and celebrate 40 people being sent into the world as missionaries, deaconesses and home missioners to witness to God’s love, mercy and justice.

Representatives from Methodist churches in more than two dozen countries were present for the commissioning of 23 new missionaries and 17 deaconesses and home missioners of the United Methodist Church. The missionaries were from 11 countries.

“Commissioning,” according to an opening reading, “is a holy act in which the church, as sign and symbol of the Missionary God, sends forth people into the world.”

The service took place at Palma Ceia United Methodist Church during the 2012 meeting of the United Methodist General Conference, the law-making body of the church, which meets every four years to conduct church business.

Palma Ceia is a 66-year-old, 1,500-member church with strong mission outreach.

More than 500 persons attended, overflowing the sanctuary into a fellowship hall where a video link was set up. The Rev. Kevin M. James Sr., the church’s pastor and host, said it was “wonderful to have the global church at Palma Ceia.” People in 22 countries tuned in to the live stream on the Internet.

Enthusiastic welcome

Later in the evening of April 29, the newly commissioned mission personnel were enthusiastically welcomed by the General Conference at the Tampa Convention Center.

Video and projected still photos underscored what Thomas Kemper, top executive of denomination’s General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), termed “missionaries from everywhere to everywhere.”

Bishop Hope Morgan Ward of Mississippi, vice president of the board, led the conference delegates and friends in blessing the new missionaries, deaconesses and home missioners.

Seventeen newly commissioned global missionaries will go to places as diverse as Senegal, Costa Rica, Argentina, Russia, Northern Ireland and Tanzania. There are some 220 global missionaries serving through the GBGM.

Deaconesses and home missioners, who are men, serve ministries of justice in the United States. Two people were commissioned as church and community workers, missionaries in economically marginalized U.S. communities. Four are new missionaries through the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministries.

‘Led by the Spirit’

At Palma Ceia, in a service both solemn and joyful, the new mission personnel confirmed a call to a lifetime of mission, “being led by the Spirit of God to engage in this work.” They promised to pray, read the Bible, increase their skills and do their work “in sincerity and love,” witnessing to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough of West Ohio, president of the mission agency, led the service of commissioning. At the start of the service, Mr. Kemper and Harriett Jane Olson, top executive of United Methodist Women, read a litany that attested to the importance of missionaries and deaconesses in Scripture and the Methodist tradition.

The litany expressed trust “that these mission servants, being sent forth in the power of the Holy Spirit and the accompanying grace of God, will fulfill the sacred tasks entrusted to them.”

Mr. Wright is a longtime reporter and a former communications staff member with the General Board of Global Ministries.

United Methodist Men salute Scout milestone, give two awards at GC

By Rich Peck
United Methodist News Service

TAMPA, Fla.—The 2012 General Conference marked the 100th birthday of the Girl Scouts, one of the youth-serving organizations supported by the General Commission on United Methodist Men (GCUMM).

It was appropriate for the birthday celebration to be in Tampa because one of the first troops was organized in this city. In 1913, Jessie Anne Link and a group of 26 girls formed a troop at Hyde Park United Methodist Church in Tampa.

Since those early days, more than 50 million girls have been part of a Girl Scout troop and there are troops in more than 92 countries.

The denomination is the largest sponsor of Girl Scouts with more than 127,000 girls meeting in 27,000 troops at United Methodist churches.

The UMC is also the second largest charter organization of Boy Scouts with more than 370,000 scouts meeting in United Methodist churches.

The commission frequently honors youth who demonstrate the attributes of the Good Samaritan. GCUMM top staff executive Gil Hanke and Larry Coppock, the commission’s staff executive for scouting, presented two awards.

Justin Jackson, then 17, was driving his mother home from church when a van ran a stop sign and slammed into their vehicle. Although Justin wasn’t hurt, his mother injured her wrist. As Justin went to help her, he noticed flames rising from under the hood of the van. Justin ran to the van and dragged the woman driver out just before flames engulfed the vehicle.

Mr. Hanke presented a Good Samaritan Award to Mr. Jackson, an Eagle Scout and a member of a troop chartered to First United Methodist Church of Seffner, Fla.

Mr. Coppock presented the award to Ryan Wilson, who is also an Eagle Scout, a rank achieved by only 5 percent of Scouts.

Mr. Wilson, 29, has Down syndrome. Because of a serious heart condition, doctors told his parents he would not live past the age of 10 and probably never would be able to speak.

They were wrong.

To become an Eagle Scout, a candidate must earn 21 merit badges; Mr. Wilson earned 28. He fired an arrow to pop a balloon 100 feet away for his archery badge and he hooked an 8-foot hammerhead shark while earning his fishing badge. For his Eagle project, he built outdoor bleachers for Faith United Methodist Church in Hudson, Fla.

The Rev. Peck, a retired clergy member of the New York Conference, is a freelance writer in Nashville, Tenn.
Wisconsin Conference Town Hall Meetings Focused on Building Beloved Community

More than 250 clergy and laity attended Town Hall Meetings that were held this past March in Dodgeville, Eau Claire, Wauwatosa and Appleton. The evening joint Laity and Clergy sessions were led by Bishop Linda Lee and Dan Dick, the Director of Connectional Ministries for the Conference. The break-out groups discussed various aspects of “beloved community.”

Across the state, the themes were similar. When asked to describe “beloved community,” the answers ranged from a feeling of welcome, safety, acceptance, family, shared vision, and mutual respect to having fun and nurturing others who are different. Of course, there was a sense that in beloved community, we are all loved by God so that enables us to love others. When asked to discuss how we build beloved community, the groups talked about working together, listening to each other, maintaining honesty and integrity, giving of self and being compassionate, developing healthy relationships, accepting change, and being tolerant and inclusive. The groups also anticipated similar challenges in trying to create beloved community, including such things as competition for time, resources and interests, as well as resistance to change, lack of trust, pride and arrogance.

Bishop Lee talked about her personal experience growing up in a diverse beloved community where she felt safe. As she grew up, she found that it wasn’t like that everywhere. However, she was thankful to become part of the United Methodist Church, a place where people are known to be welcoming and create loving communities. She exclaimed that “we are one body, and God holds us together even when we try to tear it apart.”

Clergy gathered earlier in the day for a question and answer session with Bishop Lee. Topics included local church and Conference finance and stewardship issues and concerns, the recent appointment of a new district superintendent, the church trial held last year (and the request by the Trial Court for a report to the Clergy Session), and other issues and concerns. Suggested books for further reading on the topics discussed, include:

- Becoming God’s Beloved in the Company of Friends by Mary Margaret Pandan
- Inclusion, Making Room for Grace by Eric Law
- Community, The Structure of Belonging by Peter Block
- The Abundant Community, Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods by John McKnight and Peter Block

It was also announced that the author Peter Block will be a guest speaker at the upcoming Wisconsin Annual Conference May 31st–June 3rd.

Big Changes Align Conference Staffing with Missional Priorities

By Dan R. Dick

Two new staff coordinators join the Wisconsin Conference staff as two coordinators transition into new roles. Don Greer is the new Coordinator of Circuit Ministries and Grace Cajiat is the Coordinator of Multicultural Ministries. These positions are radical shifts from our Missions Coordinator (Deborah Thompson, who leaves to become District Superintendent of the Metro North and South districts) and our Congregation and Circuit Development Coordinator (Ric Olson, who moves to St. Luke’s UMC in Sheboygan as pastor). Why the changes?

It is time to lead into the future instead of managing the present. We have very capable elected Conference leadership on our Boards of Congregational Development and Global Ministries. We have a Mission Secretary, Mission Motivation group, and volunteers for Disaster Response and a Hunger Task Force. Having redundant paid staff positions in these key areas is not providing the needed value and leadership to move us into the future. Two areas have been identified as critical needs to help us become more effective: excellence in circuit ministries and meaningful ministry with multicultural, bi-cultural and cross-cultural groups. Combining these needs with the Conference priorities to develop strong collaborative leadership between clergy and laity; nurture and sustain healthy, positive relationships within, between and beyond our local congregations; and cultivate productive and healthy congregational environments for spiritual growth and development means we need to be serious about developing strategies and resources that help us reach our goals.

The Ministry and Outreach staff of the Wisconsin Conference will work with our boards and agencies to improve and strengthen the ministries of the whole state—at all levels, but particularly in the local church. We are seeing dramatic changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of our communities, but many church leaders lack the skills and cultural competencies to help their congregations make smooth and meaningful transitions. We say we want to grow, but we are less and less able to reach the people moving into our neighborhoods—especially when these people are different.

Wisconsin Conference UMC will be launching a new website within the coming months. The new, more user-friendly website will provide an attractive, modern, and cohesive image for the Conference; as well as more resources and content. Elements from the old website that you’re used to seeing, like Conference news, pages for districts, boards, and agencies, and the online version of Reflections, will still be around, and will be joined by many new features! Look for: personalized content for clergy, laity, visitors, and people looking for a church; more interactive editing features; an efficient, organized, and easy to navigate layout; an updated Conference Calendar, and much, much more!
Walking on a path of peace and prayer

By Mary Jacobs

Walking on a path of peace and prayer

From the window near her office at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Houston, Donna Adair watches people as they walk: children as young as 3, schoolchildren, and elderly folks; church members, spiritual seekers, and passersby.

And they are all walking in circles—pacing and praying their way through the intricate path of the permanent labyrinth on the church’s front lawn, built by a premier labyrinth builder and consecrated on March 17.

The labyrinth is circular walkway designed for meditation and prayer. It’s part of a centuries-old Christian tradition, with links to ancient, pre-Christian history. At St. Paul’s, the labyrinth has become a space for spiritual nourishment and outreach to the community at large.

But, ultimately, church leaders say, the labyrinth is a place for a journey of depth and mystery. “You suspend your rational thinking, and you just walk, and mystery takes over,” said the Rev. Gail Williford, St. Paul’s minister for spiritual formation and discipleship.

Into the labyrinth

Ms. Williford had dreamed of a labyrinth for St. Paul’s since the 1990s, when she attended a workshop led by the Rev. Lauren Artress, then canon of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. (Ms. Artress, author of Walking a Sacred Path, is creator of the Labyrinth Project and a key figure in the resurgence in interest in labyrinths in the U.S. in recent years.)

The first time she walked the outdoor labyrinth at Grace, Ms. Williford says, she had a profound experience. Despite the noise and traffic nearby, she felt a sense of peace—and then, a pain in her knee—representing, she believed, the grief she had felt at the bedside of a friend who was dying. “I was totally dumbstruck,” she said. “Here I was, in the middle of a summer day on Nob Hill, and I was processing grief.”

Ms. Williford returned from the workshop determined to bring a labyrinth to St. Paul’s, a Gothic-style church located in a museum district in Houston. In 2000, the church acquired a canvas labyrinth, but she still hoped for a permanent, paved installation.

“I never thought it would happen in my lifetime,” she said.

Then an anonymous donor stepped forward with a large gift. Soon the church had enough special donations to cover the $90,000 to commission one of the nation’s top labyrinth builders, Marty Kermeen of Yorkville, Ill.-based Labyrinth in Stone.

“He really is an artist … an amazing craftsman in stone,” said Ms. Williford.

Mr. Kermeen has built more than 60 labyrinths in the past 11 years, at

PHOTO BY CHRIS NEWMAN/ECLECTIC PRODUCTIONS

The labyrinth at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Houston was lit by votive candles for a Taizé service during Advent 2011.
Church shootings claim three lives

Three persons died in the May 3 shootings at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Ellicott City, Md., The Rev. Mary-Marguerite Kohm, 62, died May 5 at a Baltimore hospital, and Brenda Brewington, the parish’s administrative assistant, was pronounced dead at the scene. The presumed assailant, a homeless man named Douglas Franklin Jones, was found dead near the church from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

UM Senator ousted in GOP primary

The May 8 Republican primary defeat of Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana will reduce by one the number of United Methodists in Congress. Mr. Lugar, 80 years old and first elected to the Senate in 1976, is a long-time member of St. Luke’s UMC in Indianapolis. He lost to Indiana state treasurier Richard Mourdock, who had Tea Party backing.

Sikh group devises instant complaint app

A new mobile phone application is meant to help those who feel they’ve been profiled by airport security file a complaint directly from their cell phones. The Sikh Coalition, based in New York, started the app project after an increase in complaints alleging unfair treatment at U.S. airports, Religion News Service reported. The “FlyRights” app is meant to help other groups as well, organizers said.

Religious hospitals see care conflicts

More than one half of ob-gyn doctors at Catholic hospitals report conflict with hospital officials over patient care policies, due to religious tenets, a new study shows. Taking all religiously-affiliated hospitals, about a third of ob-gyn specialists who watched via live-streaming, de- cided to bestiality. Even the planned “holy conversation” about sexuality proved fractious, with delegate Mark Miller asserting that some gays and lesbians were bullied in the group discussions.

General Conference got some of its toughest reviews from pastors of churches that are welcoming and affirming to gay people. The Rev. Sandy Brown, pastor of First UMC in Seattle, wrote that the decision not to change the church’s position on homosexuality was “wrong, stupid and evil.”

The Rev. Eric Folkert leads Northaven UMC in Dallas, another welcoming and affirming church. He said attendance dropped 10 to 15 percent on the Sunday after General Conference.

“I've heard from around five couples, both gay and straight, who have questioned whether they can continue in the United Methodist Church,” he said. “It would be dishonest to say that people, especially gay and lesbian people, don’t have very good reason to leave.”

As president of Good News, an official conservative caucus of the UMC, the Rev. Rob Renfroe said changing the church’s position on homosexuality would guarantee a split. “Millions of us, including many of our largest congregations, will not stay in a denomination that goes against Christian teaching lost decisively in the United States. And the U.S. churches foot the bill for denominational work.”

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But Mr. Renfroe has his own complaints about General Conference, specifically that a petition to withdraw the UMC from the pro-abortion rights Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice passed committee but failed to come up for a floor vote.

“We make room to discuss other emotional, contentious issues but not this one,” he said.

As far apart as Mr. Folkert and Mr. Renfroe are on some issues, they agreed on General Conference. Mr. Renfroe, who observed in person, called it “dysfunctional.” Mr. Folkert, who watched via live-streaming, described it as a “deeply broken process.”

Some reforms did pass, notably downsizing most agency boards and ending guaranteed appointment for ordained elders.

Don House, a veteran lay delegate from Texas, was cheered that General Conference designated $7 million for clergy training in the U.S. He cautioned against drawing too negative a conclusion from General Conference as a whole.

“The collective actions of annual conferences, districts and local churches will have a greater impact upon vital congregations,” he said.

But some others who witnessed General Conference 2012 seemed traumatized. Brandon Lazarus, a Perkins School of Theology student, was present from start to finish, serving as a page.

“I’m sure I will continue searching for answers,” he wrote on his blog, “but for now I have come to the conclusion that I have no hope for the United Methodist Church as it is today.”

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Renovation under way at Lake Junaluska center

**By Jessica Connor**

Lake Junaluska, N.C.—With a new mission statement and a new strategic vision, Lake Junaluska is stepping into a bold new future. And it hasChristian hospitality and transformation at its heart.

For the past year, the United Methodist conference and retreat center has been quietly working behind the scenes to explore, create and manage a new mission statement and vision. The endeavor has not yet come to an official conclusion, but it cannot come soon enough.

"We are establishing Lake Junaluska as a Christian vacation destination," said Ken Howle, director of advancement for the center, pointing out that everything they are doing is designed to help Lake Junaluska live into its new mission statement.

Adopted last March, the new mission statement of Lake Junaluska is to be a place of Christian hospitality where lives are transformed through small group gatherings and interactions. Designed by Greenville-based architectural firm Craig Gaulden Davis, the project reflects a more modern, streamlined feel that is geared to make the guest experience more conducive to spiritual retreat and renewal.

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hospitals, museums, schools, retreat centers, parks and churches, including one at St. Luke's United Methodist in Shreveport, La., built in 2000.

Construction on St. Paul's labyrinth began late last May and was completed in July. Builders began by laying some 160 tons of base material to create a solid foundation.

Thanks to the unrelenting heat, the labyrinth at St. Paul's was among the most difficult Mr. Kermeen has constructed. Ms. Adair watched in awe as the team worked 12-hour days, seven days a week, as temperatures climbed as high as 114 degrees.

What inspires him, Mr. Kermeen says, is a sense of calling. “I'm planting seeds and nourishing the spiritual community,” he said.

As a trained labyrinth facilitator, Ms. Adair led a group of elementary-aged children from St. Paul's afterschool program in a walk on the labyrinth.

At the center of the labyrinth, the children began to pray spontaneously—for each other, for their families and their friends. “There's an energy from the labyrinth that these children pick up,” she said. “It's a very loving energy. I think it's the love of God.”

Ms. McKinley said that the labyrinth has helped her, too, as she's dealing with issues relating to getting older. “The labyrinth changed my life as soon as I started walking it,” she said. “I'm learning to trust my pathway as I'm aging. It's bringing me courage and optimism in my journey.”

Ms. Williford says it's not unusual for people to encounter something unexpected while walking the labyrinth. “I never fail to be surprised and grateful,” said Ms. Williford. “It's just mystery on mystery.”

Center of peace

In April, Ms. Williford led St. Paul's sixth-grade confirmation class in a walk through the labyrinth. Following the typical practice, the young people walked in silence until reaching the center. Then, unprompted, they all sat down and stayed there; in silence, for about 15 minutes.

“I didn’t tell them to do that,” she said. “There was this remarkable oneness with them.” After the pause, the young people “unlocked” the labyrinth, retracing their steps to exit.

Henry Philpott, 13, a member of the confirmation class, said he used the time on the labyrinth to pray for “people in Africa who were suffering and for anyone in the world who was afraid.”

Asked whether he enjoyed the experience, Henry said: “I was beyond liking it. It was amazing.”

As a trained labyrinth facilitator, church member Hattie McKinley recently led a group of elementary-aged children from St. Paul's afterschool program in a walk on the labyrinth. While a person walking a labyrinth may find it difficult to gauge his or her progress, the labyrinth itself is not difficult to navigate. Labyrinths seem to appeal to some deep instinct in humans, according to Ms. McKinley, who says that labyrinth-like shapes have appeared in drawings on the walls of caves dating back thousands of years.

The labyrinth has represented a pilgrimage for people of all faiths for over 4,000 years, she said.

Labyrinths began to appear on church walls and floors around 1000 C.E. In the 12th through the 14th centuries, grand pavement labyrinths were built in gothic cathedrals, notably Chartres, Reims and Amiens in northern France. The famous labyrinth at Chartres, built around 1200 C.E., served as the inspiration for the installation at St. Paul's.

While the original purpose of these medieval church labyrinths is not clear, some historians believe that meditative walks through the labyrinths served as alternatives to pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

Reaching out

St. Paul's deliberately chose to place the labyrinth on its side lawn, in an open space that's clearly visible from the street and facing the Museum of Fine Arts and Museum of Contemporary Arts. “We wanted to make it a gift to the community,” Ms. Williford said.

The two museums next door draw an estimated 1.5 million visitors each year, so even if only a small portion of those wander over to the labyrinth, Ms. Williford says, the outreach is significant.

Ms. Adair notes that folks from the Presbyterian church next door have inquired and walked the labyrinth occasionally. “She’s also seen people pace the path while smoking cigarettes, or using the labyrinth as a space for sunbathing. And that’s okay, too. Like Grace Cathedral’s labyrinth in San Francisco, St. Paul’s is near a busy street.

“It’s an appropriate metaphor,” said Ms. McKinley. “There’s all this traffic going by, and cars honking, yet while you’re walking, you stay focused on your footsteps and your own path. The distractions fall away.”

In December, the labyrinth was lit with electric votive candles, creating a hauntingly beautiful setting for the church’s Taizé services. “We’ve just had so many little magical moments, because the labyrinth is there,” Ms. Adair said.
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Have a little time?
The next four years call for evangelical patience

By Andrew C. Thompson
UMR Columnist

After the GC disappointment, a plea for some perspective

BY ANDREW C. THOMPSON
6B

The delegates are frustrated that, after the failure to adopt a valid restructuring plan, their work seems for naught. Non-delegates are angry that our representatives are coming home with little to show except the removal of guaranteed appointment, which hardly enjoys universal popularity. And everyone is upset at the prospect of another quadrennium of wondering what we should do next.

I’m not sure about the answer to the “What now?” question. I have my options, of course. So does everyone else. But it doesn’t seem wise to rush into fix-it mode so soon after the meltdown. When the going gets tough—and oh my, has it gotten tough—we don’t need to rush, either toward blame or solution. We need perspective. It’s going to be OK.

Perhaps not in the sense that we wish. None of us want to see our Mother Church struggle so mightily. All of us want more faithful and fruitful ministries, even if we define those things a bit differently. Regardless of our wishes, however, it’s likely that she will flounder for at least four more years.

Two things, though, give me reason to be hopeful amid the chaos. For starters, the amount of prayer and hard work that went into the proposed restructuring at GC represents a faithful undertaking from our appointed leaders. Just because their solution was not ultimately the right one does not mean it was a failure, any more than one of Edison’s discarded ideas for the light bulb were failures. The things we learned may yet bear fruit.

Precisely what those lessons are is not yet clear, although it does seem that General Conference sent a clear message of discomfort with affording the episcopacy the powers that the Book of Discipline gives to the bishops. And hard work that went into the plan to determine whether any part, portion, or all of Plan UMC can be saved and conclude that it cannot, the decision reads.

“The broad delegation of legislative authority and the commingling of the role of oversight so inextricably permeate the Plan as to render it conceptually unsalvageable.”

So that’s the reasoning behind Decision 1210. And it is good reasoning. I do not agree with one comment I read online that expressed frustration and said this was the kind of thing we should expect from a bureaucratic church. There are reasons to get frustrated at bureaucracy, but this isn’t one of them.

We need the Judicial Council to act in the “conservative” mode that all civil and ecclesiastical courts must adopt when called upon to do the work of legislative review. They are the check on legislative excess and the preserver of constitutional frameworks. Argue against this reality if you want. But if you do, then you’re really arguing against having a 12-million member church with a global presence. Because if we want to exist in the worldwide way that we do, there are going to be certain institutional complexities we simply have to live with.

But now what?

After the Judicial Council’s decision, a colleague from my annual conference wrote on Facebook: “The most important accomplishment of GC was struck down. We all can sink home.” His comment sums up how many of the hard-working delegates must have felt after so many days trying to get some type of restructuring legislation passed.

But they shouldn’t feel ashamed or deflected. They did good work.

What we need right now is evangelical patience. For all we know, these are early days in the life of the church. We can carefully work on restructuring again in the coming four years. And in 2016, the proposal can be an even better plan for streamlining the church’s constitution.

We can also launch into the much more important work of local ministry: worship, discipleship formation, and evangelism. And we can do this with the evangelical zeal of the Methodists of old, assured that we are carrying on their witness faithfully in our own day.

The Rev. Thompson is an instructor in historical theology & Wesleyan studies at Memphis Theological Seminary. Reach him at www.andrewthompson.com.

After the GC disappointment, a plea for some perspective

‘Any legislation GC might have passed would not make us more faithful. ’

Any legislation GC might have passed would not make us more faithful, nor, I would argue, would it make us more faithful. It would have made some decisions smoother. It might have saved us money (although, after watching similar premises to the Call to Action being enacted in our own annual conference, I have grave doubts about that).

But one will be spurred toward greater acts of love because of restructuring. No one will sacrifice time and prayers and energy and money for the sake of someone else because our church runs more efficiently.

Rather, our faith catches fire because of our sense of being loved by God and each other, which in turn leads us to return love to both God and neighbor.

The end of General Conference coincided with the “super-moon,” a full moon of incredible brightness brought about by the unusual nearness of the moon to the earth. It reminded me of what G.K. Chesterton said about St. Francis, that he “is the mirror of Christ rather than the moon is the mirror of the sun. The moon is much smaller than the sun, but it is also much nearer to us, and being less vivid it is more visible.”

If we are going to thrive as Wesleyan Christians, our first and most important task is not to formulate an efficient church. It’s to develop and live out a passionate love for both God and neighbor. Those of us who have given our lives to that cause are still going to work every day to make that happen. Regardless of our narrative of decline, I still believe such work is contagious. Even if it’s not, it’s still the work of Christ.

If we give ourselves to that—live out a certain way or another—it’s going to be OK.

The Rev. Van Meter is director of the Wesley Foundation at Kansas State University. Contact him at eric@kstatewesley.org.
The Spirit is still dancing

By Elaine Robinson
Special Contributor

Is anyone satisfied with General Conference?
I spent much of those 10 days watching, either in person or by live streaming, and I feel as if I was witnessing the rise of a disappointing new dance. The Backslidings. Ah, in the Moonwalk, it seems to slide endlessly backward, all the while going nowhere.

Those who know Wesleyan theology recognize backslidings as the condition of sin in which believers forget to rely on grace, failing to listen for and respond to the gentle leading of the Spirit, moving not toward perfection in love, but away from that desired state. In a real sense, we could not agree on anything: restructuring or the name of our church. Many come with their every thought, sometimes unfilmed by common sense or civility, letting the rest of the world know on anything: restructuring, sexuality, movement not toward institution may be in its death throes, but the church which is the Body of Christ will continue to participate in God’s mission in the world, with or without the United Methodist Church. Indeed, it’s possible that the church as a spiritual reality has already left the building. I don’t really think so, but my point is that we spend far too much time worrying about the institutional church and its doings, rather than about who is the right person or group with the right program to provide CPR (Church Preliminary Resuscitation).

Yet, those of us who study the writings and practices of John Wesley can’t help but be reminded of those prophetic words near the end of his life: “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Have we, the United Methodist Church, officially become Wesley’s Church of England? Or is it the UMC in the United States that is fulfilling Wesley’s prophetic concern? We are worrying endlessly about the form of our religion, while neglecting the power of Grace?

I suspect there are many United Methodists who, like me, find themselves among the muddled middle. As I watched General Conference (thankfully not a delegate), I was keenly aware of both sides of most positions. I could see the value in both sides (and often the theological basis for both sides). What I couldn’t see very often was the willingness of the “poles” — those who argued most vehemently for a position — to listen and, perhaps, even change their minds.

Our lay leader here in Oklahoma, Judy Benson (who served on the Connectional Table), when asked by the United Methodist News Service about the Call to Action and restructuring, said this: “My opinion is the problem is not with the size of the general boards. The problem is we haven’t been able to figure out a way to work together towards the common goal of making disciples.”

Meaningful worship
Our church seems unwilling to compromise, to listen, to track the Spirit’s movement. We are in a rowboat on a turbulent sea, and find ourselves unwilling to row together toward a distant horizon. Hopefully, Jesus is in prayer on the shore and will soon come walking toward us on these same waters.

This semester, I have been teaching a course in John Wesley’s theology, specifically focused on sanctification and holy living. In the opening conference of the Methodist movement, they began the conference “after some time spent in prayer.” (See the “Minutes of the First Annual Conference.”)

We do have worship at General Conference, sometimes very meaningful worship. What might happen, though, if we spent the first 24 hours gathered in prayer, silent prayer especially, listening for God? Can we expect conferencegoing to be holy if we haven’t quieted ourselves to listen for God?

Mostly I am concerned about how we learn to be a global church which respects vastly different cultural view-points. Can we be one body? This may be the most urgent question we face, at least those of us in the muddled middle.

In the end, I believe the Spirit is still dancing and inviting us to join in, following some new steps that don’t fit anyone’s expectations. Especially mine.

Dr. Robinson is an ordained elder in the UMC and academic dean at Saint Paul School of Theology at Oklahoma City University. She can be reached at elaine.robinson@spst.edu.

Visit to a far-off cemetery offers lessons in sacrifice

By Bishop Woodie W. White
UMR Columnist

On a crisp, wintry day in February, the director of the United Methodist Endorsing Agency and I, accompanied by an Army Chaplain from the North Alabama Conference who is serving in England, visited the Cambridge American Cemetery. The cemetery, located in Madingly in southeastern England, is one of 14 permanent World War II memorial cemeteries erected outside the United States by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

A superintendent who oversees the site escorted us, telling the story of the cemetery as well as the personal stories of many of those buried there. It is sobering to look upon row after row of white marble Latin crosses and Stars of David. There are 3,812 servicemen and women buried there. Oh, the price of freedom!

In addition, the superintendent took us to view the Tablets of the Missing, a massive wall of Portland stone, 472 feet in length. The tablets contain the names and other information of 5,126 of those lost or buried at sea, or missing in action. There are also those listed as “unknowns,” whose remains could not be positively identified. It is difficult to express the rush of emotions one feels in such a sacred space. These were not statistics for us to read quickly as we moved on. These were reminders of men and women, loved ones, who had once enjoyed life and made the ultimate sacrifice for country.

One fact that many people may not realize is that among our honored dead are military chaplains. These pastors left the security of a congregation in a city, town or village to serve in a different kind of “parish” that requires personal sacrifice and, perhaps, the giving of life itself.

There are six chaplains commemorated at the Cambridge American Cemetery. The superintendent noted, including three whose names are on the Wall of the Missing. As we remembered them, the superintendent told the story of four chaplains who were made famous partly because of a documentary film about them. The four — two Protestant clergymen, a Roman Catholic priest and a rabbi — were aboard the Dorchester, a U.S. Army transport ship, when it was attacked in 1943. The four chaplains were lost at sea after giving up their life jackets so that four soldiers might be saved.

Three chaplains are among the 4,000 buried at Madingley. As previously arranged, I laid a wreath at the grave of one of the chaplains, and we offered prayers for all of them and for their unique flock. Two flags from the cemetery — one American and one British — now sit at my desk as a daily reminder of all of those who have paid the ultimate price, and a reminder of the terrible burden of war. It was an unforgettable experience.

On May 28 the nation will observe Memorial Day. For many it will be the holiday that marks the beginning of summer. Picnics and the gathering of families with a host of festive activities will fill the day. Yet, so many others will mark the day with solemn ceremonies, visiting gravesites or taking part in parades of thanksgiving and remembrance for those who have died. Those who have served and continues to offer themselves so that a nation might remain free and a way of life might be preserved. This Memorial Day, I will remember my visit to that far-off cemetery. And I will know that there are other burial places not as distant in towns and cities across America for those of every religion, race, color, ethnicity, social class and political perspective, who have made possible the freedoms we enjoy and yet are often taken for granted or even abused.

As I remember and give thanks for such sacrifice, I shall continue to pray for a world where nations and leaders of nations will “study war no more!”

Retired Bishop White is the denomination’s Endorsing Agent for Chaplain Ministries and bishop-in-residence at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology.
Judicial Council did the denomination a favor

BY BISHOP MIKE COYNER
Special Contributor

May 4 was a big day. As delegates waded through petitions and amendments on the last day of General Conference, I finished my spring semester as a senior at Indiana University. I had four finals that week, including tests for classes like British Film and The Music of Bob Dylan. To study for my British Film final, I had to watch The Queen, a 2006 Oscar-nominated film about the monarchy and its struggle to relate to the grieving masses after the death of Princess Diana. Throughout the film, Prime Minister Tony Blair attempts to convince Queen Elizabeth to acquiesce to the demands of modern society. This proved to be a difficult task. In a moment of exasperation, Blair exclaims, “Will someone please save these people from themselves?”

After witnessing General Conference 2012, I understand Blair’s frustration.

The structures and processes of the United Methodist Church are self-preserving. The size and frequency of our meetings encourage passivity; our current Book of Discipline and its structures favor institutional stagnation; and, as some discovered in Texas, our Constitution prohibits most forms of restructuring. The systems that we have created for ministry protect the status quo against revision, and our denomination cannot effectively make disciples of Jesus Christ without the ability to adapt.

Undeﬁned future

This procedural and systemic self-preservation is natural, but it does not differentiate between gratuitous and essential change. Our connection’s ability to protect itself from unnecessary change is valuable, but sometimes adaptation is necessary. In the past five years, the membership in the United States has declined by 4.5 percent; worship attendance has declined by 7.9 percent; and the number of young people being confirmed in the UMC in the United States has declined by 18.44 percent. The need for adaptation is well-established, yet General Conference yielded little change.

In part because of procedural technicalities, our plan for the future is undefined, and this gives the United Methodist Church a unique opportunity. General Conference revealed the ugly side of our connectional processes, the unhappy realities of strict procedures and self-preserving structures.

The Judicial Council decision that unifydays (even years, depending on your perspective) of work and deliberation by ruling Plan UMC unconstitutional offered the United Methodist Church a candid view of our denomination’s systems. Despite support from approximately 60 percent of General Conference delegates, Plan UMC died on May 4. Now, like Queen Elizabeth, we have the opportunity to self-reflect.

General Conference unveiled harsh procedural obstacles to change, and those realities highlight the necessity of institutional introspection. The gasps of delegates after the Judicial Council statement signaled the need for a level of self-examination that extends beyond hackneyed theological sound bites and Twitter wisdom. The hope is that, in the aftermath of General Conference 2012, we may have the clarity of vision to accept a fundamental truth: Our system will not change unless United Methodists believe with intentionality and enthusiasm that our structures and processes require transformation.

Polarity as byproduct

Our opportunity for denominational adaptability lies in our capacity to view General Conference 2012 as evidence of detrimental institutional inertia. The failure of three fairly well-supported restructuring proposals—the Connectional Table recommendations, Plan B, and the proposals from the Methodist Federation for Social Action—to effect substantial change supports the idea that our structures can be obstacles to our own mission.

Our current stagnation is not the fault of delegates, general secretaries, the Judicial Council, or bishops; instead, it is a symptom of a stubborn, self-preserving system. When plodding through our post-Conference thoughts and emotions, we should direct our energy toward obstructing structures and processes of our denomination. Blame of individuals or groups only strengthens the nasty distrust that permeates our ministries, and that distrust often manifests itself as opposition to new styles of leadership. The polarity of our denomination is, in many ways, a byproduct of our connection’s inability to structurally and emotionally distance itself from secular, democratic politicking.

With introspection comes a responsibility for growth, and all levels of the denomination must take responsibility for the self-reflection fueled by General Conference. Bishops must boldly identify and challenge ineffective structures, and each general board and agency must justify its existence by engaging in courageous, transformative ministry.

Delegates must not bury memories of General Conference 2012 under sarcasm and theological aphorisms. In four years, General Conference 2016 will assemble in Portland, Ore., and those delegates must be prepared to face our stubborn structures with the belief that the status quo is not effective.

I think back on our Imagine Indiana process, and I remember that a turning point toward the vote to approve a plan for a new conference occurred when the Imagine Indiana Team reported to each previous conference (North and South) that their vision for structure was “the conference exists to support and help the local church, not the other way around.” I remember the applause from the floor in both conferences when that vision was shared. It was then soon followed by adopting a streamlined, cost-effective structure focused upon that vision.

I yearn for such a moment of clarity at the General Conference. Perhaps the decision of the Judicial Council will move us toward that time when the whole denomination applauds a new vision for structure.

Mr. Boruff has served on the UMC’s Call to Action Steering Team and Connectional Table.