

Over the past nine months I have traveled all over this annual conference listening and observing and learning from you. I have been asking God to show me who you have been as an annual conference. I have been enjoining God to show me who we are as an annual conference today. I have been intreating God to reveal to me how God wants us to work together as bishop and people. And I have been humbly beseeching God to reveal to us together God's preferred future for the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. I have been praying for revelation.

In order to help me see what God wanted to show me, I spent one full day this fall on each district. I asked each District Superintendent to serve as my tour guide. During each tour I met with some of you in groups of clergy and laity. I listened to your hopes and dreams for this annual conference. I listened for your pains and frustrations and the yearnings of your heart for this annual conference. And I asked you to share with me your expectations of me as a bishop. In order to help me see what God wanted to show me about this annual conference, I have tried to be present in as many places and at as many times around this annual conference as has been healthy and as Tina and my husband will allow.

Let me tell you what I believe God has revealed to me. As the District Superintendents showed me around their districts, the words to this great hymn often came to my mind.

Oh Lord my God

When I in awesome wonder

Consider all the worlds

Thy hands have made

I see the stars

I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power throughout

The universe displayed
Then sings my soul
My Savior, God, to Thee
How great thou art
How great thou art
Then sings my soul
My Savior, God, to Thee
How great Thou art
How great Thou art

As I toured this conference, I thought, what a blessing it is to be serving in Western Pennsylvania, the annual conference with the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers; Mount Davis, the Appalachian Mountains and the Allegheny Plateau, the Allegheny National Forest, almost two dozen state parks, five national parks, and, of course, a beach. I don't know how you can live in Western Pennsylvania and not be in awesome wonder of the worlds God's hands have made. I don't know how you can live here and your soul not declare, "My Savior, God, to Thee, How great thou art." Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, we are blessed.

As I have met with various groups, many of you have shared with me your joy with our mission engagement in this conference, this country, and around the world. This annual conference has a heart for mission. As I toured our regional missions: Erie United Methodist Alliance, Connellsville Area Community Ministries, Eastbrook Mission Barn, United Methodist Human Services of Johnstown, Ruth M. Center, and Church Union and as I read about our Prison Outreach Ministry my heart was warmed. While these missions have various governance structures with varying levels of accountability and oversight by this

annual conferences, these missions represent the United Methodist Church in Western Pennsylvania. United Methodists sit on and chair the boards of these agencies. They are the vehicles that United Methodists use to be in mission in this region. And through the grace of God, these regional missions are doing transformative work. God has trusted us with the gifts and talents that are needed to impact people's lives in this annual conference. With these gifts and talents we have been doing the work of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and visiting those in prison. What a privilege it is to be called by God to serve our communities in this way. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, "We are blessed."

Not only have we been in mission in this region, we have been engaged in mission throughout the country and the world. I knew about your work in Zimbabwe before I became your bishop. Since becoming your bishop I have been to African University and had conversation with the university's Vice Chancellor, Munashe Furusa. We talked about Western Pennsylvania's endowed chair in the Faculty of Education. This chair was established by this annual conference in honor of Bishop Nichols. While the chair is currently vacant, Vice Chancellor Furusa shared with me that they are looking to fill that position in the fall.

I traveled to Nicaragua and visited with our missionary Richard Mroczka. I saw the work that Western Pennsylvania has been doing in Nicaragua for decades. At a recent meeting with those who have championed our global work, I heard and read about the work this annual conference has been doing in other parts of Latin America, Russia, Uganda, East Germany, Zimbabwe, and South Korea. We have built churches and clinics and schools. We have helped to provide clean drinking water for villages and safe birthing environments for pregnant women. And while we have engaged in this work we have been mightily blessed by those we went to serve. They have helped us to grow closer to God. We have learned from

Methodists across the globe about the passion needed to spread the gospel, the importance of intentional discipleship, the transformative power of vibrant worship, and necessity of being entrepreneurial in ministry. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, “We are blessed.”

As I have itinerated around this annual conference I have heard some powerful stories of conversion, transformation, healing, and call which happened at our camps and retreat center. Miracles have happened at our camps and our retreat center. The dead have literally been brought back to life. And I heard how some of you found your lifelong partners at camp. Jomonville might as well advertise as a wedding chapel. I have toured and eaten at all of our camps and stayed at Olmsted Retreat Center twice. I have been welcomed by the goats at Camp Allegheny. Wesley Woods was the first of our camps that I visited. I must admit that as we were driving to it, I thought, my God where is this place. But after I got there and saw it, I thought, my God, how great thou art. I hope you realize what a blessing it is to have these facilities associated with our annual conference. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, “We are blessed.”

I have had the pleasure of interacting with a number of our young people. They have shared with me their excitement about our conference level youth programs. A couple of our young people invited me to be a part of SPARK this year. At SPARK I witnessed first hand the energy and excitement of the young people of this annual conference. Some of you have heard me tell this story before, but it bears repeating. SPARK this year was held at the Sheraton Station Hotel in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh chapter of my sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, sorority, incorporated happened to be at that hotel for its Founder’s Day celebration that same weekend as SPARK. I did not know my sorority was there until my husband asked me if I had seen my sorority sisters. I went searching for them. But they weren't hard to find, you see Alpha Kappa Alpha is an African American sorority.

And because it was Founder's Day, they were all dressed in black with pink and green scarves around their necks. I saw them in the lobby and went over and introduced myself. They of course asked why I had moved to the area. After I explained why, they asked if I was the bishop of a particular UMC in Pittsburgh. So I explained to them a little bit about our polity and the fact that I was the bishop for all of the UMC's in Western Pennsylvania. They looked astonished and one of them said, "Then you must be here with all of the kids who are here." Now, having stayed in a hotel with hundreds of youth before, I must confess that I didn't immediately respond. But, after a second or two, I said yes. And one of my sorors said, "They are the most polite young people I have ever seen." Another chimed in, "Yes, I was a little worried when I saw all of the kids in the lobby, but they have been wonderful." And then they told me stories of their positive encounters with our young people. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, "We are blessed."

Many of the young people I met during my district tours wanted to make sure I was going to keep up the tradition of having a pizza party for them at annual conference. And of course I am. But as I talked with our young people during my tours, I heard their love for Jesus. As I talked with them, I heard their hearts for justice in this world and in the church. I participated with great joy in confirmation tours at the conference center. I was delighted and intrigued by some of the questions they asked me. This is what God revealed to me. We have some of the most talented, gifted, Spirit-filled youth in this annual conference. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, "We are blessed."

These past few months I have heard affirmation for our District Superintendents and the entire Coordinating Cabinet. What a joy it has been to work with them. Now they are a quirky group. And we have had some tense moments around the table, but each of them is a gift from God. In fact, many of

you have recognized their gifts and have asked me to free them to lead. God has shown me that this is an annual conference that in general respects authority in the church and wants to be lead. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, “We are blessed.”

I have been greatly encouraged by some of the ingenuity in ministry that I have seen around our annual conference. There are some places in this annual conference like Connect Church in the Indiana District and Roots of Faith in the Pittsburgh District where pastors and laity have dared to think outside of the box, and as a result are deepening their own discipleship and reaching new people for Christ. Folks are looking in their pews and seeing who is not there and then going out into the communities to be in ministry with diverse people. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, we are blessed.

While numbers never tell the whole story, here are some ways in which we are blessed. According to our data in Brick River, our conference data base which I hope all of you know about and use, we have 812 churches, 330 full elders in active service, 6 deacons in active service, 31 provisional members, 13 associate members, 33 full-time local pastors, 142 part-time local pastors in our annual conference. We have 164,143 members. We have been for several quadrennia the largest annual conference in our jurisdiction. Last year we had 1,820 professions of faith, 1,271 baptisms - 381 of those being adult baptisms. Last year we had 14,758 people engaged in mission from this annual conference. 90.1% of our churches paid 100% of their connectional shared ministry. As an annual conference for the sixth year in a row, we fulfilled our commitment of faith to the general church and paid our conference’s connectional shared ministry at 100%. Along with our sister conferences in the Northeast Jurisdiction, we were the only jurisdiction in the entire denomination that had each of its annual conferences pay their connectional shared ministry at 100%. God has shown me that this is a

faithful annual conference. Western Pennsylvania annual conference, “We are blessed.”

I have learned that Western Pennsylvania has a very unique culture. Western Pennsylvanians are faithful, loyal people who are perseverant. Within the larger western Pennsylvania culture there are some distinct subcultures. Some of yin even speak your own language as you ask for your pop, aka soda. You have your own harmony. When I was at a gathering in Kane I asked the folks to sing Amazing Grace. Well they broke out in Appalachian harmony. Each of our metropolitan areas have their own cultures. North of I80 is special, but the culture is different if you go west or east once you get north. The suburbs north of Pittsburgh are very different than the suburbs south of Pittsburgh. Amish country in the middle of our annual conference adds its own unique flair. And then there is the eastern part of annual conference, the parts that border Susquehanna annual conference and West Virginia. Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, we are blessed.

We're blessed in the city
We're blessed in the field
We're blessed when we come and when we go
We cast down every stronghold
Sickness and poverty must cease
For the devil is defeated
We are blessed
Since thou has walked uprightly
As a light in a dark land
Since thou has placed in thy heart
All the Lord's commands
He's set thee above nations
and cast thine enemies away

He's standing up within thee
So let me hear you say
We know that God's word
is clothed in truth and righteousness
We are His children
and with our heart we do confess
Late in the midnight hour
Go's gonna turn it around
It's gonna work in your favor
SHOUT UNTO GOD
We're blessed in the field
We're blessed when we come and when we go
We cast down every stronghold
Sickness and poverty must cease
For the devil is defeated
We are blessed

As I have traveled through the conference I have specifically asked and been listening for your expectations of me. Here is what I heard, you want me to make sure I am taking care of myself, attending to my physical and spiritual wellbeing. This is an annual conference that cares. You want me to be consistent and transparent. You have asked me to lead from my authentic self. “Unleash yourself. Rock our boats.” I heard one of you say. You want me to cast a compelling vision for us. And you want me to tell you the truth.

So here is the truth. While we have truly been blessed, there are yet and still ways in which God can bless us. There are yet and still opportunities for God to perform miracles among us.

Everyone has affirmed the good work of our staff - we are really blessed with a hard working, dedicated staff. And last year at annual conference you all expressed concerns about transparency in how decisions are made regarding the addition of staff members. As I have traveled around and met with various groups, I have also heard concerns about how we communicate the work of our staff, how their work directly impacts ministry in local churches, and how their work advances the mission of our annual conference.

Public confession is good for the soul. As a reminder we are a priesthood of believers. And so I am going to offer a confession and then ask all of us to ask God for forgiveness on behalf of all of us.

We do need to do a better job communicating the work of our conference staff. We need to make sure that all local churches know that our conference staff is here for them, in order to support and resource their ministry. We do need to be more transparent about how decisions are made concerning hiring and evaluating conference staff. We need to constantly evaluate whether or not our staffing structure is a structure that supports our local churches and sustains the mission of our annual conference. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

I need to remind us all that District Superintendents are conference staff. Because I heard you, we reduced the number of days that the cabinet meets so that District Superintendents can spend more time in their district with local churches. We have freed Greg Cox and Larry Bridge from some of their meetings so that they can have more time to work with their staff and local churches. I have asked Greg specifically to monitor the amount of time our program staff spends in direct contact with local churches. We have recommissioned the Personnel Committee so that it now functions much as a Staff Parish Relations Committee does in a local church. They have already revised the Personnel Manual. The Personnel

Committee will make recommendations about staffing in consultation with the Council on Finance and Administration. Information will be shared with the Connectional Leadership Table. With the exception of District Superintendents and Assistant to the Bishop, staff members will be hired based on an interview process which includes members of the Personnel Committee. The committee will continue to meet regularly to evaluate the effectiveness of our staffing structure in order to ensure that our structure meets the needs of the local church and advances the mission of our annual conference.

During my tours around the conference laity and clergy alike expressed concern about ineffective pastors. Many expressed concern about mediocrity in the pulpit. One of you - a clergy person - said, "We need to make sure the best people are in our pulpits on Sunday mornings." As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

Let me introduce you to Susan Moudry. Now she is not responsible for holding pastors accountable. That is my job, working along with the Board of Ordained Ministry. We will do our best to graciously hold our pastors accountable to the highest ethical and effectiveness standards. But Susan is responsible for making sure we provide opportunities and support for clergy so that they can be the pastors that God dreamed they would be when God called them. She is our staff person responsible for clergy excellence.

Many lay persons expressed a desire to have more training. Some laity in key leadership positions in the local church expressed concern about not knowing their role or not feeling equipped to do ministry in the 21st century. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

I have asked Susan to work with Sharon Gregory and the Board of Laity on laity excellence. You also should know that I have asked the District Lay Leaders to check in with their District Superintendents at least once a month. It is my hope

that at least once a month each local church lay leader is having a one-on-one meeting with their pastor or pastors to talk about how things are going in the church. Sharon Gregory and I have been doing the same.

Many clergy and laity asked for help in making disciples. There is an acknowledgement that even Western Pennsylvania culture has changed a little since 1950. The way we used to make disciples isn't working any more. Most people I have talked with have expressed a desire to do things differently, but they just don't know what to do. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

Let me introduce you to Chris Kindle and Amy Wagner. Chris is our Coordinator of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation. Chris is very knowledgeable about the process of making disciples in our present age. And I understand that Chris is now a published author. Amy is our Coordinator of Congregational Development and Revitalization. She knows the best practices for creating new spaces and places for new people. If you are serious about church revitalization and making disciples and growing your churches - if you are serious, their phones ought to be ringing off the hook.

Now let me push you a bit. You asked me to rock the boat. This is what I have seen and heard. Some of you have said you want to become more vital, but you really are not willing to extend the energy or experience the discomfort necessary to become more vital or reach new people. You see, on the other side of the cultural coin of faithfulness, loyalty, and perseverance is stubbornness and resistance to change. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us." If you really want to follow the commission of Jesus and make new disciples, if you really want to be a better disciple of Jesus Christ yourself, your conference staff is hear to help.

I heard concerns about wanting to do ministry in a way that welcomes diverse persons to the table. Many expressed concerns about racism and sexism in this annual conference. This is going to take hard, uncomfortable, even painful work. There is some reason why the western Pennsylvania geographical region in 15% minority, yet our annual conference is less than 2% minority. There is some reason why we no longer have any full-time African American churches. We are going to have to have some hard conversations about what true hospitality looks like. Having a black bishop is not going to end racism and lead to greater racial diversity in this annual conference. Having a female bishop is not going to end sexism in this annual conference. It is going to take all of us making a decision that we are going to open ourselves up to examination by God and to act on what God reveals to us. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

Let me introduce you to Dianne Glave who is our Coordinator of Diversity Development. She is gifted in helping persons and congregations examine their own stuff that gets in the way of them extending hospitality to the other.

I have heard from different regions of our annual conference a sense of isolation. I have heard it from pastors in Pittsburgh, Erie and Kane. Some of the isolation is geographic, some is ideological. We need to do better at creating a sense of family and connection among pastors and across ideological lines. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

I have been north of I80 for 13 events since September 1st. I have had my phone drop calls and have had to stand on one leg to get internet reception. There are some physical realities in our annual conference that challenge our connectionalism. Nonetheless, we are a connectional church and we do need to work on using not only technology, but also other means of communication to foster a greater feeling of connection. We need to create more spaces and places

for conversation among folks who don't think alike, but who are committed to love alike.

I heard concerns about missional shares and rising health care costs. Churches are paying almost \$19,000.00 in health care for their pastors. I asked the Health Care Committee to look again at our model for providing health care. I told them to leave no stone unturned and that there were to be no sacred cows. It is a blessing, and act of love in response to God's love for us, to be able to provide health care for our pastors. The story of the good samaritan points to the fact that it is the responsibility of those who can to take care of the medical needs of those who are unable to care for themselves. So some churches with healthy pastors are bearing the burden of some pastors who have more expensive medical needs. We do this because it is our Christian duty. Ezekiel 34:4 shows God's displeasure with the leaders of Israel who did not care for the sick. God chastised the leaders by saying, "You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back strays, or seek the lost."

By the same token pastors, we are in this together. In the early church everyone, even the poor, brought all they had and it was distributed as any had a need. We're not asking for all that you have, just for some of what you have been given by God so that you are a part of the blessed activity of helping to care for the sick and so that you - beyond your tithe to your church - can show your personal investment in your health care. Our Social Principles say that stewardship of health is the responsibility of each person to whom health has been entrusted. Creating the personal, environmental, and social conditions in which health can thrive is a joint responsibility - public and private.

We need to continue to fight for affordable health care. From the earliest days of the Methodist movement, John Wesley taught that providing health care to others, regardless of their ability to pay, is a Christian duty. As a denomination we

have consistently affirmed that “Health care is a basic human right.” “We believe it is a governmental responsibility to provide all citizens with health care.”

As I have toured I have heard concerns about the poverty rates in Western Pennsylvania. It is true that there are counties like Greene, Fayette, and Forest that have poverty rates upwards of 20%. But most of the counties in Western Pennsylvania have poverty rates within one or two percentage points of the national average of 14.5%. And some counties like Washington, Westmoreland, Beaver, Butler, and Elk have poverty rates that are significantly lower than the national average. While it is not acceptable that any child in this country lives in poverty, we must accept the fact that when compared to other places in this nation, Western Pennsylvania is not as not nearly as unfortunate as our narrative would lead one to believe.

This is what I know to be true. God has given us all that we need in order to do the ministry to which God has called us. If that were not true than God would be a cruel God who demands much of God’s children without giving them what they need to meet those demands. So the question of the faithful is not, do we have enough? The question of the faithful is, is this what we are called to do? Once we are clear on the call, God will provide.

I know that some have talked about the connectional ministry share formula. We will continually evaluate it to make sure it is fair. Fair does not mean equal. Some have asked if we should consider going to a straight tithe for our mission shares. Here is the deal I am willing to make you. When the average regular worshipper in Western Pennsylvania tithes, than we can have the conversation about going to a straight tithe for our mission share formula. Until that time, we will continue to work with churches to help them develop discipleship programs. Yes, I said discipleship. I believe that stewardship is a discipleship issue and that people who are growing in their discipleship grow in their general stewardship and

grow to become tithers. I will also pledge to you to continue to work on discerning our call or vision as an annual conference and to help make that vision clear and compelling.

You asked me to uphold the Bible and the Book of Discipline. Here is where I have a concern. While I do not expect all United Methodists in Western Pennsylvania to know what is in our Book of Discipline, I do expect United Methodists to have a basic knowledge of what it is to be United Methodist. We have too many people in leadership positions on our churches who are ignorant of our polity. And what is worse is that we have leaders who are deliberately defying the Book of Discipline. I am not talking about pastors and churches who as a matter of social justice do not agree with our church's social principles around the role of LGBTQ persons in the church. I am talking about rules and social principles about which there is no controversy. In 2017 we have church leaders who have put in writing that, according to scripture, women should not be pastors. And they are trying to convince others of this. We believe in the ordination of women - and even in their consecration as bishops. We have pastors who from the pulpit have declared that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. We believe that the Bible is the inspired, not the inerrant word of God and there is a significant difference. We have churches - only two - who have put in writing that they are not going to pay their apportionment. The Book of Discipline requires that all churches pay their connectional ministry shares or apportionments before they pay any other benevolences. We will all have to do this heavy lifting together, holding each other accountable to who we say we are as United Methodists. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

Some expressed concern about tension around conflicting beliefs about what social justice looks like for LGBTQI persons in the church. Folks on all sides of this matter have come to their opinions based on careful examination of the

scripture, reason, experience, and our church traditions. This is not the first time that good, faithful Methodists have examined scripture and come to different conclusions about how to interpret that scripture. And I pray to God that it is not the last time that we will have differences about how to interpret scripture. You see having different perspectives is a blessing that comes from diversity. We are a diverse denomination. And because we are a democratic denomination that allows equal participation from clergy and laity and proportional participation from our worldwide church, there will undoubtedly be points in our future, as there have been in our past, where significant groups of United Methodists do not agree with the polity of the church. There will undoubtedly be times in our future that each individual in this room will not agree with some resolution, or rule that is passed by General Conference. Each individual United Methodist will need to decide if they are ok with that. You will need to decide if the mission of the church is bigger for you than your potential or realized disagreement with any specific issue. You will need to decide if the blessings of diversity outweigh for you the messiness of being a diverse church.

You know my personal story. My ancestors decided to stay in a denomination that segregated them, not allowing them to be fully included in all of the ministries of the church. I was baptized into a segregated conference. But my parents, and their parents, and their parents thought that the blessing of the diversity of the Methodist Episcopal Church offered far more promise to the kingdom of God than did a denomination that only included people who looked and thought like them. And they believed the prophet Amos when he predicted a day when justice would roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And they believed Martin Luther King, Jr, who said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

There is tension in this annual conference around the differences of opinion on full inclusion. We have done too much judging and assuming and worrying and spreading fear and arming battle stations. We have not done enough deep listening to each other or to God. We have not utilized the gifts of peace and unity that were given to us by Jesus. I pledge to you that we will have continued and greater opportunity for us to listen to one another and find places of unity as God through God's inspired word and as the Council of Bishop's in response to the Book of Discipline have called us to do. As an annual conference, we beseech the O Lord, "Have mercy on us."

This is the state of the church in Western Pennsylvania. But we are blessed to be a part of a worldwide denomination. The United Methodist Church is growing in Africa and Asia. There are new and innovative ministries popping up in the United States and all over the world. People are figuring out that discipleship is the main thing and they are figuring out how to do ministry in the 21st century. As a denomination we are struggling to discern what it means to be a global church. We are trying to figure out how to live into our diversity. Some have asked, "And are we yet alive?"

1. And are we yet alive,
and see each other's face?

Glory and thanks to Jesus give
for his almighty grace!

3. What troubles have we seen,
what mighty conflicts past,
fightings without, and fears within,
since we assembled last!

4. Yet out of all the Lord
hath brought us by his love;

and still he doth his help afford,
and hides our life above.

6. Let us take up the cross
till we the crown obtain,
and gladly reckon all things loss
so we may Jesus gain.

Here is the really good news. We serve a resurrected Christ. And if we, as followers of Jesus Christ are resurrection people. And so we are yet alive. Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” None of the concerns we have as annual conference and none of the issues we face as a denomination are beyond the grace, mercy, and power of God.

Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference, you have a history with God. You have shown me what God has done through you. God has been faithful. And God is going to continue to be faithful because God can’t do anything else than to be who God is. Do you believe it? Do you believe God is going to continue to be faithful to this annual conference and to the United Methodist Church?

Great Is Thy Faithfulness