Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi: Leadership 101

Fatherly wisdom...

My father’s siblings periodically teased and marveled at him because he never said “no” to any of his children. If there was something that he did not want us to do, he would say, “I’d rather you not do that.” Then he would provide his rationale for why doing it was not, in his opinion, a good choice. As we grew older, he would sometimes add, “But if you are going to do it, here is what you need to think about.” He would ask us questions about what we thought the consequences of our actions might be and what plan we had to deal with those consequences.

My aunts and uncles would marvel that even as toddlers my siblings and I would sit either on my father’s lap or a chair and listen attentively to his rationale without wiggling or trying to get out of his lap. Admittedly my youngest brother and I would, at times, test my father’s rationale. We did not do what he said he would rather we not do. But we would test the limits by finding creative ways to accomplish our mission. My father’s rationale always proved to be sound even for our newly created activity, so each of our ventures taught us a lesson. My father often said, “There is a lesson to be learned in everything.”

I always felt affirmed by my Dad because when his siblings teased him about his parenting style, he would tell them that his children were easy to raise, so he didn’t have to say “no.” He would then declare that my sister and I were “the finest young ladies in the world” and that my brothers were “the finest young men in the world.” Hearing his declaration of who we were made me want to live up to his affirmation. I felt that my dad was not only making a statement about my past behavior, but also showing confidence in my future behavior.

I am 10 and 11 years older than my two brothers, so I saw how much work my parents did to create an environment where they would not have to say, “no.” They provided structure and nurturing activities for us. They set boundaries and clearly articulated their expectations for our behavior. And they were consistent with consequences - good and bad - even if implementing those consequences complicated their plans. I might add that those negative consequences never included physical punishment, a fact that also led to teasing from my father’s siblings.

I have incorporated many of the principles I learned from observing my parents into my leadership style. While I do not think of those I lead as children (well, most of the time), I do believe that my mom and dad’s parenting style showed tremendous insight into the human condition and that insight can be applied to adults. My parents understood that for many, saying, “no” increases the desire to engage in that behavior. So, in leading, I use “no” as little as possible. If someone asks me directly if they can do something that they cannot because of rules or policies, I will tell them “no”, and explain why. If someone I lead is doing something that will bring great emotional or spiritual harm to someone they lead, I will tell them to stop. Fortunately, my leadership does not often impact the physical well-being of those I lead, but there have been times when it has.

For example, entering a mold-infested church building was causing physical harm to a pastor under my supervision, so I said, “No! You will not go into that building again until the mold is removed.”

(Continued page 2)
Bishop Moore-Koikoi Leads GCORR

Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi has been elected President of the board of the United Methodist Church’s General Commission on Religion and Race. The vote took place during a July 11 virtual meeting.

As she took office, Bishop Moore-Koikoi acknowledged the opportunity and the challenge now before GCORR and The United Methodist Church:

“George Floyd’s cries of ‘I can’t breathe’ have brought us to an inflection point in the centuries-long quest for justice for people of African descent living in the United States and all around the world,” she said. “I commit to do all in my power to ensure that we do not let this harvest pass.”

GCORR, she noted, is poised to resource the church to accept the freedom and unparalleled power God has given us to dismantle racism and press on to freedom.

She helped organize United Methodist churches to open their doors and minister to children and families whose schools were closed, and to help meet other basic needs. She became the face of the United Methodist Church and walked with church volunteers in red T-shirts through city neighborhoods, praying for and ministering to people, including police.

“Many people are upset at the abuses black people suffer. Something stirs up in their spirit, but then they’re not sure what to do,” she recently told UM News. Through GCORR and the EndRacism effort, she added, “we’re going to provide folks with resources on an ongoing basis.”

In accepting her new role, Bishop Moore-Koikoi acknowledged the work of Bishop Earl Bledsoe and others who served before her in leadership roles at GCORR.

“We do live in hope,” she said. “We do believe that there will be a day when we will dismantle racism.”

Leadership 101

Barring something like that, I have found that it is far more effective to equip those I lead with the information they need to make effective decisions than it is to say, “No, you can’t do that.” I can’t be with those I lead at every moment or make every decision for them. I am called to lead them, not to do their job for them. I cannot pastor every church in the conference, superintend 10 districts, run a program staff, and be a conference treasurer. And the truth be told, there are far better pastors in this conference than I was. I have tried to staff the cabinet with people who are better at various aspects of leadership than I am. We would be in bad shape if I surrounded myself with mini-me’s. We would miss out on tremendously diverse gift sets. I have tried to surround myself with individuals I think may be “the finest strategic thinker, pastoral presence, non-anxious presence, (fill in the blank) in the world.” If I tried to do their jobs, the conference would miss out on something great.

For some, this style of leadership can provoke anxiety. There are some personality types who would much rather be told exactly what to do. It is more comforting for them not to have to take risks and make mistakes. So, it is my job to help these persons blossom and gain confidence in their leadership potential and decision-making abilities. Because I believe God has put into every believer unique gifts and talents that are needed in the building up of the kingdom, I want to lead in a way that allows us to be blessed by everyone.

Leading this way also means that sometimes those I lead make decisions with which I do not agree. Sometimes those decisions turn out to be effective; sometimes they do not. If they do not, I trust the person learns something and will make a better decision the next time. If the decisions are effective, I trust God to open my heart and mind to learn something.

This leadership style can be very liberating. It frees me to surrender my ego to the will of the Holy Spirit. It helps me to value the gifts and talents of those with whom I lead. And it helps me to acknowledge that there isn’t any mistake that is too big for God to use to bring about God’s will.

This is some wisdom from a loving father that I pass on to you.
Bishops Pledge More Effective Anti-Racism Campaign

By Jim Patterson, United Methodist News

This time will be different, vowed United Methodist bishops participating in an online launch of a new anti-racism campaign on a day set apart for commemorating the end of slavery.

“I will not lead or participate in another effort full of ‘sound and fury, signifying nothing,’” said Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi of the Western Pennsylvania Conference during the announcement of the campaign on Juneteenth (June 19), a significant day in the history of slavery. The announcement was broadcast on UMC.org/EndRacism and Facebook.

“The lives of my people, of all people of color who have been systematically disrespected, disregarded and extinguished by the sin of racism are too important to settle for anything ... less than uncompromising action in dismantling racism,” she said.

The new program, “Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom,” is a multi-agency effort that includes participation from the Commission on Religion and Race, the Council of Bishops, United Methodist Women, Discipleship Ministries, the Board of Church and Society and United Methodist Communications. Other agencies and many annual conferences are contributing.

Bishop Cynthia Harvey, president of the Council of Bishops, appears on video as The United Methodist Church launches a churchwide program, “Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom.”

“We come to you intentionally on this day, June 19, a day known to many as Juneteenth,” said Bishop Gregory V. Palmer of the Ohio West Conference.

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger announced in Galveston, Texas, that the Civil War had ended and that those who had been enslaved were now free. It was 2½ years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

“Today, on this Juneteenth, 2020, we wanted to initiate another focal point for conversation,” Palmer said. “A conversation about the hope for the movement that is afoot in our midst. It is a conversation about the resolve necessary to make sure that this time it is different. And it is a conversation that says, with resolve, ‘Enough is enough.’ But it is a conversation that will not settle for mere words, for empty pious platitudes. For we believe that without works, faith is dead.”

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton of the New York Conference, said the “Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom” campaign would be “an intentional spiritually guided journey from this Juneteenth to a gathering in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in late August-early September 2021.”

The top legislative assembly of The United Methodist Church, General Conference, is scheduled to meet Aug. 31-Sept. 10, 2021, in Minneapolis. George Floyd died May 25 in that city after a police officer held his knee on Floyd’s neck for more than 8 minutes.

“We’re inviting you into a journey ... that’s designed to stimulate you with frequent events — worship services, town halls, book studies, resources and honest conversations — that we believe can create a movement for lasting change,” Bickerton said.

The new movement should incorporate “deep and unwavering love for neighbor,” said Louisiana Conference Bishop Harvey, president of the Council of Bishops.

“It’s the convergence of economic hardship, the lack of adequate health care, broken systems, antiquated structures, police brutality, the absence of accountability, the continuance of white privilege and power, all combining into a mass outpouring with one clear message: “Enough is enough.”

Bishop Bruce R. Ough of the Dakotas-Minnesota Area, said real difference can occur when white people support Black Lives Matter and are willing to listen also to the voices of black, Asian, Native Americans and Latinx.

“It must be different this time and we together must make sure that the headline remains constant as we press on to freedom,” Ough said. “As people of faith we have to take the lead, carry the banner and keep pressing on to freedom.”
Sitting Together

By Rev. Dr. Renee Mikell
Co-chair, Conference Anti-Racism Team

So the spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heart of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong on me. When I came to them… and I sat where they sat. (Ezekiel 3:14-15a)

The Rev. Martin Luther King once drafted the outline for an unpreached sermon based on Ezekiel 3:14-15. In his notes, Dr. King suggested the following: Consider the fact that unless you sit where others sit you really cannot inspire, know about, or understand them. Unless you can put yourself in the place of that person you cannot really help them. Dr. King stopped short of elaborating on those thoughts, but this seems like an opportune time for us to take his advice by actively sitting together as we learn more about how to work collectively. We seek to learn about, acknowledge, and navigate the disproportionate impact of police violence against people of color. While we are sitting together, I trust that God will provide all that we need to move the needle forward toward more equitable treatment.

THE CONFERENCE ANTI-RACISM TEAM

The members of the Western PA Conference Anti-Racism Team (ART) are appalled and filled with grief by the unjust deaths of persons of color in recent weeks. Unfortunately, these are not new or isolated events, but a continuous and trending reality. Sadly, once again we must stand against such evil acts, believing the time to engage in finding the solution is now.

We stand in solidarity with families of the victims and agree with people in our country and around the world who realize these deaths are a manifestation of the systemic racism that has been present in American society for far too long. Such horrific events compel us to speak out, stand up, and act from within our very own context.

The Western PA Conference, believing the Church should take a lead with such efforts, commissioned the Anti-Racism Team in 2008. ART members were trained to recognize instances of implicit bias, as well as racial and gender privilege, while helping other leaders and congregation members to do the same. In 2020, our Conference and District Anti-racism teams remain committed to combat the sin of racism, by dismantling the systems that perpetuate it, recognizing its occurrences within ourselves, the WPA Annual Conference, and beyond the church walls, and by supporting beliefs, actions, movements and development of policies needed to tear down unjust practices.

Last September, the entire WPA Anti-racism Team read and assessed the book How to Be An Antiracist before recommending it to some District Superintendents for ART groups in their areas. The author and professor Dr. Ibram X. Kendi proposes a core principle for understanding racism and anti-racism. He says the terms racist and anti-racist are not fixed identities to be used as pejorative or complimentary labels for people. Rather, both simply describe a person’s action or inaction.

“One allows racial inequities to persevere and the other confronts the inequities,” he explains. “Anti-racism moves from social witness to social action. Antiracists support such policy through their actions or expression of ideas.”

ART seeks to identify structures that maintain systemic racism and inequality and replace them with just, liberating, and life-giving structures -- the key to dismantling racism.

The 2020 ART congregation representatives Don Blinn, Heather Burtch, Marilyn Larrimer, Peggy Ward, and assigned Appointive Cabinet representatives Dawn Hand, Paul Ritchey, and Renee’ Mikell proudly proclaim that we are anti-racists.

Today we invite all like-minded individuals in our Annual Conference to join us in doing the same.

“If your heart is as my heart, take my hand.” -- John Wesley

These troubling times remind us about the importance of joining hands with as many individuals and groups as possible to become engaged in the work of antiracism like it has never been done before. I believe collectively we have enough gifts, innovation, and diversity of thought to conduct both micro and macro-level work.

First, join in our denomination’s new initiative “Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom,” launched by the Council of Bishops and our General Agencies. Next, we extend a challenge to support initiatives within our churches and neighboring communities in Western Pennsylvania. Action items can be found at www.wpaumc.org/RespondingtoRacism.

Photo credit: Rev. Erik Hoeke, Avery UMC
Many leaders have called in recent days for movement beyond words, including Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi in her Statement on Racism and the Cycle of Violence and the WPA Conference Anti-Racism Team in an article in this publication. The time is now to answer this call, move past words, and ACT.

Our faith compels us to act TOGETHER as faithful people of ALL RACES. Yet, many of us do not know where to start or how to learn new anti-racism skills on our own. Thus, people across our Conference are pledging to learn and to act side by side to practice skills that disrupt white privilege, racial injustice, and systemic racism in our hearts, our churches, and our communities.

We invite you to take action by signing our pledge and committing yourself for one year to complete monthly education and action tasks focused on dismantling racism. JOIN US by signing this pledge to act at wpaumc.org/now-action-pledge.
Mission u Spiritual Growth Study Moves Online

*Finding Peace in an Anxious World* is something that is a top priority for many, especially in 2020. The subject was selected for the Spiritual Growth study at Mission u 2020. After the coronavirus pandemic added additional anxiety, forcing cancellation of the traditional three-day Mission u event, the leadership team decided it was important to offer alternative ways to present the study to clergy and laity in Western PA.


A fifth Zoom session, on August 18 will be open to anyone interested in talking about ways to use the study material in their local church.

In addition to the Zoom study, two other options for the study are planned:

- On Oct. 2, at Lakewood UMC in Erie (That is the day before the scheduled Annual Conference session at the Erie Bayfront Convention Center.)
- On Oct. 23, the day before the UMW Annual Meeting, at Butler First UMC’s Crossfire Campus.

Registration for those events will open on the Conference website in September. For details, check those dates Conference website calendar at [www.wpaumc.org/events](http://www.wpaumc.org/events) or go to [www.wpaumc.org/missionu](http://www.wpaumc.org/missionu) for updates and other information.

Morgan Leads PA Council of Churches

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has announced the hiring of Dai Morgan as its Interim Executive Director, effective July 1, 2020. The position is part-time and he said he will continue to serve as coordinator of United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania, a joint ministry of Pennsylvania's three United Methodist conferences. He has held that part-time post since 2015.

Morgan, who has been a member of the Council’s Commission on Public Witness since 2010 and vice president since 2017, is a clergy member of the Western Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. From 2006-2016, he was pastor of New Day/Swissvale United Methodist Church, a multicultural congregation just outside Pittsburgh.

Morgan says he has four basic goals for the Council. The most immediate is responding to the current COVID-19 pandemic. “Like any business or organization, we need to figure out how to operate under these difficult conditions,” he explained. “The second part is to discover our role, as part of the Church, in how to respond both now and with the future ramifications of this pandemic.”

He also wants to ensure the Council’s financial stability for the future, find ways to demonstrate the relevancy and value of the Church, and build staffing and resources to engage in focused ecumenical activities, as well as expand the Council’s programming.

“Addressing these (four) goals will require creativity and foresight,” Morgan said. “I have an advantage in that the Council has a superb staff on which to rely. The Board of Directors is active and involved. And, ultimately, I will prayerfully depend on the providence of God.”

Among his many interests are: Ecumenism and Interfaith Relationships, Faith and Politics, and Faith and the Fine Arts. A long-time resident of the Pittsburgh area, Morgan has been an active community presence. He is a Rotarian, was involved in establishing a Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank pantry at his church, and was Artist-in-Residence at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary from 1987-90.

In the Western PA Conference, he serves as a member of the Commission on Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns, the Poverty Team and Board of Church and Society. From 2012-18, he was an active participant in the denominational-level United Methodist Ecumenical and Inter-religious Training (UMEIT) program.
GC2020 Postponed Until Aug. 29-Sept. 7, 2021

The Commission on the General Conference has announced new 2021 dates for General Conference following the postponement of the event due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The quadrennial legislative event will take place on August 29 - September 7, 2021, at the Minneapolis Convention Center in Minneapolis, Minn.

"We're grateful that we were able to secure new dates while keeping the site of General Conference in Minneapolis. Nearly seven years of pre-planning and preparations by the host team have gone into this event," said Kim Simpson, chair of the Commission on the General Conference.

The Commission decided to focus on 2021 as it was not feasible to schedule anything earlier with so much uncertainty over international travel and the spread of COVID-19. In making the announcement, the Commission expressed regret that they were not able to accommodate a request from a group of young delegates to not schedule meeting dates that would conflict with the start of the academic year in the U.S. They cited concerns that the timing would disproportionately affect young leaders and hinder their participation, as well as that of educators who might not be able to take off work at that time.

The Commission did take steps to address a second request from the young adult group to consider alternative methods of accommodating full participation, including utilizing technology to enable virtual voting. Possibilities are being explored.

For more than two centuries, General Conference has met at least once every four years. But outside forces did force some changes. In 1800, church leaders moved the gathering to the spring to avoid fall yellow fever outbreaks. In 1862, Southern Methodists shortened their session to two days because of the U.S. Civil War.

Until COVID-19, however, The United Methodist Church and its predecessors have never delayed the church’s top lawmaking assembly by more than a year. With the move to late in 2021, the organizers of the big meeting are navigating uncharted territory.

The Commission on the General Conference in late June answered questions from Heather Hahn of United Methodist News about what the delay means for how the denomination does its decision-making.

NEJ Bishops Remain in Place
With the next General Conference scheduled for Aug. 29-Sept. 7, 2021, U.S. Jurisdictional Conferences, where new Bishops are elected and assigned, are scheduled for Nov. 10-12. Western PA is part of the Northeast Jurisdiction, where Bishops will remain in their current supervisory assignments through the Nov. 10-12, 2021 NEJ Conference. Two bishops are postponing their plans for retirement in 2020.

WPA Leaders Adapt Annual Conference Plans
As COVID-19 outbreaks continued in parts of Western PA, Conference leaders rescheduled the clergy session of the Annual Conference to August 22, 2020 and continued to plan for a one-day legislative session and ordination services in October and November.

When stay-at-home orders were in place in early April, Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi announced plans to cancel the June Annual Conference session at Grove City College and care for the necessary business in different ways. “Concern for the health and safety of our Annual Conference members, many of whom are among the most vulnerable populations, was the most important factor in my decision,” the Bishop said in an email to voting members sent April 3.

By mid-July, however, while stay-at-home orders were lifted in some areas, cases of the virus began to spike, particularly in southwestern Pennsylvania, causing leaders to again explore alternatives to the planned sessions. As of July 22, the plans included:

• A one-day legislative session on Saturday, Oct. 3, 2020 at the Erie Bayfront Convention Center.
• The Clergy Session, set for Saturday, August 22, 2020 at Ingomar United Methodist Church.
• Ordination services held regionally at three locations:
  • Grace UMC, Warren 1 p.m., Saturday, October 10
  • Crossroads UMC, N. Fayette Campus, 3 p.m., Sunday, October 25
  • New Stanton UMC 1 p.m., Saturday, November 7.
• Memorial Service plans are on hold at this time.

Appointment changes and retirements were still effective July 1. See the book at wpaumc.org/AC.

Reports and legislation that will come before the Annual Conference also are posted at wpaumc.org/AC. Note in the reports that the 2021 session of the Annual Conference also will be held at the Bayfront Convention Center.

As more decisions are made, additional information will be posted on the Annual Conference webpage and included in the weekly Conference e-newsletter. A list of Frequently Asked Questions with answers is also available on the webpage and will be updated.

Clergy and voting members will be notified when registration opens for the Clergy Session and the one-day Annual Conference session. The notification will include information on blocks of hotel rooms available at reduced rates for those who want to stay overnight at their own expense in Erie.
**Fire Damages Church, Parsonage**

Both the house and church building were total losses, said Washington District Superintendent Paul Ritchey, who went to the scene. The fire marshal was investigating the cause of the fire. “Several people on site, including Lanfer, were commenting that it is only a building, and the church is the people,” Ritchey said. “Everyone’s first concern was for the family.”

In a church Facebook post, the pastor said worship would continue as planned online and via conference call on July 5 and 12. “We have an opportunity to envision the workings of the church among us,” he said. “Many have offered a temporary physical space to worship.”

As church leaders focused on next steps the pastor encouraged them to focus on long-term ministry. “This is a chance for us to think what it might look like,” he said.

Pastor Simpson said he was thankful for the brave men and women of the multiple volunteer fire companies who responded to the blaze.

“They are often under-appreciated heroes in our communities. They deserve respect and our praise for their efforts,” he said. “There were no less than six companies working in unison today to fight this blaze. (This should teach us something about teamwork).”

He also offered thanks for the many people from the community who offered water and snacks to the firefighters and the many people who asked how they could help the family and church. The pastor posted a list of clothing and furniture needed by the family, and offered this prayer:

**Almighty God, creator and sustainer of life, we give you thanks this day that lives were saved. By your might those men and women who serve communities were strengthened and encouraged. May your grace continue to surround them as they recover from their work.**

**Lord, we ask for healing for the family that was displaced from their home. May they have physical, emotional, and spiritual healing this day. Surround them with love and care. As the church, allow us to minister with them. Help us to aid them in their re-building. Open us to ways of service, O God. Lord, we ask also to be made new. As a Phoenix grows from the ashes, so too might we as a body of Christ find re-birth from these ashes. Put forth within us, a burning to change and transform into what you might have us to be. Open us to new visions and new directions. Lord, we ask for your will to be done. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**Camping Update: Coronavirus Curtails Some Programs**

All three of Western Pennsylvania’s camps, like most others across the country, had to adjust their programming to ensure the safety of campers and staff during the coronavirus pandemic. Olmsted Manor Retreat Center and At the Lake Ministries were also affected.

Jumonville’s Board of Directors, out of concern for camper safety, made the difficult decision to cancel summer camp this year. The facilities remained partially open for small group or family retreats.

Both Wesley Woods and Camp Allegheny paired down the number of weeks they offered camp. Camp Allegheny welcomed campers from June 28 - August 1. Wesley Woods offered programming the first two weeks of July and the first week of August.

But, after receiving cancellations from three groups who each planned to rent the camp facilities for a week in August, the board of Wesley Woods had to move more quickly than expected with restructuring for financial sustainability. As a result, all but one year-round staff position was to be eliminated at the close of the abbreviated 2020 summer camping season.
When Rachel Rinehart began serving as chair of the Church Council at Grace United Methodist Church in Natrona Heights, last January, not only did the median age of members drop considerably, but the focus of meetings shifted too.

Rachel was 18 and a senior at Highlands High School at the time. After moving from Ohio to her grandparents home before her senior year, she began regularly attending the church she had visited many times growing up. Her grandmother, Kathy Russell, has been the organist at Grace for many years.

“Rachel is an avid writer and deep thinker,” said the Rev. Dr. Andy Spore, pastor of the church. “What impresses me most is her faith life...her self-discipline when it comes to devotions would put most us to shame.”

Rachel credits the pastor’s messages with spurring her to get into the Bible more and taking time for devotions twice a day. “The more I got into the word, I felt closer to God,” Rachel said. “It’s just crazy. I love that little window time...morning and evening. I get so passionate about them. I usually just read four pages of scriptures and go through that in the morning and in the evening I use a devotional.”

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“Aware of Rachel’s growing discipleship, Spore saw leadership potential in her and began meeting with her regularly in the Fall of 2019 with an eye to the possibility of her taking a leadership role on the church council.

“We spent hours talking about leadership, talking about how to conduct a meeting with volunteers who don’t have to cooperate. We spent time on agenda-building. She revamped the agenda for the council so it focuses on ministry as the primary thing. The church is very meticulous about money and that was often the focal point of the meeting.

“We talked about what kinds of things are important, what our focus should be and how we could shape an agenda to those priorities without ignoring finance. We first look at what we dream of and what we should be doing, and then talk about how we pay for it.”

Rachel put it this way: “God is unlimited in his resources and when we think about that, we start to focus on how we can spread that message. If we focus on that and if we come up with something we should do, we have to have this inward faith that He will deliver...and usually when we have that, it happens. Mission is very important.”

One of the first things Rachel and the pastor talked about were taking time for devotions at the start of each meeting to set the tone.

“Her devotions have been really appropriate at the meetings we have had so far,” Spore said last spring. “Each time it has something to do with what we are going to talk about. She has great respect for the leaders and long-time members, but she is finding her voice at the same time. The other leaders on the council have been really receptive, supportive and helpful.”

Not only did Rachel change the focus of Council meeting, serving in the role changed Rachel.

“At first, upon hearing about the initial interest in voting me in as the Chairman of the Council, I felt nervous—I’d never presided over a meeting, nor had I taken charge as a leader in situations. Before I moved from Ohio to Pennsylvania, I was quite reserved and often passive,” she said.

“However, in receiving me with grace and warmth, this congregation and more specifically, my fellow council members and trustees, have given me an immense boost of confidence. They’ve nurtured me into a more assertive, confident leader. Sure, leaders sometimes have a natural aptitude when they lead, but I was and still am quite the late bloomer, so having this opportunity in surroundings where I am guided and lead in love completely changed how I acted.

She added: “When I needed help with building an agenda, a template was given to me. When I went to my first meeting, everyone was patient and kind as I struggled to move it from person to person. There was such a comfortable atmosphere, such kindness, excitement and peace that when I took my seat and called the meeting to order, the nerves disappeared, and I learned how to properly deliver on the position that the council appointed me to. I have nothing but gratitude for what they’ve done for me, taught, and for what I know and expect they will be teaching me in the near future.”

Rachel also has been active in various support roles in the church. Early on she committed to the Kids Meal Network; she does Powerpoint during worship, and serves in other background roles.

This fall, Rachel plans to attend the University of Pittsburgh and major in English. She hopes to live on campus if possible for the fall semester. She’ll still be close enough to stay connected to the church.
**Smith Center Residents Cope with Isolation**

With millions of Americans still sheltered at home because of COVID-19, many slowed down and re-engaged with loved ones and old hobbies. But at the Ruth M. Smith Center in Sheffield, Pa., the 28 physically and mentally challenged residents — many without family and all considered a vulnerable population — suddenly found themselves secluded without visitors or short excursions off the property.

When facilities and state hospitals closed in surrounding counties—McKean, Crawford, Venango, Butler, Clarion, Elk, Erie, Forest, and Potter — Smith Center in Warren County opened its doors.

But the pandemic presented new challenges for the center already working on a shoestring budget. Volunteers who regularly gave their time were closed out. Executive director Kim Adams worried about the psychological effect of the lock-down on the residents.

Tory* hadn’t seen his mother since February and was feeling stir-crazy. “I want to go out to dinner with my mother and sister,” he said hoping for a resolution to the health crisis. But in the midst of uncertainty and stress, Tory resolved to fill his days with music, a little TV, sewing, and artwork. “I have lost 10 pounds since this thing started in March,” he said about his new health focus.

Residents’ responses surprised the director. “They have been amazing—from the start everyone had a better understanding than I expected. We jelled, we pulled together like a team!” Adams said.

Residents use the seclusion positively to teach themselves and each other new skills. Chris*, a four-year resident, spends her time drawing, working puzzles, and doing needlework. “I’m a great aunt, you know. I look forward to being with the kids. I will take a good walk around to see the flowers and everything else in spring,” she said about the isolation ending. But in the meantime, she teaches other residents to sew. “It’s not easy,” she confessed. There’s no rush in a pandemic.

Robert*, an 8-year resident, said the pandemic made him think about life and what he wanted to do. “I have been learning how to read using my Bible — that’s the good coming out of all this for me,” he said. In five years, Robert says he will look back and remember, “How good it was. How good I was treated.”

None of the residents pay their full way, so creating this environment on a tight budget is a challenge.

“We rely on benevolent giving for approximately 1/3 of our budget,” says board president Diane Miller. “But we give people with mental and physical challenges a place to call home when many others closed because of budgetary constraints. We feel blessed to do this.”

Donations are always welcome: Ruth M. Smith Center, 407 S Main St, Sheffield, PA 16347. https://www.ruthsmithcenter.org

*Because of health regulations, last names are not included.

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**Free Local Church Historian School Offered**

The United Methodist Church’s General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH) will offer a free online Local Church Historian School for local church historians or anyone interested in learning or sharing the story of their church. The school will begin on Sept. 14, 2020.

The Local Church Historian School curriculum will cover a wide range of skills necessary to become a “complete” church historian. Participants’ congregations will benefit from a new consciousness of their heritage and legacy and be encouraged to study their unique stories and proclaim it to those around them.

Each week students will be emailed materials and assignments and can proceed at their own pace. It will walk them through best practices and the process for creating and maintaining their church’s history.

Plan now to use this opportunity to ensure that the heritage of each of our churches will be celebrated and that each church can receive the full benefit of its own amazing story.

To register, go to www.GCAH.org or find them on Facebook.
Financial Focus: How Fit Are Your Finances?
By the Council on Finance & Administration

As churches navigate a return to in-person ministries and worship, it is important to capitalize on the opportunities which have emerged in the midst of our chaos. Over the next several months, the Council on Finance and Administration, with the guidance of our Conference Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer, will help local churches take a look at what the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed, and how churches can use that information moving forward.

We will provide practical tools to help you do so confidently. We encourage your finance team to begin this process by taking the opportunity now to critique your spending patterns and habits. As our circumstances continue to change, understanding the health of your church finances is imperative.

Our team has created a Local Church Financial Health Check Assessment Tool. This resource was put together as a practical guide which churches can utilize to assess current realities and identify actionable steps that will help enhance financial and organizational stability. It helps churches ask thought-provoking questions and develop next steps related to the areas of budgeting, revenue, spending, liquidity/cash reserves, contracts/vendors/service providers, personnel, property/investments, mortgages/other debt, and other miscellaneous financial foci. This resource can be found on our Conference website. Here's how:

1) Go to www.wpaumc.org or google WPAUMC and click on the link that says Home: Western PA Conference of the UMC.
2) Click on “Finance” at the top center of the screen and choose Forms and Information.
3) Under Local Church Forms, you will see the Health Check Assessment Tool in both PDF and Word format. The PDF will allow you to use the document exactly as it has been formatted by our team. The Word document will enable you to edit and contextualize the Assessment Tool for your church.

Once you’ve used the Financial Health Check Assessment Tool, your church will be better able to identify the strengths and weaknesses within your current financial structure. You will also be able to identify the stepping-stones that may help your church move toward financial wellness. In the coming months, we will provide in-depth insight and resources for each section of the assessment tool to help you put your plan into action. If you have questions about the Assessment Tool, how to customize it for your church’s needs, or how to move forward with the action steps you identify, contact the Finance Team at the Conference Center, or a member of the Council on Finance and Administration. If you add categories to the pre-formatted rubric, we hope you will let our Conference Treasurer or Assistant Treasurer know and allow us to share them with others as we learn together during this time.

Mission, Ministry News

- UMCOR Kit Collection: WPAUMC is collecting UMCOR Cleaning Kits and Hygiene Kits this summer. Put them together as part of your virtual VBS or remind people during mission moments. The Eastbrook Mission Barn has created a resource you can use, and Katie Peterson is more than happy to be a part of your VBS in person or virtually. Learn more and check the list of drop-off sites in the weekly Mission News.
- Olmsted Manor Welcomes Mission Groups: If your summer mission plans were cancelled and you’re looking for opportunities closer to home, consider working on indoor or outdoor projects at Olmsted Manor or using the retreat center as home base for volunteering elsewhere in the area. Individuals or small groups are welcome, but must abide by Olmsted’s COVID-related guest guidelines. Email Rev. Al Hammer (al@olmstedmanor.org) for more information. Visit olmstedmanor.org
- Connect with the Youth Ministry Team: It’s youth leading youth along with adult mentors in a community of believers committed to encouraging youth to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, influence the UMC, and promote youth leadership. Check out the new YMT video and find ideas for youth ministry during the pandemic at wpaumc.org/Youth.
Register for the "Tour the Camps Bike-a-thon!"

Tour the Camps Bike-a-thon! Since 2018, the Campership Bike-a-Thon has raised more than $44,000 to support the Deeply Rooted, Upward Reaching campaign for camping and retreat ministries. After two seasons of riding from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., the 2020 route will take in our three camps, Olmsted Manor retreat center, At the Lake Ministries and Healthy Village Learning Institute. The ride will be Sept. 26-30.

The cost to register is $175 and the fee includes two jerseys, lodging and meals. However, because this is a fundraiser, each biker will have a minimum fundraising expectation of $500.