

Reflections from Annual Conference

I have been attending Annual Conferences as a Lay Delegate almost every year since I had just graduated from college 40 years ago. In fact, I was a page for Annual Conference during my high school years and remember fondly hanging out with other youth at Grove City. As a young adult, I moved to the Lehigh Valley and became actively involved in a local church, but felt that being connected at the Conference level would enable me to be more effective in supporting the Camp and Retreat Ministry and would even more importantly make it possible to engage in ministry with people of very diverse backgrounds from all over southeastern PA. While living in the Allentown area, I was actually a member of 3 different local churches, but the connection I felt to the larger church made it so much easier to connect with other United Methodists wherever I went. I truly appreciated the connectional system that made it possible for the entire church to do important work for God's kingdom that would not have been possible through a single local church. Some examples are Africa University, No More Malaria, UMCOR, Camp & Retreat Ministry, Dismantling Racism, Youth Mission of Peace, Prison Ministry and Restorative Justice, Single Adult Ministry, etc. I also developed friendships with many more people of color, specifically Asians, Latinos, and African Americans, than I ever would have otherwise.

After moving back to Cranberry Township and joining Dutilh last October, I was anxious to reconnect with Conference leaders here, some of whom I had been on Program Staff with in the 1970s along with Pastor Jim. When Pastor Tom invited me to be one of two lay delegates from Dutilh, little did I know that my very first Annual Conference would be the first ever virtual one in history. Originally, General Conference was to be held in early May, 2020 and it was rescheduled to next September. Every Annual Conference in the U.S. had to reschedule their in-person multi-day Conferences for May or June until sometime this fall and even then, most have not been able to meet in-person due to the pandemic. Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi announced that the Western PA Conference would meet on-line on Saturday, October 3. There would be District meetings from 8:15-8:45, two Plenary sessions from 9-10:15 and 10:30-11:45, and various Affinity Groups using Zoom Conferencing all afternoon.

The Rev. Dawn Hand, our Pittsburgh District Superintendent, led us in a Zoom gathering which included a devotional time and a recounting of some positive examples of extraordinary local church ministry during COVID-19. The Plenary Sessions included videos of Conference-wide ministries, one of which is Jumonville U that is providing full day programming for 20-40 students daily in that immediate area who are either on-line or in a hybrid model. We were told about extraordinary ways in which churches are continuing to pay their apportionments even though there is a great deal of financial concern across the Conference. Worship included Dutilh's *Praise For* band among others. The Bishop acknowledged the difficulty that Pastors had this July in changing appointments and even though no voting took place because we were not able to do that without being in-person, a decision has been made to pay for all pastoral moves through the Conference budget as opposed to each local church incurring that expense.

I attended an Affinity Group for Allegheny College which is the only UM school in western PA, but there is discussion about disaffiliation. At the Camp and Retreat Ministry Affinity Group, each of the Conference's 6 venues (Camp Allegheny, Wesley Woods, Jumonville, At the Lake Ministries, Olmstead Manor, and Healthy Village Learning Institute) gave updates. Youth and Young Adult Ministries are planning Conference-wide gatherings. The last group I attended was on Inclusivity which specifically addressed the on-going concerns within the entire denomination and local churches that are trying to minister to their LGBTQAI+ constituents.

I enjoyed getting outside for a walk around my neighborhood when it was all over, but even virtually, I felt inspired by knowing that the Church is still making a difference in our world and that people all over western PA could meet and greet each other face-to-face without needing to drive anywhere. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns since I tried to simply provide an overview without many of the details. Thank you for the opportunity to be one of your representatives along with Katie Gascoine.