AFTER FOUR DAYS OF prayers, speeches, protests and votes, it remains to be seen whether The United Methodist Church has found a way forward on human sexuality and unity, or remains stuck.

More than 53 percent of the multinational denomination’s top lawmaking body supported the Traditional Plan that reinforces the church’s bans on same-gender unions and “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy. Still uncertain is how much of the legislation will take effect—or whether it will change the dynamic in places where a number of United Methodists, including entire annual conferences, openly defy these rules.

Late afternoon Feb. 26, delegates requested a declaratory decision by the Judicial Council on the constitutionality of the Traditional Plan. The denomination’s top court will address the request at its next scheduled meeting April 23-25 in Evanston, Illinois.

The Rev. Gary Graves, secretary of General Conference, said any piece of legislation that the Judicial Council declares unconstitutional would not be included in the Book of Discipline, the denomination’s policy book. Bishop LaTrelle Easterling said during a town hall meeting March 2 that, as a church, “We sit in the space of the already and the not yet. We are accustomed to that because we serve a Christ who died, who rose and yet will come again.”

This waiting, however, is not passive. “Waiting, for the people of God, is never a waiting without action. We are still called to pray, we are still called to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world,” said the bishop. (See story on the March 2 town hall, below.)

His advice: Hold steady. “Let’s keep doing the things that God has called each of us to do.”

By Heather Hahn & Erik Alsgaard

The impact and implications of decisions made at the recent Special Session of General Conference began to be explored in community in a live-streamed forum led by Bishop LaTrelle Easterling for the people of the Baltimore-Washington Conference on March 2. At the Feb. 23-26 session, in an emotional debate on the church’s stance on homosexuality, 53 percent of the delegates voted to uphold the denomination’s current provisions banning gay clergy and same-gender weddings and to add stricter accountability standards. Delegates also adopted a “gracious exit” plan for churches wishing to leave the denomination.

These decisions will be reviewed in April by the Judicial Council, which will determine if they are constitutional. If they are found to be legally acceptable, parts of the Traditional Plan will go into effect Jan. 1, 2020.

United Methodists are in a liminal space in this particular time in history, the bishop said. “We sit in the space of the already and the not yet. We are accustomed to that because we serve a Christ who died, who rose and yet will come again.”

“But waiting, for the people of God, is never a waiting without action. We are still called to pray, we are still called to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world,” said the bishop. (See story on the March 2 town hall, below.)

The Rev. David Simpson, a retired Elder from the BWC, attended the Special Session as an observer. He said that, as anticipated, it was painful. “What we need to do now,” he said, moments after the conference adjourned, “is to go home and take the time to get ourselves re-centered as persons. After we’ve done that, then begin to council together… and begin to analyze what happened, what we might have done differently, and to ask the question, ‘Did we do enough to keep us together to continue dialogue?’”

His advice: Hold steady. “Let’s keep doing the things that God has called each of us to do.”

By Melissa Lauber

Bishop prays to face future 'United as One'
Mending Fences

As I sat watching the movie in the wake of the 2019 General Conference Session and its aftermath, I’ve wanted to ask the court of public opinion, “What if you’d won,” or “What if you’d lost?” How, then, would you be reacting? Would you be taking a victory lap? Would you be proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord? Would you be demonizing the other side? Would you be reaching out an olive branch looking for ways to move forward together as brothers and sisters in Christ? What would you be doing or want to be done if you were on the other side of the table? Friends, I believe now is the time for conversation; real, deep, uncomfortable conversation. Not a three-speeches-for-and-three-speeches-against conversation, but rather, two or three people-over-a-Coke conversation.

Both sides have spent time talking at each other as a group, but now is the time to talk to individual people. We have let the worst of our ideas about the opposition become the brush with which we have painted everyone, and that is not fair to anyone. It is time for us to have real conversations with people with whom we disagree. In conversation, we can begin to see each other as people, not positions.

In conversation, we can hear the “why” of what people believe and engage each other, not just refute each other to win the argument. In this difficult time, with the eyes of the world upon us, we must react well. We must show the world that after severe disagreement, we can mend fences, not tear larger holes. We must show the world that the church is different. We must show the world that traditionalists and progressives can come to a table together, with our Lord in the midst, and learn to move forward together. It’s time to mend the fences.

Leadership Days 2019 Regional training opportunities for local church leaders are being planned. Save the dates:

Washington Region - March 16
Baltimore Region - April 6
Southern Region - April 13

UMM Prayer Breakfast
March 16 Calvary UMC, Annapolis Learn more at www.eventbrite.com/e/united-methodist-men-anual-prayer-breakfast-tickets-5660043497

Youth Workers Training
March 22-24 Wesley Freedom UMC, Eldersburg A weekend of training and renewal for new and experienced youth workers.

Immigration Town Hall
March 23, 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Bethany UMC, Ellicott City Explore the subject of Immigration, reform and the church’s role as an agent of justice and hope for all people.

UMW celebrates 150 years March 24, 3-5 p.m.
BWC Mission Center in Fulton Honor the Legacy – Hope for the Future is the theme. A contribution of $18.09 is requested. For more information, contact Daisy Farmer at 240-533-6448.

Seeds of Security Golf Tournament and Gala
Monday, April 22, noon to 5 p.m.
Hobbits Glen Golf Course, Columbia Proceeds from this inaugural event go to the Seeds of Security ministry to assist victims of domestic violence. A gala, on April 26 at Hobbits Glen, will also benefit this important ministry. Learn more and register at https://www.eisewhere.com/ereg/index.php?eventid=381688

Pre-Conference Briefings
Saturday, May 18 Morning session, at Jackson Chapel UMC, 560 Hallenger Creek Pike in Frederick, 9:30 a.m. to noon. Afternoon session, at St. Johns United Church at the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center, 10431 Twin Rivers Road in Columbia, 2 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Learn about what’s coming to the 2019 Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference Session, May 29 - June 1. Learn more at www.bwcumc.org/events/annual-conference/

What does it mean to be created in love? How will you live out God’s intentions for justice, unity, hope and grace?

Explore the BWC’s Lenten devotional for individuals and small groups.

bwcumc.org/createdtolove

Theological students from Johns Hopkins University, including a number of Wesley students, have drafted a statement critical of the church’s recent policies on same-sex marriage and ordination. The statement was released in the wake of the 2019 General Conference, which approved rules allowing for the ordination of LGBTQ clergy and the marriage of same-sex couples. The students, who are part of the university’s Jubilee Fellowship, argue that the decisions are inconsistent with the church’s historic understanding of marriage and violate the church’s own allegiance to the Bible. They call on the church to reverse course and reaffirm the traditional understanding of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. The statement is titled “A Time to Reclaim the Faith: A Call to Reconsider Same-Sex Ordination and Marriage.” It was signed by 25 students, including Dr. Andrew Espinosa, a Wesley Church member and a professor at the university’s School of Public Health. The statement was released on the website of the Wesleyan Student Ministry and on the Wesleyan Theological Society’s Facebook page.

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to do individually, let’s engage each other with tenderness and gentleness, let’s do the missions... and keep trusting that God will raise up leaders who can figure this out.”

Kelly Robie, a lay delegate to the Special Session, said that she was heartbroken by the actions of the conference.

“As a young adult, I had a lot more faith in our denomination to be the body of Christ,” she said. “Tonight, I feel shocked, I feel trauma to my heart and my spirit. I know that God isn’t finished with us yet and that God will continue to work in The United Methodist Church even if some people have decided to stop working in The United Methodist Church.”

Robie, a law student at American University, said that she had been carrying back to her home church, St. Paul’s UMC in Kensington, that she wasn’t going anywhere.

“We are here. We are fighting. We are not leaving,” she said. TC Morrow, a candidate for ministry in the BWC for the past several years who has been denied ordination because she is a lesbian married to another woman, had hopes that this General Conference would be different. She came out of it disappointed, but God still had a word for her.

“I received a strong word during the day of prayer (Feb. 23) ... and the words ‘stay the course’ came to me,” she said in the atrium of the Dome immediately after the conference ended. “Those are words that do not generally come to my mind, so regardless of what has happened here at General Conference, I head home with a strong message, ‘stay the course.’”

The April meeting of Judicial Council’s will be its third review of the legislation to see if it is in line with the denomination’s constitution. After some amendments to the plan, the General Conference on Feb. 23 asked the Judicial Council to review the legislation again. Early on Feb. 26, delegates learned the court — citing the same constitutional issues as before — ruled seven of the petitions unconstitutional and identified an unconstitutional sentence in another.

One of the petitions not included in the final package could have been far-reaching, requiring annual conferences to certify that they would uphold the marriage and ordination prohibitions or leave the denomination.

The parts of the Traditional Plan that the Judicial Council has held constitutional include an augmented definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” to say it includes people “living in same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual.” Also previously held constitutional is legislation that sets a minimum penalty for clergy performing a same-sex wedding of one year’s suspension without pay for the first offense and loss of credentials for the second.

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Thoughts From ‘Inside The Bar’ at GC2019

BY CHARLIE MOORE*

M y plan is to share some of my thoughts with you in three parts. Part I will be my thoughts a week before I departed for GC2019. Part II will be my thoughts once I was “Inside The Bar” in St. Louis and Part III are my reflections upon returning home from this historic event. Just to be clear, in parliamentary parlance, “the bar” is the area in which the voting members are seated.

Going to “The Bar”

As a lay delegate, I have to admit that my current views on the proposed “Plans” are still in formation. My thinking is not based upon a deep scriptural or theological foundation. My thinking is much more influenced by the cultural context in which I live. I was a sociology major who ended up as a financial executive with a very large corporation for almost 30 years. I then spent the last 20 years pursuing global entrepreneurial/business initiatives along with multiple volunteer initiatives throughout the “United Methodist Connection.” My “cultural context” is complex. While most of my adult life has been lived within an evolving progressive culture, I have also spent many months in the more traditional context of sub-Saharan Africa during 25 extended visits to Zimbabwe over the past 20 years. These many visits as a VIM Team leader and as Board Member of Africa University, have sensitized me to the wide range of viewpoints on the issue of human sexuality.

As the voting proceeded, my heart began pounding as it stretched to try and fully capture what was happening. And now that the One Church Plan has failed and the Traditional Plan has prevailed, I am struggling to envision how we will proceed from here and I turn again to the Holy Spirit for wisdom and comfort. At this point, it is NOT “Well With My Soul.”

Home From ‘The Bar’

Upon leaving the Bar and returning home, I am feeling overwhelmed by the outpouring of commentary on both sides of these issues through social media as well as through formal statements from various United Methodist affiliated organizations. In fact, after several days, I have decided to stop reading all of this so I can formulate my own thoughts.

What has become increasingly clear to me is that these issues will continue to dominate well past General Conference 2020. What is also clear to me is the fact that my passion for mission with our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe has grown even stronger — if that is possible.

I refuse to allow a single issue to define or limit my love for our beloved Connection. I will remain committed regardless of what denominational structure ultimately prevails and I will work tirelessly to minimize and adapt to whatever the financial impact will be on our global ministries, our seminars and our institutions of higher learning. It is NOW “Well With My Soul.”

*Charlie Moore, a member of Community UMC in Crofton, was a lay delegate to General Conference.

Faith of Africans will shape the church’s future

BY MATT SICHEL*

I n 1821, freed Methodist slaves from the United States returned to Africa and began the Liberia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This was the first American Methodist mission to Africa. In 1855, the United Brethren in Christ sent three missionaries to Sierra Leone, where they spent the next 80 years doing mission work in their only foreign field. This year at the Special Session of General Conference, many in the hall were stunned. I pointed to the numbers on their own sheets of paper. That is the number of St. Louis in the hall, many in the hall were stunned. I pointed to the numbers and mentioned to Sarah, “you will see that vote spread over and over again for the rest of the session.”

To those of us who supported the Traditional Plan, those numbers made complete sense. No amount of impassioned speeches, big name support or marketing campaigns would have changed that vote.

The UMC is deeply divided over this issue because we are deeply divided on the interpretation and application of Scripture. Those who espouse a traditional understanding of human sexuality will not be moved, and come to it after honestly wrestling with Scripture. It is not stirred by animus, but by a dedication to trying to be faithful to what we have understood, knowing that we will be held responsible by our Lord for what we have supported and taught.

Yes, some have suggested that two-thirds of American delegates supported the One Church Plan, but the United States is not the center of the UMC any longer. We made disciples for the transformation of the world, and those disciples now come from Russia, the Philippines, Mexico, and yes, Africa. And like their conservative American brothers and sisters, they have wrestled with the Scriptures and come on their own to a traditional understanding of human sexuality.

Those missionaries sent to Africa birthed a new movement of God in Methodism. I come away from St. Louis with an even stronger passion for mission with our brothers and sisters, they have wrestled with the Scriptures and come on their own to a traditional understanding of human sexuality. Their witness to the Spirit of God and the vitality of a movement tells me that God is indeed still speaking, and right now, God has an African accent.

At General Conference 2019, Africa stood up and became the leaders of the church. Will we rejoice or lament this beautifully diverse, global nature of our denomination?

*Matt Sichel, a member of Wesley UMC in Hampstead, was a lay delegate to the General Conference.
Trust in God: 'Just Keep Stepping!'

BY GINGER E. GAINES-CIRELLI

My dad was born and raised in the Ozark hills of northwest Arkansas, the son of generations reared in that beautiful place. There's a peculiar way of speaking that's native to that land. Today I realize how deeply embedded in my own speech are those idioms.

When we sneezed, Daddy would say, “Scat there!” I have no idea what that means. But I often find myself blurt ing out that “blessing” when someone sneezes. When I was anxious about an assignment, Dad would say, “That’s okay. Just keep stepping!” and I would know that Dad believed in me and my abilities. Those words were deep encouragement.

All of us need deep encouragement in these days following the 2019 General Conference. My fervent hope was that The United Methodist Church would offer the world a vision for how to live together in diversity and conflict, an alternative to the radical polarization and dissolution of relationships on display in the public square everywhere. I prayed that our connection in the Body of Christ, love for one another, core values from the Wesleyan tradition, and commitment to the scriptural calls of love holds you."

I pray that we in the Baltimore-Washington Conference will continue to value the beautiful diversity we experience in our connection, honor one another’s consciences, and celebrate the faithful, contextual, life-changing ministries that happen across our conference. Just keep stepping! When you are tempted to be discouraged, laugh at the tempter. God’s love is holding you. God’s love is holding us. That is more than enough to see us through.

Let’s step out together into God’s future.

*The Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli, senior pastor of Foundry UMC in D.C., was a clergy delegate to General Conference.*

The debate stretches beyond sexuality

BY REV. STEPHEN ANDREW TILLETT*

Over the years, whenever I have been typing the words “United Methodist Church” fast, it often comes out as “United Methodist Church.” At General Conference 2019, the UMC accelerated the process of becoming united. I have spent a lot of time reading the comments of colleagues on both sides of the theological and ideological divide. The pain, anguish and, at times, anger that my beloved colleagues feel about the outcome of the Special Session of General Conference is understandable.

There are some who have asserted that “sexuality” is really just a smokescreen. The actual issues at play are power, proceeds and property.

Let’s keep it real. There have always been hidden or suppressed expressions of human sexuality in the church from the very beginning. We know this because it is referenced in Biblical writings. There is nothing new under the sun. We are all “going on to perfection” but none of us are there yet (nor will we be in this life).

I do not claim to be the arbiter of all that is true, but this matter is huge. There are many things the Bible has to say about personal holiness that were not the focus this week in St. Louis.

Nevertheless, Jesus’s words in Matthew 7:1-5 really speak to me. “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you receive.”

While I understand that there are many of us who have not yet made our peace with life circa 2019, and wish many things we weren’t going to stay are. Same sex marriage is now the law of the land in the United States. Furthermore, every person reading this has probably has LGBTQ relatives, coworkers, members and associates.

These people are all precious and beloved in God’s sight and deserving of our love and respect. Any denomination that is not forward-looking and willing to embrace all of God’s people risks becoming irrelevant and extinct.

Our children and grandchildren, who are Millennials and Generation Z, do not feel compelled to stay anywhere they’re not welcomed or wanted. And if they choose to leave, when those of us who are older “go the way of all flesh,” who will be left in those congregations?

I also submit that one of the reasons the Traditionalist’s Plan has not passed muster with the Judicial Council is because they are not concerned with whether it is deemed “constitutional” or not. That’s because, after the schism, they will write a new Book of Discipline to suit the new denomination they are forming.

So my counsel to our wounded colleagues and members is simple. As with any relationship, if somebody has made it clear they don’t want you... that they don’t want you to be with you, rather than trying to contort yourselves into something unrecognizable so they will tolerate you, “shake the dust off your feet” and keep it moving.

Life is too short to waste time trying to win the approval of others that they will never deign to grant you.

Instead, I would suggest that we remember the words found in Micah 6:8, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

God is your God. God belongs to all of us, just the same. And no one can stand in God’s way when the Lord wants to bless you or use you.

"If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

God is love and God loves you and me. That is more than enough.

*The Rev. Stephen Andrew Tillet is pastor of Ashbury Brodneck UMC in Annapolis. He attended General Conference as an observer.*
Traditionalists respond to Special Session

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

The Baltimore-Washington Conference is the most diverse conference in United Methodism, in terms of race, gender, age, geography, and theology. Several people in favor of the Traditional Plan who witnessed the 2019 Special Session offered their thoughts after it was approved on Feb. 26. That plan, along with a few other petitions, is now in the hands of the church’s Judicial Council — for rulings on the constitutionality of the legislation (see story, p. 1).

By its actions, the UMC prioritized biblical authority and covenantal accountability as critical to our life as a United Methodist Church,” wrote the Rev. Rudy Bropleh, lead pastor of Asbury UMC in Shepherdstown, W.Va. “(At Asbury), it means that we will not be known for what we’re against, but what we’re for. And we’re for loving all people, receiving all people, and serving all people. We will strive to do no harm to anybody, but try to do good to everybody.”

“At Asbury,” he continued, “we don’t check human sexuality at the door; we never have and we never will. We don’t discriminate against anyone. Instead, our goal is to be in relationship with all people.”

The Rev. Heath Wilson, pastor at Tom’s Creek UMC in Emmitsburg, said he told his congregation on March 3 that they were open and welcoming to all: “We all come with some brokenness and we all come with some holiness and all of us come in need of Christ,” he said. “And everyone who comes on a Communion Sunday is invited to the Table to receive. You are invited to the table … no matter who you love, you are invited to the Table even if you are not sure you trust Jesus yet, you are invited to the Table if you are filled with joy and you are invited to the Table if you are struggling with depression, you are invited to the Table if you never drink a drop of alcohol, you are invited to the Table if you are struggling with addictions. You are invited to worship, you are invited to commune, you are invited to be part of something greater, no matter what! So, let’s journey together.”

The Rev. Travis Knoll, who pastors Hunts Memorial UMC in Towson, shared a brief outline of his sermon on March 3. In it, he said that Christians often get it wrong in that Jesus didn’t say, “come, let’s discuss truth.” Instead, it’s “come, follow me.” “In other words, it was an invitation back into relationship with God through Christ (if you have seen me, you have seen the father) at the cost of abandoning our own claims to godliness and understanding. It isn’t ‘blind faith’; it is instead an exchange — we give up pretending that we are God in order to have an actual relationship with the real God… ‘I love the church,’” he wrote, “‘but I think that we are often in the place of telling God what is good and what is evil. That is backward. God is the one who decides what is good and what is not. That is why I think that the church cannot do as we might wish; we are not God.’ The Rev. Ray McDonald, pastor at Laurel UMC, said that he would say to his congregation that there are well-intended Christian brothers and sisters on both sides of the divide.

“There is no room for rejoicing when part of our body is mourning,” he said. “We need to mourn with those who mourn. We have not settled much while we have not settled much while we are still so divided. We will begin to pray for GC2020. We will pray for the global UMC — praying for those on both sides of this divide. “I will remind them that at First Church, we love every one and everyone is welcome.”

Serve as a delegate

At the Annual Conference Session, six lay delegates and six clergy delegates will be elected to serve at the 2020 General Conference, May 5-15, 2020. An additional six clergy and six lay delegates will be elected to serve at the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference, July 13-17, 2020.

Nomination forms and statements are due April 1.

Learn more at www.bwcumc.org/news-and-views/guidelines-announced-for-electing-delegates/

Celebrate Excellence

Applications and nominations are now being accepted for a wide variety of awards including:
• Abundant Health
• Advocacy and Action
• Moral Courage
• Youth Group Leader of the Year
• Evangelism

Nominations are due April 1. Learn more at www.bwcumc.org/annual-conference-awards/

Resolve to Act

If adopted by the members of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, resolutions can shape the polity and practices of the church in our area.

The deadline for submitting a resolution to the May 29-June 1 Annual Conference session is April 1.

Learn more at www.bwcumc.org/events/annual-conference-annual-conference-resolutions-submission/

Create Justice

From funds collected in the church-wide Peace with Justice Sunday June 16, the BWC will give grants to local churches working to bring God’s shalom to life in their communities.

Grant applications are due April 30.

Learn more at www.bwcumc.org/ministries/advocacy-action/peace-with-justice/
Beloved of God, The Special Session of General Conference (SSGC) has concluded. The Rev. C. Antony Hunt is featured on the page almost before we vacated the premises. Tons of dirt were hauled in to fill the arena floor and welcome those ready to experience a monster truck event. It will take much longer for the members of The United Methodist Church to turn the page on what transpired there.

On Saturday, March 2, we offered a live stream session to share information regarding the legislation passed during the SSGC. You may view the entire three-hour broadcast at www.bwumc.org/resources/a-way-forward. I join a cacophony of voices who understand that we will be processing, healing from and unpacking this SSGC for quite a while.

As you know, I am an ardent supporter of the One Church Plan and believe it offers the contextual freedom and space for all persons to live according to their theological and scriptural interpretations. I remain perplexed as to why some completely dismiss the possibility of being in relationship with persons with whom they disagree. I am well aware of oft-repeated scriptural arguments, so we need not rehearse them again. Respected scholars arrive at differing conclusions concerning those passages.

Furthermore, I believe we have been living the One Church model for some time. We simply won’t confess it to the world.

As we sit in the liminal space between Special Social Principles rulings on the constitutionality of the petitions, and their corresponding implementation on January 1, 2020, perhaps the most important task before us is understanding what the Traditional Plan does not mean for our denominational family.

First, the Traditional Plan’s passage does not mean that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual people are not to be welcomed in our churches. Although Para. 161 of our Social Principles does contain the language concerning incompatibility, it also “implor[e] families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.”

Further, it also articulates our commitments to mission for and with all persons. Youth should be welcomed into confirmation classes and those qualifying for leadership positions should be welcomed to serve. There is nothing that precludes these actions. If that statement concerns us, I invite you to consider why.

Further, there should be clarification that one’s identity as gay or lesbian does not automatically preclude them from being in ministry. Our disciplinary language forbids practicing homosexuals from ordination and appointment. Simply identifying as gay or lesbian does not meet the disciplinary criteria. If there are persons, both hetero and homosexual, who are committed to celibacy. If one who identifies as same-gender loving is committed to a life of celibacy, they have every right and privilege available to all other clergy in our denomination.

Finally, there is language in the Traditional Plan or our current Book of Discipline that precludes forming meaningful relationships with persons unlike ourselves. In our current political and theological climates it is becoming more and more common that we live within an echo chamber of persons who share our worldview. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explained in her TedTalk, having our understanding of anything on a single story is dangerous. It is quite easy for us to “other” those we don’t know, have no relationship with or hold in disdain. It is far more difficult to “other” persons with whom we converse, break bread and work alongside.

I pray we begin to form relationships with persons outside of our echo chambers. I pray we fellowship, study and engage in mission and ministry with persons from all walks of life.

As we wait, we do not wait as those without purpose. We wait as those who have been called, baptized and ordained to serve the present age.

It is not lost on me that our waiting is occurring during the season of Lent, a journey that ushers us into a 40-day period of intentional fasting, prayer, study, meditation and self-examination. It is a 40 day and nights of testing, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he read the following:

*The Rev. C. Anthony Hunt is pastor at Emanuel Chapel UMC in Baltimore.*
BWC delegates deliver undernotes of grace

BY MELISSA LAUBER
UMConnection Staff

Kelly Robier, a lay delegate from the Baltimore-Washington Conference, seconded many of the motions and amendments that came to the floor of General Conference. It was almost second nature. She wanted a meaningful discussion of the church’s future. She sought to support those petitions she thought would make that future more faithful. Plus, she has a voice that carries. People can hear her.

On February 25, in St. Louis, Robier rose to the microphone to offer an amendment to the One Church Plan that addressed the constitutionality of the plan. Then she sat down to vote, only to find her voting machine was out of order.

Robier raised a flag to let the page know she needed a new machine, but there wasn’t time. The page advised her to quickly remove the card of Conrad Link, who was sitting next to her, from his machine and insert hers. She quickly voted.

Her one gesture changed the outcome. The vote was 494 to 403. Her one vote counted. Her gesture made a difference. In essence, she made an amendment, and then single-handedly passed it. That is the power of one voice.

Earlier in the day there was a vote that ended in a tie—409 to 409. It was a symbol of how evenly divided the church is.

Some people noted the votes were a sign of the increasingly global nature of the Church, with the delegates from the Central Conferences tending to be more conservative.

The Rev. Mark Holland, executive director of Mainstream UMC, noted, “So here are the details of how we lost the big vote today. We had 306 votes for the One Church plan; we lost by 50 votes out of 822 cast. There were 34 delegates who were not seated for the conference, mostly due to visa issues. We knew we needed to flip 30 votes yesterday and we did not. We had two-thirds of the U.S. vote, half of Europe (all of Western Europe) and some success in the Philippines. We needed 50 votes out of 260 from Africa and we received maybe 10 and maybe even zero.”

But in a note to her congregation at Falston UMC, the Rev. Karin Walker noted that if 28 people had voted differently the Traditional Plan would have been defeated. If 26 people had voted differently, the One Church Plan would have passed.

If God is speaking within, or through, the people called United Methodist, God is saying more than one thing.

In the Dome in St. Louis, much of what was said was hurtful and wrapped up in power, control, and pain. There were also undernotes of grace. But on the whole, people spoke to their own choirs, echoed the thoughts of their own tribes and wiped one another’s tears.

One delegate cited the Methodist debate over race in 1859, which was “a stand-up-and-clap, sit-down-and-cry moment.” With the creation of the segregated Central Conference, whites stood and clapped, blacks sat down and cried, he said. At this conference, the LGBTQ community in rainbow stoles and their allies cried. They also chanted, and sang and preached and prayed.

On the floor, proponents of the Traditional Plan, said that “loving accountability for the sake of holiness is the most Wesleyan thing there is.” While those in favor of the One Church Plan asked, “Are your convictions of righteousness so big that they will obscure the grace of God?”

A delegate from Liberia proclaimed, “It is better to be divided by truth rather than united in error.” In those moments, the cry for division felt palpable—like torture by a thousand tiny parliamentary paper cuts.

The delegates of the Baltimore-Washington Conference did a stupendous job. They rose repeatedly to the microphone, asking potent questions, making amendments and speaking prophetic words.

At one point, early in the conference, the song “Marching in the Light of Christ,” began and the BWC delegation rose from their chairs and danced in the aisle behind their tables.

At another point, Jen Ihlo, one of the BWC’s lay delegates, rose and addressed the body. “I’m queer,” she said. “That’s one tiny part of who I am. We are all of us children of God. We all belong.” Like Robier, I’ll second that.