

## UM Church claims a Way Forward



Bishop LaTrelle Easterling (center) and other United Methodist bishops and delegates gather together to pray at the front of the stage before a key vote on church policies about homosexuality on Feb. 26, during the Special Session of General Conference, held in St. Louis. See overview story, below.

BY HEATHER HAHN & ERIK ALSGAARD

**A**FTER 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.)

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

*See Overview, page 3*

## Bishop prays to face future 'United as One'

BY MELISSA LAUBER  
UMConnection Staff

**T**HE 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.

In a detailed analysis, Tom Starnes, the Conference Chancellor, provided a review of General Conference action. Most of what was adopted as the Traditional Plan, he pointed out, had already been declared

*See Livestream, page 3*





By MANDY SAYERS  
LEAD Pastor, Glen Mar UMC, Ellicott City

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it / And spills the upper boulders in the sun, And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

So begins Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall." It is about a stone fence with no binding cement (common in the New England countryside), separating the writer from his neighbor.

The neighbor lives by the adage that "Good fences make good neighbors." He expects the fence to be mended, from one side and the other, to rebuild the wall between them.

The writer suspects there is a deeper truth than "Good fences make good neighbors" — that we are not made for walls after all, and if we would be truly neighbors, there should be a persistent dismantling of fences and walls. When we try to build them, the "something" works to erode them, almost subversively, to turn them over.

I'm all for confession, repentance, forgiveness, healing and restoration of relationship. I'm all for THAT definition of "mending fences."

But I don't think "Good fences make good neighbors." (That's something CS Lewis' demon Screwtape might say, to ensure that the Gospel never gets preached,

souls are not converted, and the church shrinks. Think how Screwtape must have celebrated after St. Louis! "The UMC's witness to the world is THIS? Let's celebrate, Wormwood!")

I'm weary of property lines, the surveyors' insistence that we have to live in fear all the time, that we have to stay on our "sides." What if we decided good fences don't make good neighbors? What if we just unlocked the doors and kicked down the stone walls?

We don't set up "property lines" around abortion, women's leadership in church, or divorce. But when it comes to sexuality, this stone fence, this wall, we insist on building, over and over again. I thought Christ had broken down the wall? I wish we would leave it down.

*Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head: "Why do they make good neighbors?... / Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense.*

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall / That wants it down.*

**Ancient church mothers and fathers often greeted one another with the phrase, "Give me a word." This greeting led to the sharing of insights and wisdom. Today we continue this tradition with this monthly column. This year, the "WORD" will be taken from Ephesians 4:1-16 .**

By DARYL WILLIAMS  
Pastor, St. Paul UMC, Oxon Hill

*"Be humble in victory and gracious in defeat." – Christopher Earle*

"Now imagine she's white," is the statement made by Jake Brigance, played by Matthew McConaughey in the climactic courtroom scene in the movie "A Time to Kill."

Brigance's character is an idealistic young attorney defending a black man for the murder of two white men. To win his case, he realizes he has to get his all-white jury to see the world through the eyes of his black client.

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.

## EVENTS

### Leadership Days

**2019**  
Regional training opportunities for local church leaders are being planned. Save the dates:  
**Washington Region** - March 16  
**Western Region** - March 30  
**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-annual-prayer-breakfast-tickets-56650943497](http://www.eventbrite.com/e/united-methodist-men-annual-prayer-breakfast-tickets-56650943497)

### 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 \$18.69 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.eiseverywhere.com/ereg/index.php?eventid=384889&>

### Pre-Conference Briefings

**Saturday, May 18**  
Morning session, at Jackson Chapel UMC, 5609 Ballenger 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/](http://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](http://bwcumc.org/createdtolove)**

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**BWCUMC.ORG/EVENTS**



# Overview: Local UMs respond with mixed thoughts

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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 Robier, 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.”

Robier, a law student at American University, said that the message she was carrying back to her home church, St. Paul’s UMC in Kensington, was 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



Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, right center, speaks with members of the BWC's General Conference delegation during a break Feb. 25.

to the plan, the General Conference on Feb. 25 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 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 a 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.

*\*Hahn is a multimedia news reporter for United Methodist News Service. Alsgaard is managing editor for the UMConnection.*



Rev. Leo Yates Jr. , signs "How Great Thou Art" during the Feb. 23 morning of prayer at GC 2019.

# Livestream: A time for learning, listening, and questions

From page 1

unconstitutional. The Judicial Council will consider all the provisions again April 23-26.

One item that was previously ruled constitutional was mandatory penalties for pastors performing same-gender unions. The first offense would result in a one-year suspension without pay and a second offence would result in termination of conference membership and the revocation of clergy credentials.

A second item that was adopted and is constitutional “tightens up language” about what it means to be a “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” Starnes said. The newly-approved definition includes people “living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or is a person who publicly states that she or he is a practicing homosexual.”

In the bishop’s sharing and in several prayers, the pain and anger being experienced by LGBTQ people were lifted up. “I have not met a single person who attended General Conference or watched it on live stream who was not deeply affected,” Easterling said.

No matter where you stand on the theological spectrum, “many have been wounded, many have been harmed.” And yet, the bishop said, “there is no equivalence of pain felt by those whose very being was at issue at this special called session.”

The bishop said it is her “earnest prayer that every lay person, every minister, every church will intentionally reach out to our gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and queer brothers and sisters to share the good news that they are loved and beloved by God. I hope we put flesh and bones on those words and live into them in the coming days. Please do not minimize, or attempt to silence, those in intangible, palpable and visceral pain. In the words of Zora Neale Hurston, 'If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.'”

The Rev. TR Chattin, the clergy head of the BWC delegation, expressed via video that this General Conference felt different than the eight others she had attended, starting in 1988.

“It had been my hope that this special session would have allowed us to be united,” she said. “For many of us the way forward from this conference is not entirely clear. My heart aches for the LGBTQIA community and for our fractured connection.

“The wounds of this conference cut me deeply. It is especially in these times that we need each other and need to be reminded of the unwavering presence of the God of life and love.”

However, Chattin said, the results of this conference might be a catalyst for action.

“Together as a conference, we have an opportunity to respond to our respective places of mission and ministry in love,” she said

At the forum, several others spoke out about the impact of the special session on their faith and ministry, including Megan Blizzard, a young adult from Westminster UMC, who read a letter signed by more than 15,000 young adults calling on the church to stop hate and allow all people to live fully into their identities as children of God.

The Rev. Joseph Daniels of Emory UMC, a five-time delegate to General Conference, urged those listening to recognize that this is not just about LGBTQ people, but is a broader issue of the oppression that includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class and more. Until the church addresses the broader issues of power, profit, property and control, “we will constantly come to moments like this and constantly witness the carnage of somebody,” he said.

Daniels urged members of the

Baltimore-Washington Conference to embrace justice, as “the absence of oppression and the presence of peace,” recognizing the importance of both “soul justice and social justice.”

In a question and answer session, Bishop Easterling called on all present to take a time of discernment, self-care, deep reflection and sharing before reacting to any potential changes in the church.

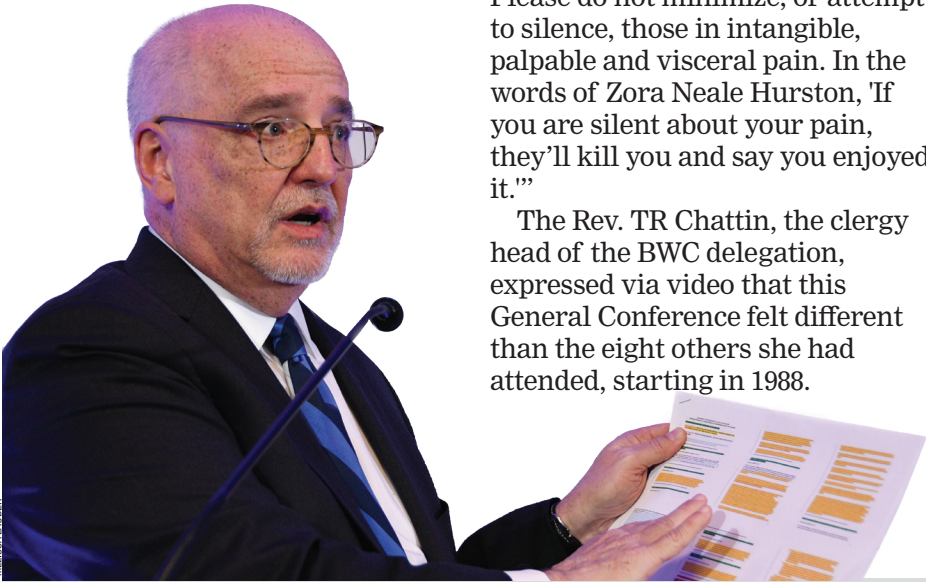
She encouraged individuals and congregations considering withholding their tithes, offerings and mission shares not to “weaponize their stewardship and the gifts God has given them.” She also stressed the importance of every United Methodist church being open as a house of prayer to all people.

She encouraged everyone to remain open to the God of miracles and grace. “Never put a period where God has placed a comma,” she said.

In addition to 21 churches throughout Maryland, D.C. and West Virginia, the live-stream forum was watched by more than 2,500 people.

At the close of the three-hour forum at the Mission Center in Fulton, the bishop proclaimed the words of Ephesians about one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

“We are the BWC and we are one,” she said. And the more than 100 people who gathered for the taping joined her: “We are the BWC and we are one. We are the BWC and we are one.”



BWC Chancellor Tom Starnes shares his presentation on the petitions and constitutionality of the Traditional Plan during a March 2 live stream.



# Thoughts From ‘Inside The Bar’ at GC2019

BY CHARLIE MOORE\*

MY PLAN IS to share some of my thoughts with you in three parts. Part I will be my thinking 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. I am deeply regretful that we are at the point where one singular

issue can have the potential impact of significantly reducing the depth and breadth of our beloved Connection. As I prepare to travel to St. Louis, I continue in prayer as I seek guidance from the Holy Spirit.

## Inside ‘The Bar’

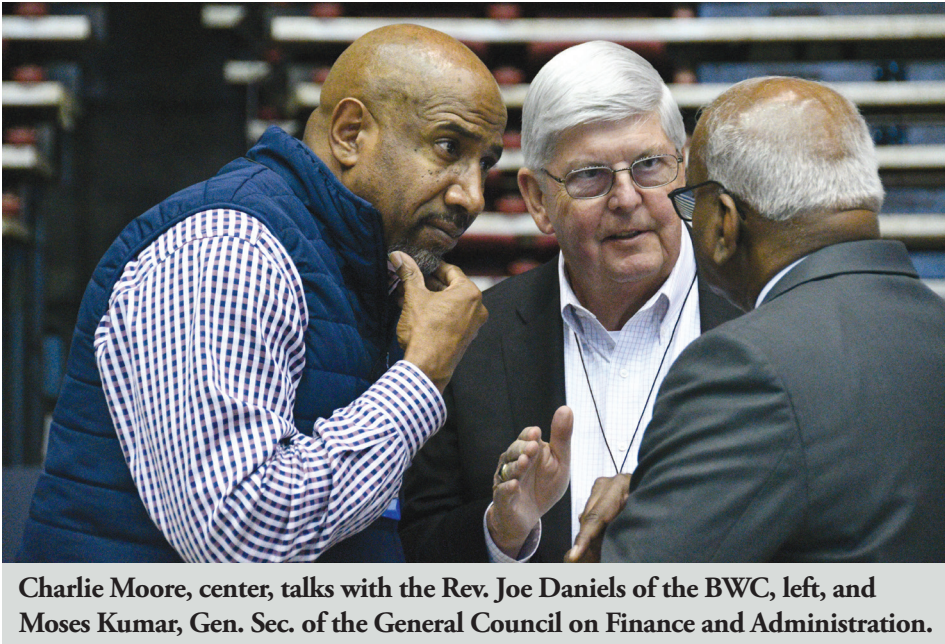
Upon arriving in St. Louis, I was able to spend considerable time with a number of my close Zimbabwean friends who are fellow delegates and visitors to General Conference. Their support of the Traditional Plan is clear and it is deeply rooted in their history. This history began as the evangelical white missionaries brought Christianity from the U.S. to Africa. Almost all theological seminaries in Africa continue to teach from a traditional/evangelical perspective. In my conversations with my African friends, it was also conveyed to me that almost all African annual conferences plan to remain in our denomination even if the One Church Plan passes. This realization significantly influenced my final decision to fully support the One Church Plan — which is founded on the notion that this path will do the least harm to our beloved Connection and will result in the least number of people leaving our denomination. 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 seminaries 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.*



Charlie Moore, center, talks with the Rev. Joe Daniels of the BWC, left, and Moses Kumar, Gen. Sec. of the General Council on Finance and Administration.

# Faith of Africans will shape the church's future

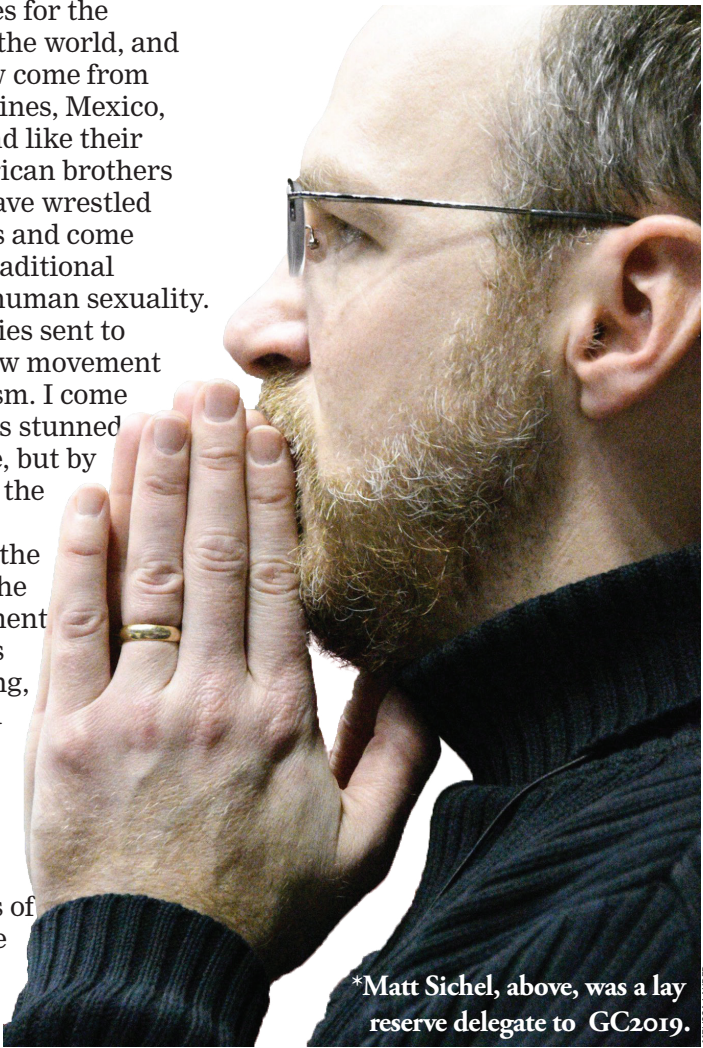
BY MATT SICHEL\*

IN 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 General Conference, both the Sierra Leone and the Liberian Conferences sent 12 delegates each, the same amount as we sent from our Baltimore-Washington Conference. Overall, over 40 percent of the delegates were from outside of the U.S., with 30 percent from Africa. This says something significant to me about the nature and future of our United Methodist Church. I was the last elected lay delegate to our NEJ/General Conference delegation. This was my first opportunity to represent our annual conference. I was honored and humbled at the chance. While my theological perspective is certainly more conservative than the majority of our delegation, I appreciated that I was always able to share my thoughts openly in our delegation meetings. I spent the majority of the sessions in St. Louis with the other

reserve delegates, sitting next to my sister, Sarah Schlieckert. She and I have connected over many things these past four years, and I have grown to appreciate her faithful, intellectual curiosity. I have tried to articulate the basis for my conservative viewpoints to her, and she has done the real work of trying to genuinely understand me. I hope I have done the same with her, listening, learning, and growing. On Monday, when the votes for the Traditional Plan showed a 55 percent majority, 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 stunned not by the outcome, but by the dynamo that is the UMC in Africa. 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 to become 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 reserve delegate to the General Conference.*



\*Matt Sichel, above, was a lay reserve delegate to GC2019.



# 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 blurting out that “blessing” when someone sneezes! When I was anxious about an assignment, Dad would say, “[That’s] No step for a stepper!” 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 relationship 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 to unity, humility, compassion, and justice would allow us to do something new.

I was encouraged by the opportunity presented by the Commission on a Way Forward to lessen harm for LGBTQIA people while making space for faithful, contextual ministries in all the places United Methodists live and serve around the world. I was grateful for the recognition that, for contextual ministries to

occur, the discriminatory language against LGBTQIA people in our Book of Discipline had to be removed. I walked into St. Louis with so much hope for what the people called Methodist might do.

Instead, at best, we come away from St. Louis with the status quo and, at worst, new provisions (should they be deemed constitutional) that accomplish the very opposite of what was called for by the 2016 General Conference.

Far from allowing contextual ministries, these new provisions demand a rigid uniformity of practice that penalizes dissent and threatens expulsion. They reject outright any blessing of the well-documented gifts and graces of LGBTQIA persons for ministry or of longstanding, loving, committed relationships between same-gender partners. They disregard the theological and biblical integrity and conscience of LGBTQIA allies. Those who cannot abide by these punitive standards are offered a “gracious exit.”

The Commission on a Way Forward was asked to develop a plan offering as much unity as possible with as much contextuality for ministry as possible. The Traditional Plan was not the work of the Commission. Its passage leaves us with legislation that is largely unconstitutional, encourages either schism or further disobedience and conflict, harms our evangelism through its exclusion and hypocrisy, and inflicts further harm on LGBTQIA young people, adults, their families and allies.

So what do we do now?

In January, I began a new morning prayer practice of being available to Christ, listening, and writing down what I receive for future reflection. Here is some of



The Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, right, talks with the Rev. TR Chattin on the floor of the Special Session of General Conference. Both were delegates.

what I have heard:

"Know that the future is held in God’s keeping."

"The way will make itself. Just keep stepping."

"Be free of worry. There is no point. Be in today and love. Be in today and serve. Be in today and play. Laugh at the tempter. There is no power greater than love. And love holds you."

As we move into this moment following the General Conference with all the uncertainty it brings, I hear my Daddy’s voice saying, “No step for a stepper!” I hear the voice of Christ saying, “Just keep stepping.”

In other words, trust that God is giving you what you need. Trust that God holds the future. Keep doing what you do and serving as you serve and loving as you love in your congregation. The people in your local communities need you to keep being the church for them — regardless of what vote gets taken at an institutional meeting.

I don’t intend to stop serving

Jesus and my congregation in the ways I am called to serve. My congregation is committed to continue being a witness for the inclusive love of God and radical hospitality of Christ for all people in our diverse human family.

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 TILLET\*

OVER THE YEARS, whenever I have been typing the words "United Methodist Church" fast, it often comes out as “*Untied* Methodist Church.” At General Conference 2019, the UMC accelerated the process of becoming untied.

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 palpable.

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 people of various 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 in this matter. 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 get.”

While I understand that there are many of us who have not yet made our peace with life circa 2019, and wish many things weren't so ...they are. Same sex marriage is now the law of the land in the United States. Furthermore, every person reading this 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 wanted or welcome. 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 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 to 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 act justly 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 to 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 Tillett is pastor of Asbury Broadneck 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 — similar to the Supreme Court — 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

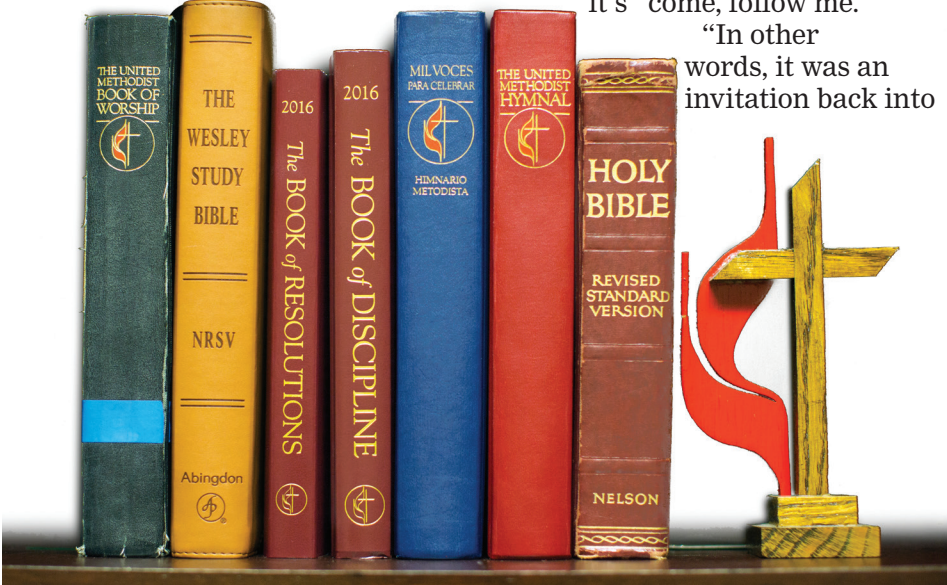
relationship with God through Christ (‘if you have seen me, you have seen the father’) at the cost of abandoning our own claims to godliness and understanding. It isn’t ‘blind faith;’ it is instead an exchange — we give up pretending that we are God in order to have an actual relationship with the real 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 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.”



## DON'T LET THESE OPPORTUNITIES PASS YOU BY

### 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/](http://www.bwcumc.org/events/annual-conference/annual-conference-resolutions-submission/)



### 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/](http://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/](http://www.bwcumc.org/annual-conference-awards/)



### 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/](http://www.bwcumc.org/ministries/advocacy-action/peace-with-justice/)





# A word from the bishop

## In liminal time, UMs called to ‘actively wait’

Beloved of God,

The Special Session of General Conference (SSGC) has concluded. The Dome in St. Louis turned 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.bwcumc.org/resources/a-way-forward](http://www.bwcumc.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 the oft-articulated 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 of awaiting the Judicial Council 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 denomination.

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 “implores families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.”

Further, it also articulates our commitment to be in ministry 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 or disturbs you, 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 threshold. There are persons, both hetero and homosexual, who are committed to celibacy. If one who identifies as same-gender loving has committed to a life of celibacy, they have every right and privilege available to all other clergy in our denomination.

Finally, there is nothing 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, basing our understanding of anything on a single story is dangerous.

It is quite easy 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 occurs during the season of Lent, a journey that ushers us into a 40-day period of intentional fasting, prayer, study, meditation and service. As Jesus emerged from his 40 days and nights of testing, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he read the following:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners And recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

May we sit with these words and seek God’s face in understanding exactly in what forms evil, injustice and oppression present themselves to us today.

Blessings and peace,

*Bishop LaTrelle Easterling*



## Pilgrimage to retrace the steps of freedom

By C. ANTHONY HUNT\*

JOURNEYS TOGETHER ARE wonderful ways to build community and learn more about who we are in light of the diversity that is incumbent in community. Since 2006, I have had the privilege of leading groups of scholars from Wesley Theological Seminary and St. Mary’s Seminary and University in immersion courses that retrace many of the steps of the American Civil Rights movement in Alabama during the 1950s and 60s.

This coming April 6-11, a group of about 50 laity and clergy from the Baltimore-Washington

Conference will travel from Maryland to Alabama to retrace the steps of those who lived and struggled together during the American Civil rights era.

We will travel through Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, Ala., beginning each day with singing, praying and reading Scripture as was the practice in the tradition of the American Civil Rights movement. John Lewis, now a U.S. Congressman from Georgia, and one who labored on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement, has intimated that “We never went out without singing and praying.” And so, before leaving each morning, we will pray, read Scripture, and sing freedom songs.

As we travel, reflect, listen and learn together — often struggling through many of the difficult paths and realities of those who lived the Civil Rights movement — we invariably sense among ourselves the real possibility that the Beloved Community can be realized in our lifetime, and that bridges can indeed be built to help us cross and healthily engage those things that still divide us.

We will visit numerous sites that were significant to the Civil Rights movement. In Montgomery, we will visit Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Rev. Martin

Luther King, Jr. served as pastor from 1954-1960 at the height of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Two blocks from Dexter Avenue Church, we’ll visit the First Confederate White House, the home of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. Sitting between Dexter Avenue Church and the first Confederate White House is the Alabama State Capitol — the place where Gov. George Wallace and other state officials stood in defiance of efforts towards equal rights among the races. We will visit the Equal Justice Initiative, and learn of the legacy of lynching across America, as well as instances of modern injustice like mass incarceration.

In Birmingham, one of the places we’ll visit is the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which on September 15, 1963, was bombed by segregationists, and where four black girls (ages 11-14) were killed in the church basement while preparing for their Children’s Day worship celebration. Across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is Kelly Ingram Park, where many of the protest marches in the city of Birmingham began, and which became notorious for the atrocious and brutal acts of Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor and the

Birmingham police as they turned dogs and fire hoses on black children of Birmingham.

Invariably, one of the most moving parts of our time in Alabama is our walk together across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, where on March 7, 1965 (known as “Bloody Sunday”), over 600 persons of various races and religions were beaten and turned back by police in their efforts to cross the bridge and march from Selma to Montgomery to demand voting rights for all people.

At the conclusion of each of these Alabama journeys, I am always struck by how far we as a society have come, how many divides we’ve crossed, and yet how many divides are yet to be crossed. We realize that it would not have been possible 50 years ago for groups of people from diverse backgrounds to travel in relative peace and safety throughout Alabama. These are real signs of the stones of hope that can, as Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about on August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., be hewn out of the mountain of despair among us.

*\*The Rev. C. Anthony Hunt is pastor at Epworth Chapel UMC in Baltimore.*

If you are interested in traveling with us on the Retracing the Steps of Freedom Pilgrimage in April, there are still a few seats available. For further details, contact Rev. Stacey Cole Wilson at [scolewilson@bwcumc.org](mailto:scolewilson@bwcumc.org) or 240-581-5366, or visit <https://www.bwcumc.org/event/1233648-2019-04-06-retracing-the-steps-of-freedom/>



# BWC delegates deliver undernotes of grace

By MELISSA LAUBER  
UMConnection Staff

**K**ELLY 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 404 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 closely divided the church is.

Some people noted the votes were a sign of the increasingly



Kelly Robier, a lay delegate to General Conference 2019, records her amendment to submit to General Conference at the session in St. Louis.

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 386 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 1939, 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?”

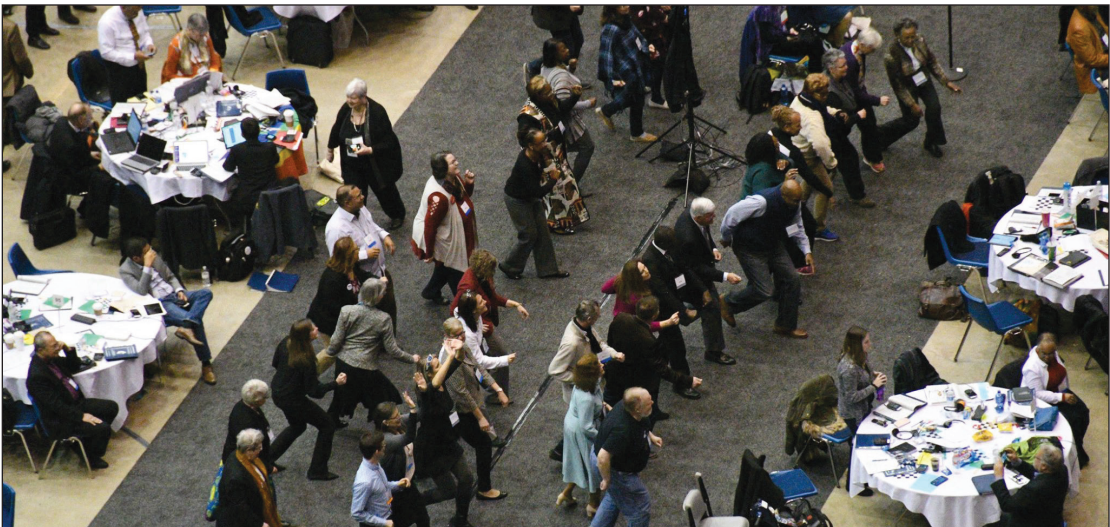
A delegate from Liberia proclaimed, “It is better to be divided by truth rather than united in error.” In those moments, the cry for division felt palpable — like torture by a thousand tiny parliamentary paper cuts.

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.



Clockwise, from top left: the Rev. Joan Carter-Rimbach prays during the Saturday day of prayer; BWC delegates (front row) lead some line dancing during a festive moment on the floor of GC2019; Jen Ihlo, a lay delegate, checks her voting device; (inset) the Rev. Conrad Link (left) speaks with Matt Sichel during a break; the Rev. Joe Daniels addresses GC2019 about financial concerns; and the Rev. Sarah Schlieckert is seen recording one of several video blogs she produced during the four-day GC2019.