

Holston Conference Delegation to General & Jurisdictional Conferences 2012

Report to Annual Conference Session by Del Holley on June 11

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church convened in Tampa on Tuesday, April 24, 2012. Nearly 1,000 delegates from congregations around the globe met together under the theme, “Make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world.” We were sent by our annual conferences surrounded by the prayers of our sisters and brothers across the connection with high hopes for a productive time of holy conferencing. We began our work in earnest – with 5 hours of plenary debate, parliamentary amendment, and the ultimate adoption of our Plan of Organization and Rules of Order. Expressing the frustration of procedural wrangling at such an early point in our 11 days together, I posted the following comment on my Facebook wall: “When we get to heaven, if God makes us adopt ‘rules of order to govern our time together,’ the Methodists are in trouble.”

General Conference 2012 is, perhaps, the most analyzed and criticized gathering of the United Methodist Church in its denominational history. In 2008, delegates to General Conference were asked to refrain from the use of electronic devices such as cell phones and laptop computers on the plenary floor during legislative sessions. By contrast, in Tampa, at times the convention center looked like the exhibit hall of a consumer electronics show with all the iPads, laptops, smartphones, digital cameras and recorders, and just about any other piece of electronic hardware you can imagine. Legislative sessions and some committee meetings were streamed live on the internet, and on-going debate and vote results were published in real time by Tweets, Facebook posts, blog entries, e-mail, and text messages. In the past, much of what happened at General Conference was not known in the annual conferences until oral reports such as this one were made, but I know that you have read dozens of articles, editorials, and e-mails dissecting what the General Conference did or did not do this year.

For those reasons, making this report this year is a particular challenge for me. My goal this morning is to offer you a message of hope from the 2012 General Conference. It’s not all good news, but even in the disappointing moments, there are reminders that we serve a God who loves us, calls us, and empowers us to do great things in the name of Jesus Christ!

One of the most significant issues facing delegates to this General Conference was comprehensive restructuring of the denomination’s General Boards and Agencies. The General Administration legislative committee considered three competing proposals for structure, but none of them garnered enough support for the committee to recommend adoption. In spite of an effort to draft

a compromise plan, the end result of the committee's work was to offer no recommendation for restructuring to the plenary session of the General Conference. Prior to debate on the legislative floor, another effort was made to draft a compromise plan. That proposal – known as Plan UMC – was passed by General Conference, but was later ruled constitutionally defective by the Judicial Council. The General Conference did approve several petitions offered by the General Boards and Agencies themselves which served to reduce the overall size of those groups and streamline their processes for ministry and program. While we could not agree on a complete restructure of our leadership groups, the General Conference did take a step in the right direction. In the process, we learned a lot about how not to approach this issue in the future. We learned that there are significant trust and communication issues around restructuring. We learned that developing a restructuring plan will take time and will require an intentional effort to listen to the concerns of groups at all levels of the denomination – from local congregations to the General Secretaries – and to address those concerns in the final legislative proposal.

One important point to bear in mind is that the proposed restructuring was only one piece of the Call to Action and Vital Congregations focus. Overall, the Call to Action is a ten-year emphasis on building effective practices in local churches to start and sustain vital congregations, reform lay and clergy leadership development, deployment, and evaluation, statistically measure our progress in those areas, and establish a new culture of accountability throughout the church. Those overarching principles of the Call to Action will continue to guide the work of our leadership groups for the next two quadrennia.

Another issue widely discussed outside General Conference was the change in the *Book of Discipline's* provisions for security of appointment. The Higher Education and Ministry legislative committee worked diligently to add procedural safeguards to the language of the original petition in an effort to prevent abuses of discretion in the appointment process. As a result, the final legislation received overwhelming support in the plenary vote.

There were issues that generated a great deal of debate in legislative committee and on the plenary floor. A variety of petitions addressed the denomination's position on the practice of homosexuality, ordination and appointment of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals, and clergy participation in same-sex covenant ceremonies. The debates, protests, and demonstrations around human sexuality revealed the pain experienced by persons on both sides of the issue. Although the General Conference voted to retain the *Book of Discipline's* current statements on human sexuality, conversations will continue. Our challenge is to find productive, spiritually-healthy ways to engage in

holy conferencing on the issue in spite of our disagreements about the specific language included in the *Discipline*.

We also debated divestment from companies doing business in the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is another area with deeply held convictions by advocates on both sides of the issue. Ultimately, the General Conference approved a resolution calling for adherence to our denomination's principles for ethical investment without mandating specific divestment.

The General Conference adopted a budget for 2013-16 of \$603 million, a 6% decrease from the current quadrennial budget. The budget establishes a new \$5 million fund for theological education in the central conferences and \$7 million to recruit and train young clergy in the United States.

We also approved legislation facilitating full communion with a number of historically black pan-Methodist denominations and moving United Methodist Women from the auspices of Global Ministries to its own autonomous structure.

There were moving times of worship and Communion and celebrations of our denominational ministries around the world. We celebrated the 40th anniversary of the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, the 20th anniversary of Communities of Shalom, and the 100th anniversary of Girl Scouts. We learned that the United Methodist Church's "Imagine No Malaria" efforts have helped cut the number of Malaria-related deaths on the continent of Africa in half. We heard inspirational messages from lay and clergy persons involved in ministry to and with the poor, homeless, and marginalized. We celebrated the planting of over 600 new churches since 2008 – more than half of which are racial/ethnic congregations.

Throughout our work together in Tampa, I felt an overwhelming sense of the global nature of the United Methodist Church. From praying the Lord's Prayer together in our native tongues to seeing the delegates from Africa, Asia, and Europe actively participating in debate and leadership, we were surrounded by reminders that we are servants of a Kingdom that is not constrained by geographic boundaries.

During one of our delegation meetings in preparation for General Conference, I shared a devotion based on the Biblical account of the Hebrews' flight from Egypt. You remember the story: under Moses' leadership, the Hebrews leave Egypt in the middle of the night. God leads the people to the shore of the Red Sea and then hardens the heart of Pharaoh so that he and his armies pursue them. When the Hebrews see the Egyptians advancing toward them, they turn on Moses. "Why have you brought us to this place?" I suggested that we would find ourselves asking the same question during our time in Tampa. And, I submit, that all of us in this room will ask the same question as we continue down

our own paths of mission and ministry in the days and months ahead. We can approach this inquiry in one of two ways.

Like the Hebrews, we can choose to focus on the place we find ourselves. “This place” is about us: our fears, our anxiety, our concerns. “This place” is about all that we do not have and all that we have not done. “This place” is about our failures and shortcomings.

Or we can choose to focus on “why.” “Why” is about God – it is the great unanswerable question, as any person who has been involved in raising a child can attest. “Why” is about purpose; it is about the work yet to be done; it is about the persons we will meet. “Why” is about mission and ministry; it is about hope, and faith, and love. “Why” acknowledges that it’s not about us and where we are; it’s about what God needs us to do in the place He has put us.

Today, we look toward the future of the United Methodist Church. We see things that raise our level of fear and anxiety. We see obstacles on the path. But we see so much more that gives us hope. We see great things that God will use to encourage us along the way. And we know that there are many things as yet unseen – great victories that are incomprehensible to us, but that God will deliver through the strength of His hand and the prayers of His people.

Pray to be in the middle of God’s plan and purpose. Pray for the United Methodist Church to be faithful to its mission to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world. And pray for faith to be exalted over fear – “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and love, and self-control.”

Thanks be to God!

Respectfully submitted,

Del Holley, delegation chairperson

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Lake Junaluska, N.C.