

Pastor's Message – 6/16/24
2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Last weekend, as you may already be aware, the Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in Wisconsin met for its annual meeting at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay. I had a lot of windshield time driving back and forth on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. So, a lot of time listening to music and news on the radio. I think it was on Sunday night driving back that I heard the news of the death of Marquette University's President, Michael Lovell, from sarcoma as he was vacationing overseas at the young age of 57. Like many obituaries I hear, it was reported that he died, "after a 3-year battle with cancer" ... Undoubtedly, he knew that his days were numbered, and cancer eventually would lead to his death.

I remember when I was a youngster hearing my grandmother expressing her belief that she was dying. This went on for a number of years. She had no terminal illness and lived for many years after those days. I don't know if she was making a theological statement or just that she had an unhappy life and felt her life was almost over.

Both President Lovell and my grandmother knew something that we all know – that once we are born, we are already dying. Some people spend that time better than others. I've been thinking about our Bible reading for today for a couple of weeks now and Paul is also aware that all of us are in-between life and death and, in Paul's case and the case of Christians, a new life.

He writes "as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord." He would "rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord." But that's not where he was and that's not where we are. We are all in-between, so Paul encourages us how to live in the meantime. Life in this world is not just a life of waiting - if we have a mission. We can't believe that God's plan, God's will, or purpose for us is just waiting, confusion and despair, can we? This life is not just waiting, it is living out our mission as individual believers and as church.

What I really want to do is report to you about is the Annual Conference from last weekend. It started predictably, with all the ground rules, where guests can sit, who can vote, the instructions for voting, who can speak and under what conditions, and the consent calendar: those resolutions which pass without any expected discussion or opposition.

The Conference then turned into a pep rally: speaker after speaker and video after video, award after award of the wonderful, amazing things that Churches in the Conference, the Conference itself, and the United

Methodist Church is doing around the world. After the United Methodist General Conference of a few weeks ago, when so many were predicting the impending death of the United Methodist Church, it was encouraging to hear the many ways that the United Methodist Church is making a positive difference in the world, bring the Kingdom of Heaven closer by the faithful work of United Methodists and United Methodist Churches in their own backyards and around the world.

There were three major things that happened at General Conference. One of those was a resolution that allowed for some additional Regionalization of the United Methodist Church around the world. The UMC is proposed to be divided into four regions: Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the United States. Each region can interpret the Book of Discipline to best fit their cultural context. There were revisions in the Social Principles of the Book of Discipline, streamlining the Social Principles into fewer sections, but expanding content to emphasize our responsibility to care for God's creation: the creatures of the world and the world on which we live.

Finally, perhaps the change that caused the most ripples dealt with language in the Book of Discipline prohibiting same gender marriages and the ordination of gay clergy. The language calling the practice of homosexual behavior incompatible with Christian teaching was removed from the Book of Discipline. United Methodist clergy may perform same-gender marriages but are not required to and same-gender marriages can be performed in United Methodist Churches. The intent is to express God's welcome and invitation to all people.

Another profound action by the General Conference was reducing the General Conference budget by 41% will reduce apportionments to Conferences and then to local churches. Some will welcome a reduction in apportionments in that smaller churches may not have the financial resources to continue to make burdensome apportionment payments. However, it seems to me that less money may mean fewer programs and fewer people who might be reached by the United Methodist Church. It is amazing just how impactful the United Methodist Church is around the world as evidenced by this slide of world-wide UMC ministries.

The mainline Christian denominations are realizing more and more that there is one baptism, one Spirit, and one God who is Father of all. The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church now accept a common sacrament of Holy Communion and clergy from each denomination can lead Communion services in each church.

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and then to local churches, but I wonder if reducing budgets means reducing the good work that the United Methodist Church can do around the world.

In an event closer to home, the Conference recognized two Certified Lay Ministers, one whom I sat with at a table on the Annual Conference floor from the Monona United Methodist Church and, someone you may remember from leading worship and preaching last year when I was gone, the sister of Steve Guell, Denise Retzleff, from FdL: Covenant United Methodist Church. It is amazing to behold the connections we have and with we are blest in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Methodist Church.

In responsible use of our funds, the Wisconsin Annual Conference reduced the number of Districts in the Conference from 5 to 4, so the Waupun United Methodist Church along with the other churches in our Circuit, Randolph/Courtland, Beaver Dam: Trinity, Horicon/Lowell/Juneau, and Mayville Campbellsport have now moved to the South East District and have a new District Superintendent, the Rev. Ebenezer Insor. Randolph/Courtland were initially moved to the South West District, but I was able to petition the redistricting Committee to retain them in our Circuit. They, i.e., the people of Randolph/Courtland have a greater connection to Beaver Dam and hence to our Circuit. They will be receiving a new Pastor, the Rev. Yaba Lucie Abongda as will Mayville/Campbellsport on July 1.

The number of Bishops in our North Central Jurisdiction has also been reduced, so as of August 1, the Wisconsin Annual Conference and the Northern Illinois Conference will share a Bishop. We won't know who that will be until the Jurisdictional Conference next month, so stay tuned for information. We'll still be independent Conferences but with one Bishop.

Unfortunately, the Wisconsin Conference lost 3 Churches at last week's Annual Conference: Chili, Cristo La Roca, and Granton. The Chili and Cristo La Roca churches decided to close and Granton was abandoned by the Congregation. However, the Conference celebrated thirty-one new church starts where there were not churches before!

In other exciting news, the Annual Conference voted to establish a new program, Revive!, which will provide support, including financial support for existing congregations to imagine different ways of maintaining and expanding the use of their already existing buildings for new ministries and to "right-size" their buildings.

As I already mentioned, there were also a few more boring resolutions that were passed by the Annual Conference.

Not boring, but look at this? Look at the picture on the screen! That is the tag of announcement of another year of 100% payments of apportionments by the Waupun United Methodist Church: this one for 2023! It will hang at the bottom of many years of 100% apportionments payments at the entrance of the Fellowship Hall. Twenty-six of the last 32 years! That shows the generosity, sacrifice, and faithfulness of this United Methodist Church!

The Bible study teacher for this year's Annual Conference had us focus on Genesis 17:6-8 and the promise of God to Abraham for abundance: abundance of land and progeny. That promise is still ours today. God has given the resources that we need to be the church of God: building and people and promises that into the future. God promises enough: enough for this year, for today, for right now. We will pray The Lord's Prayer as we do every Sunday and, in that prayer, we ask God to give us this day our daily bread and that is God's promise – to give us today and every day just what we need.

God promises that we will be a radicle church. Radicle is an agricultural term – the term for a plant that has not yet appeared, but it already growing and will soon be visible. God makes a promise through the prophet Isaiah,

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

*I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.*

(Isaiah 43:19 - New International Version)

This past Annual Conference and our whole history as the Waupun United Methodist Church has shown us to be a radicle and faithful Church. God has done amazing things in and through us and I believe God is not finished with us yet. Who knows the amazing things that are still yet to come!

I want to read again words from Paul to us for today, “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Everyday is a new day to serve Christ and to work to build the church and to create a new world. This is “Kingdom of God thinking.” We live in this world, but not of this world. We live today while looking to the future. We are not at home with the Lord now but look forward to that day. In the meantime, we watch and pray and work to create a community of love and light: the light of God's love and promise.