

CABINET REPORT **UNCHARTED TERRITORY**

Rev. N. Susan Brims, East District Superintendent
Rev. Dan R. Morley, North District Superintendent
Rev. Mark Conrad, South District Superintendent
Rev. Nancy Cushman, West District Superintendent

The call of Christ is to go into all the world and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Who would have guessed that the world would change in the ways it has since we gathered for Annual Conference 2019?

Like Lewis and Clarke when they encountered the Rocky Mountains on their journey to the Pacific Ocean, we have left the known map, we are in uncharted territory, and it is different from what we expected. We are experienced river rafters who must now learn to be mountaineers. And some of us face “the most terrible mountain we have ever beheld.”

As your district superintendents, our goal in this report is to do more than share facts and figures with you. It is our fervent prayer that we share with you the ways you inspire us as we encounter the powerful ways God is moving in and through the communities of faith that make up the Desert Southwest Conference of The United Methodist Church. With Tod Bolsinger’s book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, as our guide, we invite you to journey with us through the last year and into the future. Be prepared – we will spend a lot of time in uncharted territory.

THE WORLD IN FRONT OF YOU IS NOTHING LIKE THE WORLD BEHIND YOU. -
Christian leaders have faced a common reality, that with change comes a sense of disorientation. This disorientation invites us to peer into the unknown and discover the possibilities ahead of us. (adapted from page 14)

As we began this conference year, it was clear that changes were before us. We were anticipating significant legislation and action through General Conference 2020 and we would need to prepare how to influence it and respond to it. The 2019 Annual Conference session created the DSC Way Forward as a coalition of teams to address the many markers of change and influencers. The Superintendents offered support and resourcing to these teams.

Then, as we had our eye on the approaching May 2020 General Conference date, everything again changed. In March of this year, the COVID-19 pandemic altered nearly every facet of our local church and conference ministries. As we entered into a time of isolation, our pastors and lay leadership needed to create online and at-home worship experiences for their congregations. All ministries and events needed to cease public gatherings. It was a time to re-tool, re-prioritize, and adapt to a significantly changing environment.

It was a time pastors and lay leadership needed to learn together and trust one another. We experienced the truth of Paul’s teaching that every member of the body is essential (Romans 12).

NO ONE IS GOING TO FOLLOW YOU OFF THE MAP UNTIL THEY KNOW THEY CAN TRUST YOU. - “... even competence is not enough without the personal congruence and character of the leader. Only when a leader is deeply trusted can he or she take people further than they imagined into the mission of God.” (page 15)

Though in the fall of 2019 we did not foresee the coming COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of our annual Church Conferences would prove to be vital to us in navigating the season of isolation. Each Church Conference spent time identifying and clarifying their ministry focus. In a time of change and uncertainty, having clarity of focus, gives an anchor point which brings calm and confidence in the community. Or as the good folks at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center like to say, leaders must be able to “stay calm, stay connected, and stay the course.” Staying focused and on-course during this year has been essential for our local churches and conference ministry.

What we learned through our Church Conferences:

- People hold a deep love and commitment for their church communities and ministries.
- There is a significant call and desire to reach new people and yet initiative is thin, or congregations are not fruitful.
- There is a passion for making a difference in the lives of those who struggle, who are on the margins of life.
- People remembered how they experienced God through their relationships with each other.
- Excitement is strong as people shared about connecting with people who have not thought the church is for them.
- Our connectional way is an important value.
- It is essential that whatever our way forward, the Methodist/Wesley heritage needs to continue.
- Folks are weary over the General Church disagreement on human sexuality.
- Worship and singing are at the heart of our church.

What we are learning and witnessing through the pandemic isolation:

- Our pastors and lay leadership are highly creative and adaptive.
- By nature, we are a communal people who hunger for personal connection.
- Our membership is dedicated to the vitality of our ministry in overcoming obstacles to the worship of our God and giving to continue in ministry and alleviate suffering.
- The church is not a building; the church is. . .
- Though in ways our church is fragile, we are stronger than we thought.
- We have reached new people as our worship has gone WWW (world wide web) and over the airwaves.

IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY, ADAPTATION IS EVERYTHING. - “... *adaptive challenges require learning, facing loss, and negotiating the gaps of our values and actions.*” (page 15)

There were times when Lewis and Clark turned a corner only to discover that what they expected was not what was in front of them at all. Just when they thought they would find the river that would take them to the Pacific Ocean, the group saw ahead of them what we know as the Rocky Mountains. How do you canoe on mountains? At this point in the journey the team realized that they had to adjust what they were doing. It was adapt or go back.

CANOEING THE MOUNTAINS.

Every journey carries unexpected challenges. For some, the challenges are viewed as defeating. For others, they open the door to new possibilities. What follows are some of the times when our churches found themselves having to pick up their boats and discover how to maneuver over the mountains in their paths.

Church Closures

Camp Verde United Methodist Church – After 143 years of history and ministry, Camp Verde UMC was officially closed on October 1, 2019 per ¶2549.3.b of the *2016 Book of Discipline*. The church was founded in October of 1876 by the Rev. Alexander Groves. Camp Verde UMC had a long history of faithful service in our Desert Southwest Conference. In 2017 some members of the church and the pastor left The United Methodist Church and tried to keep the church property. That decision and the way it was carried out left many wounds and lasting scars which resulted in a lawsuit. In consultation with members of Camp Verde UMC and the cabinet, the Bishop has discerned that we will not be able to restart a Camp Verde United Methodist congregation at this time. The difficulty of these last years does not diminish the faithful witness and ministry of generations of Methodists who faithfully served Christ through Camp Verde UMC. We

know that God is not restricted to one building or one community and we trust in a God, who reigns through changing times, through endings as well as beginnings.

Youngtown United Methodist Church – Since 1956 this congregation has served as an anchor of faith in the far-west Phoenix Valley town of Youngtown. They served faithfully, even as the larger community of Sun City seemed to grow up around them. After years of struggling with finances and declining numbers, the people of Youngtown UMC made the courageous decision to close and to leave a legacy that will bear fruit for years to come. They have embodied Jesus' words from John 12:24, "I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." Youngtown UMC's ministry will last beyond their lifetime through their legacy investment in the New and Vital Faith Endowment Fund that will provide for future ministries for generations.

Not a closure but a metamorphosis – Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Phoenix has a strong and wonderful history of service and Christian witness in the downtown Arcadia neighborhood. As members of the church moved further away, and the community began to change, Aldersgate found itself in a transitional neighborhood. When the membership decline reached a critical point, the congregation made a faith-filled and powerful decision. In discussion with Dayspring UMC in Tempe, Arizona, the two churches began to dream about what could happen if Aldersgate became a second campus site for and with Dayspring UMC. The members of Aldersgate UMC made it clear that they are not ready to close their doors, but they are ready to see ministry happen in ways that their aging congregation is not able to fully do. Dayspring UMC and Aldersgate UMC continue to be in the process of transformation. At some point in the future Aldersgate UMC proper will have a final worship service. It is our hope and prayer that as discussions with Dayspring UMC continue we will be able to create something new that will allow the legacy of United Methodist love and ministry to continue in the Arcadia area.

Appointment Changes

Uncharted territory was experienced as we moved into appointment season this year. Many of our churches continue to be impacted by the denominational debate about the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. Other churches are experiencing the impact of years of decline. As a result, this year the appointive cabinet walked with churches having to make some major adjustments. Eight congregations made the difficult decision to move from a full-time pastor to one who serves less than full time. Five congregations made the decision to close their associate pastor position. The grief and loss around these decisions are deeply felt.

While our hearts ache with churches who have made difficult decisions, there are yet some reasons to celebrate. Four congregations added new appointed clergy positions, varying from full-time to less than full-time. We have congregations taking new steps into developing multi-site ministries. We even have reason to celebrate with a congregation that, rather than make the decision to close, chose instead to partner with a larger congregation to make way for ministry to continue in a new way. They will eventually close, but it will be with the spirit of an Elijah and Elisha when that happens.

What we have discovered through this time is that there are gifts hidden in the challenges. We only have to be intentional in our looking for those gifts. A significant gift churches are finding is a renewed sense of call to engage in the work of evangelism. The pandemic has challenged our churches to take their message to Facebook and YouTube. This has resulted in positive online engagement. Where churches once believed that their next staff hire was a youth worker or care minister, churches now have discovered that a pastor of online engagement may be the next step that is needed to connect with people who would not normally come into our buildings. It is exciting to look forward to how this learning will bring about change in our churches.

Impact on Conference Finances

Traditionally, missional giving through apportionments have been the way that ministries throughout the connection are funded. In the *Book of Discipline*, apportionments are described as our first priority in mission giving. The fracture in the relationship between the larger church and the local church is evident in

many ways. Frustration over the struggles in our denomination, as well as local church decrease in membership numbers and decreased giving, have led some churches to make the decision to reduce, or stop altogether, their participation in this apportionment giving. In addition, some churches have made the decision to prioritize their individual mission projects over the missional giving of the larger connection.

The result of this reality includes:

- 30% decrease in available Equitable Compensation funds. Equitable Compensation funds provide ways for some churches to have pastoral support.
- A realignment of conference staff responsibilities following the decision not to fill positions in the same way (or not fill at all), after a staffing change occurs.
- A decrease in funds available to support our campus ministries and other ministries as well.

While reduced apportionment participation has caused us to adjust for now, we are aware that we are still a strong community of faith. We still believe in a bright and hopeful future for all of our churches and for the ministry that God has called us to do together. And we still believe that together we are able to accomplish more for God's world than we could separately.

CANOEING DOWNSTREAM

When we journey into uncharted territory, there are times we find our canoes flowing quickly down the river, toward our destination. Anticipated or not, there are discoveries made by our churches. Below is a brief review of some of the positive changes encountered as we flowed with God's spirit downstream in the times calling us to discover a sense of resiliency through adaptation.

Changing role of technology

Over the last decades we have seen many ways technology has been used in our worship services and ministries, often times accompanied by complaints about the changes. Then the COVID-19 pandemic forced us out of our church buildings! Technology became our main tool to reach our members, and the world. We have witnessed and experienced: virtual worship services; virtual choirs; ZOOM Bible studies; radio programs; drive-in church; online story times; puppets used for virtual children's time; many ZOOM meetings; check-ins with church members by phone; and many other technology-based ministries. Location ceased to be so limiting. People anywhere in the country (or the world) suddenly had access to our ministries and worship services. We no longer wait for people to come to our church buildings. The question will be what happens when the pandemic is over? Will our primary efforts go back within our walls? Will we settle for broadcasting our in-person worship services, and limit other ways we are now using technology? Or will we continue to intentionally use the new lessons and skills we have gained?

We became a church deployed to reach new people with Christ's love

As a church, we struggle with how to respond to our changing world. We have seen how our congregations are aging, and we are un-sure how to reach younger generations. We know we need to be in the world, while feeling most comfortable in our buildings. We yearn for the years when Sunday mornings were sacred, while experiencing competition from many areas of society. We say we want to learn new ways of reaching people, while being hesitant to let go of old ways of doing things. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to reconsider, and re-frame, how we do ministry. Is it possible the church has been more deployed in the world during the pandemic, than we were before the pandemic? As our buildings re-open, we will be challenged to take the best practices from our pandemic experience and combine them with the best practices of our in-person experiences.

Challenges are Reframed as Opportunities.

How much panic was created by the reality of not being able to use our church buildings? We adapted, then the pandemic rules kept changing. How many times did we say we cannot do this, then we did? It is amazing

how necessity drives us to find ways of doing the “impossible.” Challenges have the ability of guiding us to blessings. Seeing the opportunities in challenges might just lead us to a revival!

YOU CAN'T GO IT ALONE. - *There is an “unmistakably relational dynamic of adaptive leadership. ... the kind of radical relationship necessary for leading in uncharted territory.” (pages 15 & 16)*

This last year may have been a journey into uncharted territory, but along the way there is a renewed sense of unity. In many ways we have witnessed that our social connections have increased in this time of social distancing. More phone calls are being made. Collaborative platforms on the web have brought colleagues together in conversations of support, encouragement, and sharing of ideas. In many ways we had become complacent and assuming of the body of our connection. Through this time of isolation, we have reaffirmed the truth that we value each other and need each other.

The United Methodist Church has created a structure to keep the connection alive. The committees or ministry teams of the local church were mirrored in the District, the Conference, the Jurisdiction, and then the General Church. The communication and ideas moved through these teams connected one to another. The General agencies offered resources to the layers of ministry teams across the structure. This process and way of structuring and being the church is decreasingly effective. In many ways much of that system has been dismantled, but we have yet to create another intentional way of connecting.

In this time of pandemic, we have reaffirmed a major point of our potential vitality – our connection of one body, one ministry, one congregation into another and thereby increasing effectiveness in ministry. Let us be intentional about our connections. Not by creating structure, but rather by networking in more organic ways which reflect the context of the ministry and the unique giftedness of individuals. Let us choose to be connected and share our ministry ideas, possibilities, and initiatives outside the walls of our churches where we have now been moved to go.

On our journey of faith and change we have said good-bye to members of our connection. This year we have remembered and celebrated the life and ministry of the following pastors:

The Rev. Cynthia Langston Kirk
The Rev. Roger Stressman
The Rev. Phyllis Ayers Nelson
The Rev. Sandra Kimbel
Pastor Mavae Koli

We remember the spouses of our clergy who have died during the past year as well. Each and every one served God in powerful ways. Together we remember and give thanks for:

Mrs. Gayla Remp
Mr. John MacVean

This year we bless 12 of our colleagues as they step into retirement. They are Michael Bryant, Rula Colvin, Valerie Fairchild, Kim Gladding, Lois Hedden, Julius Keller, Billy Martin, Beverly Ritland, Deanna Self-Price, Sherylan Gay Thorson and Jim Wallasky. We want to take this moment to share our words of gratitude for the many ways these servants touched lives and carried out Christ’s work in the communities they served.

This year the appointive cabinet blesses the Rev. Mark Conrad for his work with us, as he joins those who are retiring. His sense of humor and keen insight, as well as his entrepreneurial vision will be missed. Following Mark, we welcome the Rev. Matt Ashley, who brings his unique set of gifts and abilities to our cabinet table.

It is the nature of the journey for change to happen, and with every new step we are blessed and strengthened.

EVERYBODY WILL BE CHANGED, ESPECIALLY THE LEADER. - *“Learning from those who are most at home in uncharted territory is one of the great opportunities that most leaders miss. ... the ultimate value and gift of leading into uncharted territory: our own ongoing transformation.” (page 16)*

As we come to the close of this appointment year, we recognize that we are in a new time. There is no returning to life as it used to be. Perhaps this year has taught us the power in John Wesley’s encouragement to grow in grace. Who we were yesterday is not who we will be tomorrow. The journey we have been on has changed us and will continue to do so.

There are some things we have learned along the way that we want to take with us into a new day. We appreciate the lessons of intentional connection learned through our days of separation. In many ways we have heard how churches have created phone chains, developed calling teams to make phone calls using the entire membership directory, taken advantage of video conferencing for small group experiences, and found many other ways to tighten their connections with one another. We appreciate the lessons of online engagement learned when in-person gatherings were suspended. We have discovered that online engagement is more than a worship experience. It includes developing online Bible studies, discussion groups, parenting moments, and times just to have fun together. Churches are realizing that online engagement may require working together to hire someone to serve as a “virtual campus pastor” – a position several churches could share. Online engagement has enabled us to be more easily accessible to people who have lost connections with a community of faith or drawn in people who have never been part of a community of faith. It is a valuable entry point we do not want to lose. We value the lessons of greater missional engagement, where ministry becomes less transactional and more transformational. Although it is fun to go to the store and purchase a gift to give away, the past few months have taught us that it is even more rewarding to find ways to support people in need. Extra care was given to ministries that shelter and serve the homeless. Churches found ways to collect funds for those who lost jobs. There have been extra efforts to be in direct ministry with people whose restaurants struggled once COVID-19 brought eating out to a halt. There have also been efforts to care for first responders and medical professionals more personally. In a time when our world seemed to struggle under the weight of disease and death, the people of the Desert Southwest Conference lived into their identity as instruments of hope and healing. The impact of stories shared, time spent serving others, has affirmed that what we want to carry into a new day is the power of God’s love offered and available to all people, the affirmation that all people are valuable in God’s eyes, and ours as well.

There will also be some things that we let go of as we move through the uncharted territory ahead of us. To allow greater alignment with our call to be a courageous church: loving like Jesus, acting for justice, and being united in hope, we may need to let go of the belief that the pastor is the expert and rely more fully on the full body of Christ to engage in the work of transformation. We will need to let go of the things that divide us. The denominational debate over the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons seemed to fade when we realized that we are all God’s people, we are all called to love one another, serve one another, hold hands through stormy times. The global pandemic taught us that we are intimately tied together in ways that are as simple as the air we breathe in and out. Whether we agree or not on issues in our churches, we have learned through this difficult time that we must let go of anger and love one another the way we find described in 1 Corinthians 13. We may need to let go of the notion that it is the institution that must be preserved, because we have no other choice but to let go of buildings that are too expensive to keep up, with too few people to pay the bills, and in the process of letting go of those things we have learned the power of focused and intentional ministries that touch lives and restores justice. Yes, there is heartache when churches decide to let go of staff, or property, but there is also resurrection if we do this difficult work well. We have learned that every time someone says we, the church, can’t accomplish something – make a difference – impact the world, this last year has taught us we will need to let those thoughts go, for we have experienced that the opposite is true. We can and we will, together and with God’s help dream the biggest

dream and accomplish it. Not even the fiercest mountain or most turbulent waters will hold us back from doing what God calls us to do.

The question that all of our churches must answer for themselves is how they will allow the things we have experienced this last year to prepare us for the ministry ahead. The work done during Church Conferences in the fall of 2019 affirmed that there is strength to be found in reclaiming our identity. It is a strength that gives us the ability to shape what we do and how we do it in the year ahead of us by reminding us why we are in ministry to begin with.

Rev. Beth Rambikur, Director of Connectional Ministries, noted in her March 19, 2020 blog that we have been here before. These notes were written following the 1919 Spanish Flu Pandemic:

A.W. Adkinson, District Superintendent, reported at the 38th annual session of the Arizona Mission - October 9-12, 1919 - "My report today should constitute a brief resume of the past two years. A year ago, after a successful year of service, we were unable to meet in annual session, but rather entered upon a year the opening three months of which were most depressing." (page 23) "The quarantine against the influenza made it impossible to assemble the Mission for its annual session last year ... On account of the influenza the new year opened under a gloom that we could not penetrate. No services could be held. No one wanted pastors to call. Our pastors were helpless. The authorities would not allow them to call on the sick. They were afraid to have them call lest they should bring the sickness. Only at funerals were they in demand, and these had to be semi-private, and the utmost precaution taken to avoid the spread of the disease." (page 25)

From the District Superintendents of the Southern California Annual Conference 44th session October 1-6, 1919: From the poetic soul of E.J. Inwood of the Long Beach District, "This Conference year has seen the church rising in her strength and accepting the challenge of the new day...hundreds of churches have come to feel a new social and evangelistic responsibility for the communities in which they live...'Light and Shadow, Sunshine and cloud' are strangely mingled in this life." (page 53)

It has been 101 years since those words were written. The District Superintendents of the Desert Southwest Conference today collectively believe that this has been a year where our churches have truly had to face the most difficult challenges. Through it all, they have found ways to pick up their canoes, begun to learn how to journey over high and treacherous mountains, and discovered the importance of their identity, call, and mission all over again.

The theme of this year's annual conference is "For Such a Time as This." From the moment General Conference 2019 ended until this day, what we have found is that the people of the Desert Southwest Conference are people of love and grace. Our experience is that all people are God's gift to this world and to the church. We are people who believe that God is present in all circumstances and will empower us as we travel through uncharted territory to arrive one day at a new place, a place where God's vision for our Conference becomes reality. God has chosen us to be the people called Methodists for such a time as this.

Submitted with thanks and praise for all of God's people:

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