

REPORT OF THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS

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How Long, O Lord, How Long?

Last year's Cabinet report was a review of how our church had moved through Uncharted Territory. We were in the early months on the pandemic when those words were written. We had no idea of what lay ahead of us. In the year since that time, we have heard the cry, "How long, O Lord, how long," loud and clear.

Our church and our nation cried: How long, O Lord, before we figure out how to dismantle systemic racism and discover the ways of love, equity, and justice. We look for this not simply in words alone, but in the policies and practices of our communal lives.

Our church and our nation cried: How long, O Lord, before we learn that when the Bible teaches us that God loves all people, that all means all, calling us to create a church where we discover and use the gifts God has given to all people.

Our church and our nation cried: How long, O Lord, will it be before the pandemic ends and life returns to more familiar patterns. The stress of all that has happened during the pandemic has left our clergy and our churches stressed, exhausted and at the same time experiencing something of a renewal.

We listened to the cry and, in the midst of listening, we discovered ways that God is present. Our pastors, churches and ministries have been resilient in the face of all that has come before us in this last year. Yes, it has been a year of challenges, but it has also been a year of unexpected wonder and excitement as we have watched the ways that God is moving. As District Superintendents we found ourselves turning to the Psalms for inspiration and found that when the people of God meditate on God's ways that they are like trees planted by streams of water, which do indeed yield good fruit.

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 1:1-3

Commitment to Walk in New Paths

As we entered Annual Conference 2020, we were witnesses to the horrific deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many others whose names we were just beginning to pay attention to. As an Appointive Cabinet we made a commitment to walk in the waters of our baptism, seeking God's direction how to become new people. We have learned that addressing racism is a difficult matter. Together we, with the entire appointive cabinet, engaged with in-depth book studies, completed and discussed our learnings from the Implicit Bias Workbook and the Intercultural Development Inventory, participated in the Conference 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge, learned from watching *The Long Shadow* and watched webinars hosted by The Race Coalition. At times our discussions were

difficult. We did not rush through them for the sake of checking off a list. Instead, we committed ourselves to learning, self-reflection, engaging in difficult discussions, and leaning into what needs to change, in ourselves and in the systems of our Conference.

We have discovered the ways that our language revealed our growing awareness. We moved from thinking and speaking in theoretical ways, to thinking and speaking in more personal ways. Language that began as “this is what they (the government, systems, others, etc.) need to recognize or do,” changed to “this is what I (no ambiguity here) need to do, or this is what we, as church leaders, need to do.” Listening to our own language taught us humility and revealed to us the ignorance in so much of what we had been taught, and therefore taught others. Listening to our own language caused us to confess our own sin of complicity in supporting and sustaining systemic racism.

The Wesleyan way of discipleship has its strong foundation in personal holiness. Personal holiness asks each one of us to consider how we live and work together as the people of God. Personal holiness grows through continuing study of all of scripture, not just the parts we want to hold onto. It means praying together, talking, and listening to one another. We discovered ways in which the presence and power of this foundational tenet was challenged as people, even people in our churches, grew upset at discussions that addressed racism, or as decisions were made for the care of one another during the pandemic.

In a time when some churches have deemphasized the liturgical practice of confession, even the confession found in the communion liturgy, we have rediscovered a call to renew the practice of confession in our communal lives. Confession holds us accountable to one another for the ways we live and work together as disciples of Christ.

As we reclaim and refocus on confession what we have been reminded of is just how the Imago Dei, the image of God, is present in every person. This spiritual practice empowers us to value each culture and every person.

Many Gifts

Through our prayerful discussions and learnings, we are committed to continue to better prepare pastors and Staff Parish Relations Committees for Cross Cultural/Cross Racial (CC/CR) appointments. This is a growing edge for our churches. SPRC teams often feel they are open to Cross Cultural/Cross Racial appointments. When we have engaged in study and preparation together, we have found the outcome to be fruitful for the appointment, the pastor, and for the congregation. It is our hope that all our church SPRC teams, pastors, and congregations would engage in Cross Cultural/Cross Racial studies long before receiving a CC/CR appointment. Our Conference is becoming more diverse in many ways, and we need to be ready for this wonderful movement of God’s Spirit.

We continue to work with our district committees to increase diversity and therefore enhance all that we do together.

When we, as District Superintendents, Appointive Cabinet, pastors, and churches engaged in discussions and plans to dismantle racism; we were encouraged by the gifts the church has to offer for the transformational work that is needed. If we will find courageous ways to live our faith, then we believe the church is uniquely positioned to dismantle racism and build a more loving and just world.

Delight is in the Law of the Lord

You might think that California’s giant redwood trees would have roots that grow deep into the ground. But it is not so - redwood roots are quite shallow, typically growing only five or six feet under the soil. Nonetheless redwoods can stand for well over a thousand years because the trees grow near one another; the roots of each tree reach out to meet and grow around the roots of the other trees so that all the trees are holding one another up, helping one another to withstand the storms that might otherwise knock them to the ground.

Our United Methodist tradition teaches that the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation, and so we are people who delight in the Law of the Lord. We experience the richness of Christian fellowship when we engage in Bible Study together, and we meet God in the silence of our meditations upon the Scriptures. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus shared a commandment with his disciples, the Law of Love, that we should ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ (John 15:12) We walk with one another and support one another through all the storms that life sends our way.

Scripture teaches us what it means to love God and to love one another, but that is not always easy. Over the last year and a half, we have lived through a pandemic and we have not always had a common mind about how to approach it. Our local churches developed reopening plans with well-researched safety protocols because we want to love one another and love our neighbors by keeping everyone safe and healthy. But not everyone agreed with suspending in-person gatherings or wearing masks or not singing in worship, and at times our conversations have been difficult. *We confess that it is not always easy to love one another in the midst of disagreements.*

In the midst of those challenges, our nation has been divided over politics, over race, over law enforcement, over immigration, over many challenging issues. People feel strongly about their points of view, and at times talking together in grace-filled and respectful ways has been challenging. *We confess that it is not always easy to love one another in the midst of disagreements.*

We are also challenged by a second rescheduling of the 2020 General Conference, delaying a possible resolution of our denominational conflicts over human sexuality. Persevering through this pause has given us the opportunity to reprioritize, to rethink possibilities, to allow new opportunities to emerge. It may be that when General Conference finally does meet, United Methodists will be in a better place to resolve our disagreements amicably and find a path forward. Nonetheless, the delay has been hard on everyone. *We confess that it is not always easy to love one another in the midst of disagreements.*

Yet we are called to be a courageous Church – loving like Jesus, acting for justice, united in hope. Jesus challenges us to love one another as Jesus loves us, even when loving one another is difficult. We are called to be those who love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength. We are called to be those who show what it is to love one another even when we disagree with one another.

John Wesley once asked, “If we cannot think alike, can we not love alike?” We are grateful for all the ways the people of the Desert Southwest Conference have demonstrated in a difficult year that we can, indeed. Thank you for all the ways you hold one another up through difficult times.

Like Trees Planted by Streams of Water

Out of the stress and “dryness” of this COVID pandemic, our churches drew from the Living Water and have engaged in new ministries to connect with people. The result of these efforts has not only reached the people inside the church, but it has reached many people beyond the church. Homebound folks have been able to worship and participate in small groups again. Folks from the neighborhoods around the church have connected with churches through drive-in worship or through the online services. People from outside the state and even outside the country have connected with our churches through worship primarily but some have joined Zoom small groups.

Even in this time of isolation during COVID, we have learned to intentionally care for one another and lean on each other for support. New small groups of clergy formed and started meeting regularly to offer support and encouragement to each other. Laity volunteered to call members of the congregation regularly to offer a loving voice in the midst of isolation. Folks who normally did not interact got to know each other over Zoom and through phone calls.

In the midst of the financial stress and fear caused by the pandemic, many of our faithful flock continued to financially support their local churches as well as offer outreach to essential workers and those

suffering hardships from the pandemic. Many of our churches in turn continued to faithfully pay their apportionments so that our combined ministries continued. Through the generosity of our churches, the conference was able to draw from our resources to offer additional support through technology grants, training seminars, COVID loans/grants, and the apportionment dividend.

In this most challenging time, we have been like trees planted by streams of water drawing deeply from our faith in Jesus Christ and our community with each other to continue to be in ministry.

Yielding Fruit in Season

It is said that trees need stressors like strong winds to mature and strengthen. Biosphere 2, the protected eco-bubble outside of Tucson proved that theory, which Jean Giono wrote of in his 1953 book, *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Without the stress of the winds, a tree becomes weak and vulnerable. As in Psalm 1:4, the wind is needed to cleanse and strengthen.

Even now, and during real losses, we have seen fruitfulness which has come through these months of pandemic. We have learned new ways to connect with one another. It was impressive how quickly people “tooled-up” with technologies to connect over the World Wide Web. The basic email connection went to the next level with virtual meetings of video conferencing and worshiping. We became proficient to the degree we no longer experienced such meetings as virtual, but very authentic and real. Though we are re-engaging with in-person gatherings, the online gatherings have become a permanent part of our connection options.

The local church connection has not only been within the congregation, but also between congregations. Leaders have connected with one another from church to church to learn and share ideas and practices. In many ways this has been facilitated through our Conference connections of vital faith, communications, superintendents, and many more. However, church leaders have also taken opportunity to create the connection from church-to-church and leader-to-leader on their own initiative. Our United Methodist theology and practice of connectionalism has been at its best through these months of pandemic.

Most of our churches have received grants and support through our Conference ministries. These grants and loans have enabled churches to make it through difficult and lean times, but also to invest in technologies as they adapt to new ways of connecting with one another and new people.

When the pandemic resulted in a necessity to isolate, we needed to move out of the building of the church. In many places, it was initially stated that the church was “closed.” However, it was soon evident that church had taken on new forms. New ways to be the church without a building emerged. This was especially realized with online, conference-call, and at-home forms of gathering for worship. At first these offerings were often bumpy and clunky, but then they became refined and meaningful. A direct fruitfulness became reaching more people who were not able or comfortable to enter through the doors of a church.

It is usually necessity or difficult times which bring about lasting change. Even when the change results in fruitfulness, we often resist it. Yet as we reflect upon this past conference year, may we have eyes to see a season of fruitfulness which the Spirit has led us into.

We are aware that there are more challenges ahead of us. As the pandemic subsides, the issues confronting our church will continue to arise. Through everything we have learned and from all we have experienced, we are strengthened in our faith and resolve to be a courageous church- loving like Jesus, acting for justice, and united in hope.

As Psalm 1 calls us, when we meditate on God’s ways and courageously live our faith, then we believe that together we will be like trees planted by streams of water. We will yield the fruit of vital and transformational ministry, creating a more loving and just world.