

Report on Norwalk UMC Delegate Attendance at the 2024 Iowa Annual Conference

By Kate Baldwin

Bishop Kenneth Bigham-Tsai began her message with the following scripture.

Isaiah 42:1-9 New International Version

The Servant of the LORD

42 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.

³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁵ This is what God the LORD says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:

⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸ “I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

Drawing parallels to the words of Isaiah, the Bishop emphasized the need for the United Methodist Church to bring about positive change in the face of adversity. She spoke of the importance of embodying God's spirit of justice and compassion in all actions and decisions.

She highlighted the pressing global issues, including conflicts in the Holy Land, Africa, Ukraine, and within the United States. She expressed concern for the prevalence of hate speech, violence, and divisive ideologies. She reminded all that we need to guard our freedoms by denouncing cultural actions that judge people by race or ethnicity, that breed hate, anger or violence. She reminded us that we are to embrace Charles Wesley's legacy that we are people of grace, called to live by social holiness. She quoted Mark Twain, "*History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.*" Her message was clear that it is my responsibility as a Christian to guard against judging others and creating divisions among Americans or across the globe that lead to conflicts among people or societies, to live a life of civility toward all.

Reflecting on the recent General Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, she praised the delegates for their commitment to a peaceful resolution and unity. She shared there were no angry speeches, protests or fighting. Delegates came together with a united purpose to move forward in peace.

To quote the Bishop, "United Methodists showed a divided and warring world a new way of being—by beating our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. Our delegates started us on a journey toward peaceful resolution to a conflict that has embroiled our church for decades. It was as if, they helped us, as a body, raise our heads from our decades-long fighting and take in the breath of God's healing,"

In hearing her message, I understood that we have reached a compromise over a diversity that has plagued the United Methodist Church for over 50 years. 2024 church leaders, both clergy and lay delegates working together, created a path for all believers to live in harmony as Methodists. The Bishop emphasized that local Methodist Churches across Iowa, the United States and the world will be able to decide if their church will endorse same sex marriage within their sanctuary. At the same time, this compromise has affirmed that all individuals, regardless of background or orientation, have a place at the table and are valued members of the United Methodist Church.

Looking ahead, the Bishop directed us to focus our energy on the Mission of the United Methodist Church-

120. The Mission—The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.

This next portion of the Bishop's address really resonated with me. She shared that her email inbox has been full of emails about the General Conference, asking where do we move forward from here. To quote the Bishop. "And friends, over the next months, our mission is where we must focus, not on arguments that divide us. I bemoan the fact that I have had so many questions about General Conference, but very few about our mission. I have **not** been inundated with questions about how we reach more people for Jesus? My inbox is **not** full of questions about how we reach more diverse people for Christ. My mail is **not** overflowing with questions about how we revitalize our ministries to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people for Jesus, But friends, these are the questions that are crucial as we focus on our future and seek to live into our mission—to inspire, equip and connect communities of faith to cultivate world changing disciples." These words made it clear to me that our mission as disciples of Christ, focusing not on what divides us but instead focus on bringing people to know the love and saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Bigham-Tsai highlighted examples of missions and ministries in Iowa Methodist churches that live out being Disciples and cultivating Disciples of Christ. She noted examples like our Lunch in the Park mission that serve people freely without judgment, qualifications or expectations. She called out new mission programs in Algona, Bloomfield, and Albia that are growing programs that serve immigrants or people of need. These are the missions that Jesus encourages to do.

She also focused attention on growing a seminary program in Africa that will prepare more ministers to serve the United Methodist Church. These are all efforts to address the shortage of ministers and our mission.

The Bishop concluded her message by encouraging all Methodists to focus on unity and compassion that will lead to more people taking Christ as their lord and savior.

If anyone wants to read the Bishop's message in summary or watch the full message in video, it is available on the Iowa United Methodist Church website.

In matters of business, the Iowa United Methodist Conference continues to suffer budget constraints, forcing difficult choices to be made. Ron Carlson, the Conference's Chief Financial Officer, is confident that through these difficult choices, clear priorities have been established. Since 2020, The Conference has reduced the operating budget by 26% from \$11.5 million to \$8.5 million. That is a significant reduction to any organizational budget. Many of these budget cuts have resulted in a reduction in the number of people, meaning fewer people to do the same amount of work. Everyone in this room has likely experienced these circumstances. It presents challenges to the Conference and local churches alike.

The 2024 budget that the delegates approved is sound, however it is supported by \$1.5 million of one-time money. Increased apportion revenues will need to be realized or further cuts will need to be made in 2025. He reminded all the delegates from local churches that honoring our local apportion is vital to the work of the Church, not just at the conference headquarters but across Iowa and the world.