

## Day 1 of 2021 Annual Conference

The 12th session of the Susquehanna Conference began on Friday, June 18, 2021. Bishop Jeremiah Park opened the session with a greeting message, that spoke of the theme for this year's Conference: A Vision of the Beloved Community. Bishop Park went on to say "Our world, our nation, and our church are going through a profoundly liminal time with lots of uncertainties and anxieties. We hear seriously concerned voices of frustration, despair, and fear from all over the place. However, this unprecedented time we are living through could be a once in a lifetime moment for God's people to catch up with the new things that God is doing among us and in the world. This may be a revolutionary moment of opportunity when history and hope and dreams meet together." Bishop Park continued with a message of love, community, and Christ. "This is the time and we are the people to be a living witness of 'A Vision of the Beloved Community of Christ'. Once again, we are the people of a vision of the Beloved Community: 'Alive in Christ together, Susquehanna Conference will embody the Beloved Community of disciple-making congregations.' Amen and Amen" said Bishop Park.

The Conference Session continued with worship. Opening with youth from across the connection reciting "Cultivating Beloved Community" which was adapted by Rev. Nathan Decker. Followed a rendition of the song "The Gift of Love". The sermon was delivered by Bishop Peggy Johnson of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference and Peninsula-Delaware Conference. Continuing the message of love and community Bishop Johnson said, "Jesus saw the heart of people: The woman at the well, Nicodemus at night, Peter by the charcoal fire after the resurrection. He patiently listened, engaged and looked at them with the eyes of God's love and kindness...Sometimes we are so busy or so sure we know what a person is like ahead of time that we don't really see them, hear their hearts and understand their backgrounds. Pope Francis recently wrote, 'This haste, this everything-right-now, does not come from God. If we get worked up about the right-now, we forget what remains forever, and we follow the passing clouds and lose sight of the sky.' Love has patience and sees the sky." After Bishop Johnson, Rev. Kris Sledge, Rev. Anna Layman-Knox, and Rev. Paul Amara spoke about the Beloved Community Fund. Followed by the song "High Above". The service was closed by Rev. Larry Leland.

After the opening business of the Conference, we viewed part 1 of the Leadership Report. The report featured churches throughout the connection and their various ministries that serve their congregations and communities. These ministries included a growing online ministry, vibrant youth ministries, and impactful community service.

The first report of the day was the Council on Finance and Administration, led by Council Chair Rev. Timothy Baer. It is noted that this report does not include the 2022 financial plan, which will be voted on in a Special Session in the fall of 2021. The report included Benevolent Goals, Special Sunday Offerings, and General Recommendations. The motion to accept the report was passed.

Next, Joyce Davis, Conference Lay Leader, delivered the Lay Ministry Report. Davis, spoke about the new Laity Board, which includes five young people to bring new ideas to the table. She expressed her excitement about the new Laity Board and the new collaboration with the Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia Conferences. And offered words of encouragement to our conference laity and urging them to be valuable resources for their clergy and congregations.

Bishop Park then introduced Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball. He voiced his excitement for this new vision. And, he spoke of the great ministry of these Bishops. Bishop Moore-Koikoi said "To the Annual Conference, in case you haven't yet heard, I am excited beyond measure that Bishop Steiner Ball and I will be working together to provide episcopal coverage for the Susquehanna Conference, Western Pennsylvania, and West Virginia Annual Conferences. We believe that through the words of Isaiah 43:19, God is saying to our three annual conferences, today, I'm about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it." She went on to talk about her love for the Annual Conference theme and the importance of the beloved community. Bishop Steiner Ball said, "I think of you Susquehanna Conference, and the opportunities, the new thing that God is bringing forth among the West Virginia Annual Conference, the Western Pennsylvania Conference, and the Susquehanna Conference. Indeed, the world is our parish, and I am looking so forward to getting to know you better and to being in mission and ministry alongside you."

Then, Rev. Nick Kinney, Associate Director of the United Methodist Stewardship Foundation, gave the report for the foundation. The report consists of 2 resolutions. The first resolution was the United Methodist Stewardship Foundation merger with United Methodist Foundation of Western Pennsylvania. The second resolution set the parameters of agreement and plan of merger. Both resolutions were passed.

The Nominations Committee report was next and was given by committee Chair, Teryl Cartwright. The Nominations report was approved. After the Nominations, Rev. John Bondhus, from the Conference Board of Global Ministries presented the Advanced Specials. The motion to accept the Advanced Specials was approved.

Following the reports, a video of a conversation between Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi and Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball was shared. The conversation discussion parts of the new vision, encouragement of collaboration, and opportunities for innovation.

After a break for lunch, Rev. Michelle Bodle, Chair of the Board of Pension and Health, presented the Board's report. There were 5 motions presented: 1) Annuity rate for pre-1982 years of service, 2) Retirement approvals, 3) Rental/housing for disabled or retired clergy, 4) Comprehensive benefit funding plan, 5) Discontinuation of retirement HRA for those retiring after June 30, 2021. All motions were approved.

Next were the resolutions, presented by Rev. Andrew Burd-Harris, Chair of the Conference Board of Global Ministries.

- 1) **Mental Health:** It includes three actions. The first, asks members to observe Mental Health Awareness Month on the third Sunday in May. The second, asks the conference to recognize September as Suicide Prevention Month and National Recovery Month. The third, asks the conference to observe Mental Illness Awareness Week during the first week of October and to hold a day of prayer on Tuesday, October 5, 2021. *Amendment vote to remove lines 7 and 12, not approved. Amendment to add reference to the resolution accepted by Rev. Evelyn Madison. The resolution was approved.*
- 2) **Disability Awareness Sunday:** It asks for this action, beginning on line 37: that members of the Susquehanna United Methodist Conference celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday as the second Sunday in October (October 10, 2021). *The resolution was approved.*
- 3) **A Call to Work Toward Unity:** It calls for five actions. The first, asks the members to work toward unity and creating space for every church, lay person, and clergyperson to live out their convictions, as we wrestle with different understandings of human sexuality and sin. The second, asks conference members to commit to do no harm in words or actions toward our fellow United Methodists in the Susquehanna Conference in the midst of our disagreements. The third, asks conference members to commit to do the most good possible through words and actions toward our fellow United Methodists in the Susquehanna Conference in the midst of our disagreements. The fourth, asks conference members to that we commit to attend to the ordinances of God together with intention as a witness to our faith in Jesus. The fifth, calls conference members to commit to undertake our work towards unity with charity and grace where possible and without malice when not. *Amendment vote to change line 9 to remove*

*“their convictions as we wrestle with different” and replace with “the ordinances of God on the” was not approved. Motion to call for the question vote was approved. The resolution was approved.*

- 4) **Reaching People with the Good News of Jesus Christ, Hope of the World:** It calls for this action, which begins on line 41: that we, the people of the Susquehanna Conference of The United Methodist Church, renew our commitment, for such a time as this, to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen from the dead, the Living Lord of history and the Hope of the world. *Amendment to add the word “all” to resolution so it would state “to reach all people” accepted by Rev. Andrew Burd-Harris. The resolution was approved.*
- 5) **Unity in Mission:** It calls for four actions. The first, asks the conference to resolve to desire to be an Annual Conference that lives out unity in diversity for the sake of our mission and as an answer to Jesus’ prayer that we may be one. The second, asks the conference to resolve to desire to stay in relationship with The United Methodist Church and in mission together. The third, asks the conference to resolve that, if the United Methodist General Conference amends The Book of Discipline, we aspire to become an Annual Conference that protects diversity of conviction and practice among our local churches and our clergy, including that we would hope to become an Annual Conference which permits, but does not require, performing of same-sex marriages. The fourth, requests that the leadership and local churches of the Susquehanna Annual Conference work towards practical frameworks for living together in connection as The United Methodist Church continues to discern its future path. *Motion to table Resolution #5 was approved. Point of order was called. Parliamentarian, Rev. Jennifer Williams, ruled that ruling stands.*
- 6) **A Call to End Conversion Therapy:** It calls for the action, that members of the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church urge the Pennsylvania State Legislature to ban conversion therapy in the state of Pennsylvania to protect and uphold the dignity, rights, and liberty of LGBTQA+ persons in this commonwealth. *Motion to table Resolution #6 was not approved. Motion to call for the question was approved. The resolution was approved.*
- 7) **The Susquehanna Declaration:** The first action, asks the conference to apologize to the LGBTQ+ persons in this conference and its predecessors who felt God’s call to ministry but were unable to pursue it due to discriminatory church laws. The second action, calls the conference to apologize to LGBTQ+ persons 40 who have felt marginalized within their own churches, including those denied the blessing of a church wedding. The third action, calls the conference

to pray that God would forgive our straying away from the Greatest Commandment, where Jesus commands us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The fourth action, asks the conference to pledge to engage in processes that require active engagement and a commitment to showing grace rather than expressing anger, given that not all in the United Methodist Church embrace LGBTQ+ equality. The fifth action asks the conference to commit to work towards a future church, here in the Susquehanna Conference, and in the broader United Methodist Church that is fully accepting of our LGBTQ+ siblings in all aspects of church life, including ordination, as well as marriage officiated by United Methodist clergypersons in United Methodist churches. *Motion to table Resolution #7 was not approved. Motion to call for the question was approved. The resolution was not approved.*

After the resolutions, we moved into a time of worship. Rev. Brenda Leigey, opened the COVID-19 Memorial Service with words of grief and comfort. Essential workers and youth then read scripture and gave brief messages of hope. Rev. Barry Robison, delivered the sermon “Mending the Nets of God”. “The nets of our lives, individually and congregationally, have been torn and the task of mending them is before us. COVID has torn the nets of our lives in different ways. It has affected the physical, mental, and spiritual health of some people in ongoing ways. It has affected others through loss of income or employment. It has caused folks to feel isolated through the loss of relationships, both personally and congregationally. COVID has torn the nets of the ways we live life, at home, in public, and at church” said Rev. Robison. He talked about the time it takes to mend and finding hope in Christ to help us through that time. Rev. Robison, went on to speak about how when the net is mended it will not be the same and how our churches and their ministries will never be the same. He called on churches to embrace these changes. “And so today, as important as mending nets can be, I encourage you to resist the temptation to think that all you can or should do at this time is mend your nets by trying to put your lives back together the way they were. God may be calling all of us away from those efforts to some other purpose” said Rev. Robison. The service continued with a time of prayerful reflection. The service concluded with the song “New Wine” and a benediction from Rev. Barry Robison.