

REPORT on the 2018 EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA ANNUAL CONFERENCE
submitted by Lay Member Lois Q. Neidermyer

The 2018 Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church convened at the Expo Center in Oaks, PA, from June 14 to 16 with the theme: “We Will All Be Changed.” Pastor Quentin Wallace and Lay Member Lois Neidermyer served as Covenant United Methodist Church’s voting delegates at the conference.

Variations of the conference theme were reflected in the worship services and celebrations during the three days. The Rev. Justin Hancock, a deacon with cerebral palsy and the leader of the Julian Way in Dallas Texas, preached at the opening worship service on “We Will All Be Present” with emphasis on embracing those with disabilities. The retiree recognition service reflected the theme “We Will All Be Connected” with retiring clergy passing the mantle on to this year’s ordinands. Bishop Cynthia Moore-KoiKoi, who leads the Pittsburgh Episcopal Area, preached on “We Will All Be Sent” during the Service of Ordination. Then at the Memorial Service the presiding Bishop Peggy Johnson preached on “Die Like You Are Living” as we remembered clergy and lay people who passed on since last year’s conference.

The business of the conference focused on “We Will All Be Connected” with reports, recognitions, and resolutions. During Holy Conferencing, 28 resolutions were discussed and voted upon. Several justice-related resolutions were approved. During this 50th anniversary of the United Methodist Church, clergy and lay members voted to cancel all churches’ unpaid “prior-years’ balances” of apportionments and certain other billings as of the end of 2017. Furthermore, additional balances, including unpaid property and liability insurance, were canceled as an act of justice for 29 predominantly black churches, many of which belonged to the former, racially segregated Delaware Annual Conference and some to the former Philadelphia Conference as well as the current Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. This measure was considered “one attempt at acknowledgement and atonement” for a racist history of segregation within the Methodist conferences until mergers in 1965 (before the 1968 formation of the United Methodist Church).

More justice related resolutions were approved: one to advocate against offensive use of Native American team names and mascots in sports and one for protection of sacred Indian sites and reversal of recent White House decisions to reduce the size of national monuments on public lands. Another resolution affirmed the action of the 2016 General Conference in calling for a reduction of guns, including assault weapons, and gun violence in America. An additional decision was made to create a new conference Committee on Domestic Violence from the current task force to help churches address this concern with more substantive programming and resources. Approval was also given to promote greater awareness of and support for conference efforts to confront sexual harassment, sexual abuse, misconduct, and misogyny in church and society.

Two of the resolutions related to “A Way Forward” for the denomination were discussed in light of the recent recommendation from the Council of Bishops to be presented at General Conference in February of 2019. This Special Session will address whether or not to change church laws prohibiting LGBTQ members’ participation in pastoral ministry and marriage within the church. The Bishops’ Commission has decided to recommend a new One-Church Model that would place decisions about whether to ordain LGBTQ clergy or to officiate at same-gender unions closer to the congregational level. Two other models that were explored but not endorsed by the Bishops’ Commission will also be presented at the 2019 General Conference: the Traditionalist Model, which would affirm the current disciplinary language and restrictions, and the Connectional Conference Plan, which would allow conferences to choose their affiliation with one of three connectional conferences—traditionalist, progressive, or a combination of approaches. (To understand more about these issues, go to www.epaumc.org and find under News and

Events the NEWSpirit Newspaper, Spring 2018, Volume 18, #2.) At the June Annual Conference, the resolution entitled “Agape Love for All,” calling for elimination of the current Discipline’s restrictions for LGBTQ clergy and marriage within the church, was postponed indefinitely in light of the imminent decisions to be made by the Special Session of General Conference in early 2019. Another resolution, entitled “Gracious Exit,” advocated for “a fair and gracious exit path for congregations who cannot in good conscience abide by the stance of the church regarding LGBTQ+ ministry, as determined by the 2019 General Conference” and to do so with their buildings and assets while assuming their own liabilities. After much debate, this resolution was defeated by a close 285 to 241 vote.

In other conference action, members approved unanimously a resolution calling for a special offering to aid the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico in its long and painstaking recovery from Hurricane Maria in 2017. Only 10 percent of what the UM Committee On Relief raises for Puerto Rico can go to repair or rebuild damaged church structures. Churches within our conference were encouraged to receive a special love offering on Sunday, September 16, 2018, for the Puerto Rican churches’ recovery. Additional action was taken to solicit second-mile funding from churches for nine Advance Special projects during 2018-2019. Other important financial decisions were also made regarding clergy insurance plans, pension rates, and equitable compensation. The 2019 budget for the EPA Conference, including its connection with the General Church, was approved at \$5,319,005, a total very similar to the 2018 budget.

In regard to other conference matters, changes were made to several rules of order so that business can be conducted in a more organized and efficient fashion. Nominations for clergy and lay membership on conference committees were listed in a 32-page packet, corrected as necessary, and then approved. One church, Avon Zion UMC, was officially discontinued by the conference with recognition for those who had been faithful members there. Near the end of the business of the conference, a timely emergency resolution was submitted to call on the U. S. Government to end its recent policy and practice of separating parents and children immigrating here as refugees from violence in their Latin American countries. It was unanimously approved.

Going forward, we are called to prayer for the 2019 Special Session of General Conference scheduled for February 23-26, 2019, and for our EPA delegation of eight voting members (four clergy and four lay) and two alternates. If you wish to learn more about the UMC Way Forward and the recommendation from the Council of Bishops’ Commission, you may attend the West District Town Hall Session with Bishop Peggy Johnson on September 27, 2018, beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Ruhl’s UMC in Manheim. A listening session will follow from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. when the public will be invited to provide input on the paragraphs from the UMC Book of Discipline concerning sexuality and the proposed plan for the Way Forward as a denomination.