

Reflections from Annual Conference 2021

This past weekend, Pastors Tom Parkinson and Jim Gascoine along with Dutilh's 2 lay delegates, Kate Gascoine and I, attended a hybrid version of Annual Conference for the Western PA Conference. Only those who had special invitations to either the Ordination service on Friday night or the Memorial Service on Saturday morning were invited to attend in person at the Bayfront Convention Center in Erie, PA. The rest of the clergy and lay delegates participated through live streaming the event. The theme was "Our Labor Is Not in Vain." At the Ordination worship service, there were a total of 17 people who were ordained as Elders in full connection and 2 were ordained as Deacons in full connection. In addition, there were 7 provisional elders and 5 provisional deacons who were ordained for the next step in their journey. As those of you who attended worship this past Sunday know, Sam Hogue shared in giving the message because he is discerning his call to the ordained ministry.

Therefore, it might be helpful for you to know the difference between the Order of Deacon and the Order of Elder in the United Methodist Church. The candidacy process is the same because both interview with the Board of Ordained Ministry before being commissioned. Once commissioned, candidates are granted provisional Conference membership for 2 full years before being fully ordained and they are no longer considered members of a local church. The difference is their function within the clergy since Elders are generalists who serve in itinerant ministry by the Bishop's appointment to a specific congregation annually, while Deacons are specialists who find their own ministry setting and then request the Bishop's approval and appointment to that ministry setting. Both are called by God to preach, teach, serve, care for, and lead congregations as God has uniquely gifted them. The Ordination service is a significant event in the life of the United Methodist Church because all candidates make vows that confirm that they have been called by God to the ordained ministry.

On Saturday morning, our Bishop, Cynthia Moore-KoiKoi, led us in Bible study from 1 Corinthians 15 and used the illustration of her attempts to create a raised-bed garden to remind us that even though much could have dissuaded our efforts in ministry over the past year and a half, we can be assured that our labors have not been in vain because God has promised to use them for His good purposes. During the State of the Church address, she and our Conference Lay Leader, Sharon Gregory, shared examples from all over the Conference about churches doing exceptional ministry in serving their communities. The most significant change at the Conference level this coming year is that our Bishop and Bishop Sandra Steiner-Ball who oversees the West Virginia Conference will share episcopal duties in overseeing the Susquehanna Conference as well because their Bishop, Jeremiah Park, is retiring. They jointly shared with us that they have embraced the vision of how God will be able to use their unique skill sets and passions to serve such a large geographic area by mobilizing churches, both laity

and clergy, to support each other in mutual ministry with a collaborative spirit. In addition, we voted to approve a merger of the Western PA and Susquehanna Foundations into a single functioning Board which will create nearly \$200 million in joint resources so grants can be given to lots of different new ministries. The fact that both Boards and two Annual Conferences were able to nearly unanimously support the merger was a true miracle according to the Executive Director.

Because the Conference was virtual for most of us, we could experience the annual reading of the appointments via PowerPoint interspersed with videos highlighting the Conference's five areas of focus: Developing Principled Christian Leaders, Creating New and Renewed Congregations, Engaging in Ministry with the Poor, Promoting Abundant Health, and Dismantling Racism. The Rev. Amy Wagner will no longer be attending Dutilh because she was reappointed from Conference staff to serve as pastor of St. Paul's UMC in Allison Park. Salem UMC in Wexford will also welcome the Rev. Stephanie Gottschalk. Pastor Tom told me that he looks forward to being in collaborative ministry with both of them since they all went through the ordination process together. During this time, we were reminded about the benefits of a connectional church because God can do much more through all of the churches in the Conference working together than is possible through the work of a single congregation. Our financial support through our Apportionment dollars makes all of this possible.

The Conference concluded with a Memorial Service which remembered those who have served well in this life and passed on to Glory. In 2014, one of those who was remembered was my mom, Barbara Blackstone, and I was reminded of how her legacy has impacted so many others in this Conference in addition to my commitment to Christ and His church. I consider it an honor to serve as one of your lay representatives to Annual Conference and hope that you can share in my belief that we are stronger together than we are apart.