

2021 Laity Address

Greetings friends! I bring you greetings and wishes for a meaningful Annual Conference. I think we are getting used to this ZOOM format for meetings and worship services – I know I am. It has allowed distant members to participate at no cost and without driving long distances. Nevertheless, I'm also looking forward to when we can all be together in person. There is nothing like meeting face-to-face.

This has been quite a year, wouldn't you say. This is the second year in a row that District and Annual Conferences have been held via ZOOM. The Laity Academy was canceled due to pandemic related concerns. This is the first year with out a Laity Academy since it started in 1983, 37 years ago. The 2020 General Conference has been postponed (pause) twice. It's status is still in question and Agencies, Boards, Conferences, and local churches are scrambling in all the uncertainty. Lastly, our Bishop, Peggy Johnson, announced

her retirement, so this will be her last Annual Conference as our Resident Bishop.

But it's not all bad news. I think we've at least started to come out of our doldrums. Three different vaccines for COVID-19 are available and being administered to more and more folks every day. Soon we should attain “herd immunity.” With the vaccine folks can do most things just like before – except with a mask and some social distancing.

Tools for Ministry was held via ZOOM in March and was an unqualified success. Thanks in no small part to the work of Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, the Director of Connectional Ministries, and her staff, the District Lay Leaders, the Cabinet, presenters, and Lindsey Coleman who I call the “Queen of ZOOM” for the Conference. There were 734 registrants. Annual Conference is usually a little over 800, so this was the second largest gathering –

albeit electronic – in the Conference. Thirty-five ninety minute courses were offered across districts allowing for greater choice for registrants and broader sharing of knowledge by presenters.

In the midst of our pandemic lock-down a new Facebook page for EPA Laity was launched. It now has over 100 subscribers and is used to promote events make announcements and foster better communication between laity across the conference.

Certified Lay Minister is the highest level of recognition a lay person can attain in The United Methodist Church without becoming clergy. This June ten individuals representing all four districts will graduate from the CLM program making a total of seventy-one active CLMs. Fourteen of those CLMs are assigned to pastor a church. Seven students are enrolled in the program for next year.

Laity Academy will be back in 2021 building off the success of Tools For Ministry. Courses will be offered the first weekend in August via ZOOM. That's August 6th – 8th. The format will be the

usual ten hour courses broken up into two or three hour blocks of time over the weekend. Later, in October, some preaching courses will be offered in person at locations to be determined. Look for more details on the Conference Website.

Still, we live in troubling times. Racial discord presents itself in so many forms in so many places. Political compromise oftentimes seems like wishful thinking. Ecumenical compromise is just as elusive. The 2020 General Conference has been delayed twice and when it finally happens, what form it will take, and what issues will be resolved are still up in the air. No one knows for sure. Churches are leaving the Denomination. One in Eastern Pennsylvania left earlier this year. I'm sure more will follow but no one knows when or how. The times are truly troubling.

So what should you and I do about any of this? Well, prayer is always in order. But we need to do more than pray. Listen to what the Prophet Micah said, “ ... what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Easier said than done, particularly the humble walking. We need to be kind to each other. Kind to the people we know and to people we don't know. Kind to people we know disagree with us and kind to people with whom we agree. Kind to people who want to leave The United Methodist Church and kind to those who wish to stay. Simply stated, we need to show grace toward one another. It's the only way we can advance our mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

So go ... and be gracious to those you encounter.

Amen