



MNConnect:

Annual Conference Special Edition

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Bishop's Episcopal Address: 'It is time to do something'

By Christa Meland

"It is time to take and pass the final exam. It is time to do something."

That's what Bishop Bruce R. Ough told members of the 161st session of the Minnesota Annual Conference. In his Episcopal Address, Ough said the question Jesus asks on the final exam—the question he taught would be put to us in the final judgment—is haunting: "When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not care for you?" (Matthew 25:44).

"The final exam is whether you and I will fully, sacrificially, extravagantly engage in Christ's mission to transform the world," Ough said. "The final exam question will not be about what we professed but what we did when we saw the least of these hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, or in prison."

He noted that the poor had a central place in the teachings and actions of Jesus. In fact, one in every 16 verses in scripture refers to the poor. And one in every 10 in the gospels is about the poor, the impoverished, and the economically exploited. Jesus is clear: The distress of every single human being is a priority for the living God.



Bishop Ough says the final exam is "whether you and I will fully, sacrificially, extravagantly engage in Christ's mission to transform the world." Photo by Jill Shirley

And who are these others—the people who are a priority for the living God? They are the children who die each day from malnutrition and the diseases of poverty. They are the people who have no access to clean water. They are the disproportionate number of African Americans incarcerated in our prisons. They are the people we see every day in Minnesota who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, addicted, abused, or imprisoned.

"We should not only share gospel, food, water, health care, education, and community with the poor," Ough said. "We are also called to address, advocate, even fight the demonic systems that create and sustain poverty. We dare not offer the gospel in Christ's name without offering bread in Christ's name. And we dare not offer bread in Christ's name without addressing the very

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political and economic systems that brutalize human beings beyond our imagination.”

St. Augustine said it well, Ough noted: “We are the bread on the table.” The final exam is about becoming what we are—bread on the table.

In his book *Include Me Out*, Colin Morris said: “If there is still time left for Methodism, it can only be stirred into action if the power is connected between the two poles—Christ’s love and human suffering—if we feel the full strength of the first and the monstrosity of the other.”

This is the bridge we are called to build as United Methodists, Ough said.

Ough told members of annual conference that he recently heard someone say: “Hell means realizing

later we should have said ‘yes’ when God called us.”

“Friends, God is calling us in Minnesota,” he said. “God is calling us to connect the poles of Christ’s love and human suffering. God is calling us to build bridges out of poverty. God is calling us to expand our missional impact. God is calling us to heal a broken world.”

An increasing number of our congregations already know the answer to the final exam, Ough said. They know the words of Mother Teresa to be true: “We should not serve the poor like they were Jesus; we should serve the poor because they are Jesus.”

They know that when they reach out to the least of these who are members of God’s family, they are ministering to Christ. They know that their future is not found in preserving themselves behind locked doors. They know that

God’s vision is our mission.

The future of every congregation is dependent upon its ability to be externally focused and to re-think “church” on a regular basis, Ough said.

“Unless we are constantly in the business of leaving the building, the church will die,” he said. “Unless we are constantly keeping our eyes on God’s eternal purposes, the church will die.”

Are you ready to transform the world? he asked.

“It is time to know your communities; love your communities; build relationships with your communities. It is time to build bridges between the poles of Christ’s love and human suffering. It is time to show the world that black and brown and red lives matter.”

It is time to take and pass the final exam. It is time to do something.

Changing the world: 2014-2015 missional report

By **Christa Meland**

When we work together, shoulder to shoulder, we can change the world.

That’s the message that Southern Prairie District Superintendent Phil Strom gave to members of the 161st Minnesota Annual Conference Session. And that message was reinforced Wednesday afternoon through several stories of Minnesota United Methodists being church in their communities and across the globe.

Conference attendees learned how Oakwood United Methodist Church in New Ulm adopted an elementary school in order to share God’s love with the neediest children in the community. They learned that Centenary United Methodist Church in Mankato provides hot breakfast and hope six mornings a week to



The report can be downloaded from the “Conference session” section of the conference website (www.minnesotaumc.org).

its neighbors in need. They learned that 61 Minnesota United Methodist churches have formed relationships with 16 missionaries being the hands and feet of Jesus around the world. They learned that the Minnesota Conference is partnering with United Methodist missionaries in Vietnam to help foster an abundant life for

children in Vietnam.

They learned that we are healing a broken world in a wide variety of ways. Other highlights celebrated during a look back over the past year:

Reach • Renew • Rejoice: To date, \$3,038,968 million has been pledged to this congregational development initiative that aims to raise \$3.7 million to start new churches and revitalize existing churches across Minnesota over the next seven years. Many individual donors and roughly a quarter of churches have thus far made pledges.

Transformational processes: Twenty-four churches are currently engaged in a revitalization process—Missional Journey for small churches, Healthy Church Initiative for

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mid-sized churches, or Missional Church Consultation Initiative for large churches. These churches have all said “yes” to starting a new lifecycle of vitality and are working to position themselves for growth in number, spirituality, and community impact.

Church planting: “We believe in resurrection and we are a missionary movement, always going to the frontier, where new people are living and working, and we send circuit riders to those places,” said Rev. Whitney Starkey, associate pastor at Centennial UMC in Roseville. The Minnesota Conference currently has 15 faith communities that are less than seven years old. One of them is a second site for Centennial that will launch later this year. Another is a new Minneapolis church that Tyler Sit, who just finished a church-planting residency in Chicago and will be commissioned Thursday, has been appointed to launch this summer. That church will be focused on eco-justice, which Sit describes as the intersection between race, economy, and ecology.

The ELI Project: Thanks to a \$60,000 grant from the United Methodist Church’s Young Clergy Initiative, the Minnesota Conference just launched The Exploring Leadership Internship (ELI) Project, an internship program for college students exploring a call to vocational ministry. Eight interns will spend eight weeks at a host church this summer to engage in hands-on ministry. “Developing leaders who have the zest, grit, and heart to not only lead the church we have now, but imagine and create a church for the future, is priority one,” Rev. Cindy Gregorson, the conference’s director of ministries, said.

Generous givers: Through their generosity, Minnesota United Methodists have collectively enabled vital mission and ministry around the



Annual conference members wave their printed missional reports in the air. This document, available to all, celebrates highlights from the past year. Photo by Jill Shirley



When we work together, shoulder to shoulder, we can change the world. That’s the message that Southern Prairie District Superintendent Phil Strom gave to members of the 161st Minnesota Annual Conference Session. Photo by Jill Shirley

world. Gifts include: \$2.8 million to Imagine No Malaria (which has saved 280,000 lives), more than 3 million meals packed and nearly \$100,000 given for hungry children around the world, and \$959,000 in giving

over and above apportionments—including \$218,000 to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, which brings hope and assistance to places impacted by natural disasters. Thank you for your generosity!

Rev. Jorge Acevedo: Faithfulness and fruitfulness

By Christa Meland

"Jesus said, 'I want you to be fruitful'—and it begins with being faithful," Rev. Jorge Acevedo told nearly 800 members of annual conference during two 90-minute teaching sessions Thursday. "God wants Pentecost to happen in your life and in your church."

But we have to understand that faithfulness precedes fruitfulness, he said, citing John 15: 1-8. "Our lack of fruitfulness is the direct result of our lack of faithfulness. You cannot give what you do not have."

Acevedo is lead pastor at Grace Church, a multi-site United Methodist congregation in Southwest Florida that has grown its weekend worship attendance from 400 to more than 2,600 over the past 19 years.

Faithfulness to God

He said faithfulness requires several things—one of which is community. Studies have found that pastors suffer from agonizing loneliness and despair, but ministry was meant to be lived in rich, deep community. Solitary confinement is the worst punishment you can give a prisoner, and yet, "sadly, many Christian leaders are living their Christian experience in solitary confinement."

Acevedo said he's been part of a covenant group for 24 years. The group meets twice a year, and they "pray hard and play hard." But the group members also hold each other accountable when they're not together.

"How are you doing at staying connected in rich, authentic relationships with other Christ-followers?" Acevedo asked attendees.

Faithfulness also requires abiding, he said. Too often, "we're trying to be Christian instead of training to be Christian." He cited a study that found



Rev. Jorge Acevedo is lead pastor at Grace Church, a growing multi-site United Methodist congregation in Southwest Florida. Photo by Jill Shirley

that the No. 1 factor in helping people grow in relationship with God is regular Bible engagement.

Acevedo said people occasionally ask him why he does daily devotions. He gives four reasons: It helps him listen to God, it's a way for him to "dethrone" himself, he often comes away with a word for someone else he encounters later in the day, and it helps him innovate in both life and ministry.

"How are you doing at staying connected in a rich, authentic relationship with Jesus?" Acevedo asked.

Third, faithfulness requires pruning—cutting those things in life that keep us from abundant fruitfulness and lifting up and cleaning off anything that keeps us from abundant fruitfulness. The easiest traps for idolatry for many maturing believers are things that are religious spiritual in nature, he said—like worshipping the superstar

pastors in our denomination. These individuals teach us—but we should worship God and God alone.

Fruitfulness for God

"In creating a culture of discipleship in your church, the systems and strategies you create will determine the harvest you get," Acevedo said. It matters where you plant seeds.

God is out there at work in the world and has an active presence that's not dependent on human actions—a concept Methodism founder John Wesley called "prevenient grace." In Wesley's days, class meetings were a space for people to incubate their faith, Acevedo said. Just 20 percent of people have a "light switch" experience in coming to Christ; for the other 80 percent, it's more of a "dimmer switch" experience—one that takes time to transform into who God intends them to be. Acevedo asked: "Where in your church is it safe to not be a Christian?"

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He said Grace Church has tried to model its ministries around the movements of grace that Methodism founder John Wesley identified:

Reach ministries: Engage and invite unchurched people in our community to experience the love of Jesus through the body of Christ. One of Grace's "Reach" ministries is its Exceptional Entrepreneurs program, which empowers people with special needs by inviting them to participate in worm farming (vermiculture) and gives them job training and life skills.

Connect ministries: Help people connect to Jesus and the Grace Church family. For Grace, these include hospitality—like greeting people at the parking lot and delivering a mug to the homes of first-time visitors—and membership classes and other opportunities for people to learn about the church.

Form ministries: Help people have a growing and transforming

relationship with Jesus Christ. For Grace, this means engaging people through small groups and training them through spiritual mentoring, a Walk to Emmaus experience, Bible engagement, and other avenues.

Send ministries: Release God's people to make the realities of heaven the realities of earth. For example, Grace has an annual shoe ministry through which members demonstrate servant leadership by washing the feet of children in need, providing a message of hope, and supplying a new pair of shoes and school supplies.

Every community has people in need. "Find your niche" and use it to reach and connect, he said.

Acevedo said the evangelism question that leaders of Grace always ask when they are reaching and connecting is: How can we pray for you? Unchurched people often share some of themselves in response to that question. It's critical to always connect the church's good works

to the reason for those good works, Acevedo said.

"Why would you give away a bag of groceries and not tell someone why you're giving away that bag of groceries?" he asked.

He said we have to create an environment where the Holy Spirit can do what the Holy Spirit does best, which is grow people into Christ's likeness.

"A vital congregation is one that creates incubator-like environments for the Holy Spirit to work God's grace into people," he explained.

Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the age. But we should be asking ourselves: "Am I with Jesus as He is on mission in this world?"

"There are 7.3 billion people on this planet who are crazy about Jesus, and about 5 billion of them don't know it yet," he added. "Spread throughout Minnesota are hundreds of thousands of [people] who are looking for God and they don't even know it."

Repentance and reaching out to strangers

By **Christa Meland**

During Thursday and Friday morning worship, members of annual conference were reminded that we are called to reach out to the strangers among us and that we are united in Christ with brothers and sisters of all ancestries and geographies. They also donated \$74,735 (so far) to the Love Offering, 60 percent of which will go to Vietnam.

Rev. Anita Phillips, executive director of the United Methodist Church's Native American Comprehensive Plan, said during a Thursday morning Bible study on Deuteronomy 10:17-19 that alienation is something that happens to each of us. "There are times when all of us have experienced a feeling of alienation, of separation, of not being



Rev. Anita Phillips says repentance is an ongoing process. Photo by Jill Shirley

connected to any human thing and alone and adrift."

She recalled a story about going to Chicago years ago and feeling like a foreigner in a strange land—and talked about a man who reached out

to her and enabled her to experience "the most significant healing I've ever experienced in my life's journey."

The strangers and the aliens are mentioned time and again in the Bible—and "they are named not as enemies...but as individuals that are worthy of respect, considered to be mutual human beings, those to whom we offer hospitality," she said.

The 2012 General Conference included an act of repentance toward healing relationships with indigenous peoples. It was not meant to be a singular act but a process.

"There are many, many Native American brothers and sisters who have become alienated from what

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God created us to be, strangers in our own land," Phillips said. She encouraged attendees to open the deepest part of themselves and think about a time when they've felt like the alien or been dehumanized.

"Your native brothers and sisters need you; we need you to understand, listen, acknowledge our history, confess that even if you and your family did not directly have a hand in the oppression of native peoples, you now stand on ground and you live lives that are made available to you through genocidal actions toward Native Americans in our past," she said. "I choose to welcome you, just as centuries ago we welcomed you and showed you how to live so that you might survive. I hope your spirit trembles as mine does in moments like this... We each hold the key to each other's humanity and healing."

On Friday morning, Phillips said the notion of repentance is a living thing, a process that's ongoing, and she talked about that process. "You might say to our native people, yes, native American brothers and sisters, those indigenous people around the world, we recognize you, we see you, and we are willing to hear your story now. We are willing to know the road you have walked...and we're ready to receive what you have to say, as your church, the body of Jesus Christ. We're here for you."

Phillips said there are four questions she's found helpful to ask at times when she has journeyed toward repentance:

1. Can you see us?
2. Can you hear us?
3. Can you find Christ in us?
4. Will you claim us as part of yourself and your community?

Phillips' message about reaching out to strangers was reinforced during other parts of Thursday's worship



Attendees folded brightly colored paper airplanes as they prayed for Love Offering recipients. Then, after writing on their planes the name of a person or ministry they hold dear, they released them into the air. Photo by Jill Shirley

service. Toward the beginning, members of annual conference worshiped with two congregations in Vietnam through an online connection. The three groups sang together and celebrated that we are brothers and sisters serving one Lord.

"We are overwhelmed today because we sense how vast your love is, how extensive your mercy is that it can travel to all corners of this wonderful globe," Bishop Bruce R. Ough said in a prayer during the joint worship. "We are so touched today that we can be part of a connection that brings the gospel to every person everywhere...We pray that you would bless...our united ministries for we are one in Christ."

The Minnesota Conference recently formed a partnership with United Methodist missionaries in Vietnam to help expand Grace Children's Center in Ho Chi Minh City, which is currently providing education and daycare for about 20 orphaned children. Sixty percent of this year's Love Offering for missions will be put toward this effort. Another 30 percent will be used for

grants for local churches that develop a long-term partnership with a school. And the remaining 10 percent will go toward Volunteers in Mission scholarships for first-time participants. Through the Volunteers in Mission program, teams spend up to two weeks working on mission projects either domestically or abroad.

Toward the end of Thursday's service, members submitted their contributions toward the Love Offering.

They also prayed for the recipients as they folded brightly colored paper airplanes. After the planes were folded, attendees wrote on their planes the name of a person or ministry they treasure and wanted to hold in prayer. Then, 800 paper airplanes were simultaneously released into the air in a sea of colors.

"Bless this, our offering of love and prayer, as it wings its way to those in need and those who serve," attendees prayed in unison before sending their planes flying. "May we be a blessing to one another and the world..."

Laity session: No excuses; it's time to answer God's call

By Christa Meland

Most of us remember playing the childhood game "Simon Says." The person designated as Simon gives commands, and others try to follow the commands that begin with those two words.

A question that was always really important when playing that game as a child was: Who gets to be Simon? In other words, who gets to be the leader?

In the 2015 laity session, conference co-Lay Leader Janet Beard pointed out that the question changes in adulthood. Nowadays, the question too often is: Who will be willing to be the leader? Or even, who can we convince or coerce to be the leader?

It's time for each of us to step up and say "yes" to God's call. That's the message that Beard and co-Lay Leader Bob Kutter communicated to several hundred laity in a crowded ballroom Wednesday morning. Their message was reinforced with energetic music, skits by improv group Table Salt Productions, and testimonies from several lay people who have discerned God's call and become equipped to answer that call.

Beard told attendees that there was another Simon many years ago who was called and also hesitated to be a leader. She recounted the biblical story near the end of John in which Jesus asked Simon Peter to feed his sheep. Peter—the one who had denied Jesus, the one who couldn't stay awake with Jesus, the one who probably felt unworthy to do anything for Jesus.

Beard said Peter could have made all kinds of excuses for why he was not capable of feeding Jesus' sheep, and he could have said "no" to Jesus.



Laity session attendees sing along to songs played by a live band. Photo by Jill Shirley

But we're here today in part because Peter chose to say "yes." We live lives of grace—filled with God's love, peace, hope, and joy—in part because Peter answered Jesus' call.

"How often do our excuses get in the way of our saying 'yes' to God's call?" Beard asked attendees.

She pointed out that before Jesus asked Peter to feed his sheep, Jesus asked: "Do you love me?"

"It seems that the greatest qualification for being a disciple, for being a leader for Christ, is to love him!" Beard continued. "How many people are out in the world, waiting for us to do away with our excuses and answer God's call? How many sheep is Jesus waiting for us to feed?"

Lay training and certification

Beard said one of the reasons we might not answer a call to ministry is that, like Peter, we feel inadequate or unprepared to do so. There are now a variety of opportunities within the Minnesota Conference for laity to become equipped to answer that call.

A newly formed Lay Ministry Action

Team within the conference has designed opportunities for laity to become trained to serve their own church, other churches, or the conference in deeper ways—in other words, to answer God's call. Through this team, the conference offers certification to become a lay servant, a lay speaker, or a lay minister. (Learn more here.)

"God, the people in our communities, and our conference are counting on all of us to keep learning to be the light so that we can feed God's sheep with the best effort we can," Beard said.

In March, 32 lay people gathered at Koronis Ministries for training to become certified lay speakers. Lee Rainey, a member of Park Avenue United Methodist Church in Minneapolis and leader of a Twin Cities lay leader group, was one of them.

Rainey said he appreciated the lecture-discussion-interaction style of the retreat and particularly enjoyed learning from clergy how to effectively prepare a sermon—and then getting to practice delivering a sermon. "The instructors did an excellent job of combining their book knowledge... with their practical experience as pastors," he said. "We came away with many resources to help us in our ministry for Christ."

Beard and Kutter told laity that it's time to fully embrace God's call.

"Every moment of life is filled with choices," Kutter said. "And what we do with those choices is what gives meaning to life... If we say 'yes' to our personal call to be a disciple over the call of the secular world, and if we choose life over death often enough and long enough, meaning emerges and we are indeed transformed."

Conference celebrates milestones in ministry

On Thursday evening, conference session attendees remembered friends and colleagues who have died over the past year, honored clergy who are retiring, and celebrated licensed local pastors as well as those who were commissioned and ordained. Here are those we lift up in remembrance, recognition, and celebration:

Those Who Have Died

- Kathryn L. Harvey (Husband, Rev. Ralph), 6/5/2014
- Rev. H. Thomas Walker (Wife, Val), 7/16/2014
- Gretta Buller (Husband, Rev. Bruce), 7/16/2014
- Rev. Jack R. Parriott (Wife, Mary), 7/27/2014
- Joan N. M. Krueger (Husband, Rev. Delton), 8/5/2014
- Juanita O. Ernst (Husband, Rev. Duane), 9/15/2014
- Vivian F. Uhren (Husband, Rev. Ken), 10/3/2014
- Rev. Robert A. Neff (Wife, Bonnie), 10/8/2014
- Rev. Luther B. Pennington, Jr. (Late wife, Lucile), 10/22/2014
- Rev. Charles O. Butler (Late wife, Rev. Marilyn), 10/29/2014
- Rev. Gordon A. Patterson (Late wife, Caroline; late wife, Rosemarie), 11/29/2014
- Rev. Donald A. Kinzer (Wife, JoAnn), 12/3/2014
- Rev. Warren A. Nyberg (Wife, Virginia), 12/6/2014
- Rev. Edward Stevens (Late wife, Joyce), 12/15/2014
- Rev. William E. Cox (Wife, Fran), 1/2/2015
- Rev. Clarence R. Nicholas (Wife, Jean), 1/12/2015
- Rev. Charles H. Berg (Wife, Wilma), 1/23/2015
- Rev. Raymond F. Boehlke (Late wife, Ruth), 1/30/2015
- Ruth Kraft (Late husband, Rev. Harold), 2/25/2015
- Rev. Ralph B. Shoemaker (Late wife, Pearl), 3/21/2015



Thirteen people were commissioned or ordained at the Celebration of Life in Ministry worship service on Thursday night. Photo by Jill Shirley

- Rev. Robert D. Kendall (Wife, LuBell), 3/26/2015
- Lorraine Kurtz (Late husband, Rev. Delburn), 4/15/2015
- Elaine A. Budke (Late husband, Rev. Melvyn), 5/17/2015
- Katrina E. Lee
- Gregory W. Leslie
- Kelly R. McCuaig
- Jerad Morey
- James M. Morgan
- Laura M. Nordstrom
- Chad R. Setter
- Matthew Silker
- Kenneth H. Uhren

The Retirement Class

- Pamela E. Barbour
- Marilee Benson
- Lynn C. Borgeson
- Rufus R. Campbell
- Joseph W. Carpenter
- Judith A. Clark
- John Darlington
- R. Geoffrey Denison
- F. Elaine Foote-Blum
- Jeff Gustafson
- Edward J. Holland
- Toni Marie Kisch
- Richard Koehn
- Jonathan Pyne
- Loronda Schuler
- Terry L. Tilton
- Penny Zettler

Licensed Local Pastors

- Linda L. Boorman
- Leah Challberg
- Tamara Churchill
- Melissa K. Deuel
- Clinton M. Evans
- Karen A. Evenson
- Daniel L. Foster
- Ralph L. Holbrook
- Katherine King
- Nathaniel Larson

Those Who Were Commissioned

Commissioned for the work of a deacon

- Erica Jo Koser
- Carissa Anne Lick

Commissioned for the work of an elder

- Jeremiah Anson Lideen
- Shawn R. Moore
- Susan Ann Putzke
- Tyler Ho-Yin Sit
- Lora Rose Sturm
- Rachael Anne Warner

Those Who Were Ordained

Ordained for the work of a deacon

- Susan Marie Mullin

Ordained for the work of an elder

- Samuel John Kautz
- Jacob Cody Nielsen
- Whitney Lynn Starkey
- Cynthia Dianne Williams

Awards given to churches, individuals

By Christa Meland

Three churches, four individuals, and a nonprofit were recognized for the ways they have made a difference in their congregations, their communities, and around the world. Here's a look at the recipients and their contributions:

Culture of Call Award: Hastings United Methodist Church

Several years ago, borrowing from a similar program at Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, Hastings UMC started its "Ministry as Career" (or "MAC Track") program. Church leaders are intentional about identifying gifts for ministry that they see in young people—and inviting those young people to explore those gifts through hands-on experiences. MAC Track participants lead all aspects of a Sunday evening "Overflow" worship service that regularly welcomes 100 youth from the community. They preach, lead prayers and music, deliver hospitality, and lead in many other ways—and leaders meet with them to teach them about various forms of ministry and answer their questions. Hastings UMC is dedicated to training the next generation of church leaders. This award, presented by the United Methodist Church's Foundation for Evangelism, is given annually to just one church from across the connection.

One Matters Award: Oakwood United Methodist Church (New Ulm)

This award from Discipleship Ministries recognizes churches that have grown in their number of baptisms and professions of faith, and Oakwood UMC is not only reaching out to meet a tangible need through its adoption of Jefferson Elementary School, but it is making disciples. Every person baptized and making



Oakwood United Methodist Church (New Ulm) received the One Matters Award from Discipleship Ministries. Photo by Jill Shirley

that commitment to Christ matters to God, and this church had a huge increase in its number of baptisms, from three in 2013 to 11 in 2014! Oakwood UMC will receive \$1,000 to continue its efforts to offer Christ to the children of its community and help them grow in their love of God and neighbor.

Denman Evangelism Award, Youth: Allison Schwarz, Le Sueur United Methodist Church

Schwarz did not wait to be confirmed to be on the mission field for Jesus. She was active in mission trips both across the country and across the street, distributing sloppy joes at the Salvation Army soup kitchen in Mankato and leading prayer at a Vacation Bible School in Newport, Tennessee. She has been known to sport an apron that says "Have you hugged a United Methodist today?" and delivers on those hugs. If her laugh and smile are not enough invitation, you will find her on the streets of Le Sueur, inviting others to

meals and worship. Schwarz identifies herself within the mission of Jesus and sees herself as a part of the lineage of those who have done the same. Giving back to her town, church and school is a part of who she is and what she is about.

Denman Evangelism Award, Laity: Mindy Kearney, LaCrescent United Methodist Church

Kearney has invested her heart and life into loving children. She has been the creative and driving force behind several evangelism opportunities in her community of LaCrescent. She began JOLT—Jesus Our Living Truth—a Wednesday evening meal that is free and open to the community. She has led the church in ecumenical efforts in Vacation Bible School and youth mission trips. The big outreach she's now leading for her church involves preparing and serving sack lunches for children in the summer. Last summer, LaCrescent

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UMC had three delivery sites and plans to add two more this summer. Kearney's love of children and desire to tell them about Jesus never stops, and they know that.

**Denman Evangelism Award, Clergy:
Rev. Dr. Lowell Gess**

Gess returned to Sierra Leone earlier this year, at the age of 93, to the Kissy Eye Hospital he helped to start in 1984. He went because of Ebola. Medical staff in Africa are limited in number, and many were in the first wave of those who contracted and died from Ebola. Gess said that while praying for the safety of the staff at the hospital, he felt a call to go and help. So he bought a plane ticket. The trip was Gess' 186th across the ocean. He has been a medical missionary since 1952, caring for people's bodies and souls, always sharing the gospel in word and deed. He said of his recent two months in Sierra Leone that he had never been more dependent on God's grace or experienced more highly the joy of ministering in the name of the Savior and Lord. In explaining why he did it, he quoted I Corinthians 9:13: "All this I do for the gospel's sake in order to share its blessings."

**Francis Asbury Award: Rev. J.
Cody Nielsen, executive director,
University of Minnesota Wesley
Foundation (campus ministry)**

Nielsen is the founding executive director of the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities' Wesley Foundation, a United Methodist campus ministry. He began this ministry from the ground up after a previous ecumenical campus ministry involving United Methodists disbanded. The ministry is now in its fourth year. He also established an e-newsletter for all the United Methodist-related campus ministries in Minnesota. Nielsen has been an instrumental part of the Minnesota Conference's Higher Education



Rev. Dr. Lowell Gess accepts the Denman Evangelism Award. Photo by Jill Shirley

Ministry Team, and he has raised the visibility of campus ministry at annual conference gatherings. And this summer, for the third consecutive year, Nielsen is leading an inter-generational group to New Jersey to provide Hurricane Sandy relief.

**Rural Church Award: Ogilvie United
Methodist Church**

Though small in numbers, the people of Ogilvie UMC have had a mighty influence in their community. Last fall, the church experienced a financial crisis and there were concerns about its future. Hard questions had to be answered. After much prayer and the professional guidance of a consultant, the good folks of Ogilvie decided that God wasn't through with their Christian influence in the community. They decided to continue being missional, to move forward bringing Christ to the community. They began a new outreach called "Food for the Soul," which offers a free hot meal once a month to everyone in the church and community who desires it. God has blessed the ministry, and it has

generated excitement and faith in the congregation. The folks of Ogilvie have a "don't-give-up" and "can-do" attitude.

**Jeanne Audrey Powers Award for
Ecumenism: Northern Intercultural
Spiritual Experiences (NISE)**

NISE was founded in 2011 to create an interfaith community in the northern suburbs that would provide spiritual experiences through presentations, deep and profound conversations, and the arts. The goal is to increase interfaith and intercultural understanding and relationships, which in turn further unifies the community. The impact can be found in the comments of attendees: "It is so great to be a safe place to hear about other faiths." "When I hear what you are doing with NISE, I think about what God, what Jesus is thinking." "I am so impressed a church will host these types of conversations." The award was presented to Sally Higgins and Kay Roberts, members of Champlin United Methodist Church who serve on the NISE board.

Conference preacher Nancy Victorin-Vangerud: Listening when the stones cry out

By Christa Meland

During opening worship, this year's conference preacher Nancy Victorin-Vangerud drew from a story shared by Dr. Thom White Wolf Fassett as part of the book *Giving Our Hearts Away: Native American Survival* (co-authored by Rev. Anita Phillips and Dr. Henrietta Mann). Fassett's story is about his father, Spotted Horse, a traditional pipe carrier from the Standing Rock reservation in South Dakota. People brought him stones that they thought were special—stones that they thought may be saying something. So he tried to listen to those stones. He couldn't figure out what some of them meant through his listening, but he was continually "working on it."

Victorin-Vangerud said the story invites us to consider that listening to the stones might take a long time—that we have to work at listening. "Why not this week, we ask ourselves, 'What might the stones across our state be saying to the churches?'" she asked.

She talked about a stone in Fort Snelling State Park that she has been trying to listen to for several years. It is engraved with the names of the bands of Dakota interred there over the winter of 1862-1863 as part of the aftermath of the Dakota-U.S. War. Up to 1,700 Dakota—mostly women, children, and elders—had been force-marched 150 miles to the site. That winter, the imprisoned Dakota suffered severe hardship. Up to 300 died. Engraved upon the stone are the words "Mitakuye Oyasin"—"All My Relatives." It is difficult to hear



Conference preacher Nancy Victorin-Vangerud. Photo by Jill Shirley

the words of that stone, Victorin-Vangerud said. It is difficult to hear the words of some of our ancestors.

During the message, Rev. David Bard brought to the stage a stone that came from the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida. He was a delegate that year and attended an Act of Repentance worship service. Each person was invited to select a stone from the worship space to bring back to his or her annual conference as part of a commitment to join the journey of repentance.

On Wednesday, Bard placed on the communion table the stone he selected so that throughout the week members of annual conference

can listen to what the stone may be saying. "My brothers and sisters, this stone from the General Conference cries out to us, 'repent!'" said Victorin-Vangerud, adding that the first step on our journey toward healing is to turn, see, and listen to the cries of others' truth.

"All my relatives, my Methodist relatives here, we are here in St. Cloud because God calls us to mission," she said. "But if we are to become an authentically missional church, we have some very difficult listening to do. We are called to repentance. Will we be silent, or will we cry out? We are yet alive, and so are Native American sisters and brothers who walk this spirit path."

Conference approves bigger 2016 budget to boost leadership development

By Christa Meland

Members of the 2015 Annual Conference Session voted Friday to approve a 2016 apportioned budget totaling \$6,120,770. That's roughly \$121,000 more than the 2015 apportioned budget and \$90,000 above the budget "ceiling," the maximum allowed under conference standing rules. Members approved going \$90,000 above ceiling in order to continue two critical leadership development initiatives.

With an "uncollectible contingency" of \$605,000, the total amount to be apportioned in 2016 is \$6,725,770. The uncollectible contingency accommodates anticipated shortfalls in some churches' apportionment payments.

Apportionments are the share each annual conference or local church pays to support international, national, and local missions. Some of the funds remitted by Minnesota congregations stay within the state and help fund various Minnesota Conference programs and mission efforts, and about a quarter of the funds remitted by local churches go to the global United Methodist Church. Apportionments also pay for the internal support system that allows for 100 percent of "second-mile" giving (to Imagine No Malaria and other Advance Specials) to go to the intended mission or ministry.

Before approving the 2016 budget, members agreed (by a vote of more than two-thirds) to suspend the conference "ceiling" rule, which uses a formula to limit the growth of the budget from one year to the next. Under that rule, the 2016 apportioned budget was limited to an increase of 0.5 percent, or \$31,000, above the 2015 budget.



Members approved a 2016 apportioned budget that's \$90,000 above the budget "ceiling" in order to continue two critical leadership development projects. Photo by Jill Shirley

But the Common Table, which comprises leaders of all ministry teams, and the conference's Budget Process Team recommended the larger budget so that the conference can continue two programs that prepare and develop leaders. The budget is still the lowest one since 2002 (with the exception of 2015).

The Council on Finance and Administration is required to comply with the ceiling rule and recommended a budget totaling \$6,031,234. But after that recommendation was presented, conference co-Lay Leader Bob Kutter made a motion on behalf of the Common Table to suspend the ceiling in order to approve the larger budget, and members vote to approve that motion.

The two items that the \$90,000 above ceiling will fund are:

· **The Exploring Leadership Internship (ELI) Project:** This is a summer internship for college

students who are discerning a call to vocational ministry. After a week-long orientation, each intern is placed into a vital congregation with a gifted pastoral leader and spends eight weeks in a hands-on learning experience to discover his or her gifts for ministry and experience joys of pastoral ministry. An inaugural group of eight students will begin their orientation on Sunday. The first year of the program was made possible thanks to a \$60,000 grant from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry's Young Clergy Initiative. But future years would need to be funded by the Minnesota Conference. Sixty-five percent of Minnesota clergy will be eligible to retire in the next five years.

· **Soul Leaders:** This umbrella title refers to clergy peer groups. Right now, Soul Leaders is a retreat series that offers small groups of clergy the opportunity to reconnect with their

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passion and purpose and explore issues related to heart, courage, and call. But it will soon be expanded to encompass other types of clergy peer groups that are under development. Leadership in the church is often lonely in that clergy are working in solo appointments in locations that are far from their peers. Peer group learning has proven to be one of the most effective ways for clergy to grow and be sustained in their ministry even after their formational years. Soul Leaders launched in 2013 thanks to accrued Ministerial Education Fund dollars, but those resources have been exhausted. The 2016 budget includes approximately \$50,000 for the continuation and expansion of this program during that calendar year, \$30,000 of which was contingent on increasing the ceiling.

Revs. Dianne Ciesluk of Grace UMC in Pequot Lakes and Elizabeth Macaulay of Christ UMC in Rochester, who have participated in Soul Leaders, were among those who spoke in favor of the bigger budget. Ciesluk called her Soul Leaders experience “life-changing,” and Macaulay said the program facilitates connection between clergy from across the state and builds circles of trust that “will ripple across the conference.”

Rev. Victoria Rebeck, a deacon appointed to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, said the two programs are “strategic items that are designed to train leaders and will help our churches be more missional.” Rev. Rob Kopp of UMC of Thief River Falls echoed that



The 2016 budget was developed through a collaborative process. Photo by Jill Shirley

sentiment, saying: “We need people who have passion and energy for the church and churches that are passionate about building those relationships.”

The 2016 budget was developed through a collaborative process that includes the ministry teams and boards of the annual conference.

The apportioned budget is organized around four key areas outlined in our Journey Toward Vitality: developing missional leaders, equipping missional congregations, extending missional impact, and generating missional resources. The Journey Toward Vitality is a roadmap that outlines the conference’s vision and the strategic pathways that will get us there. This roadmap is guiding us in our efforts to increase congregational vitality.

The areas of the budget, and the 2016 apportioned amount budgeted for each, are:

- Developing missional leaders: \$1,114,680
- Equipping missional congregations: \$706,242
- Extending missional impact: \$1,862,240
- Generating missional resources: \$233,508
- Aligning our work: Leadership of the annual conference: \$930,238
- Aligning our work: Support of the annual conference: \$1,273,862
- Uncollectible contingency (under direction of the Council of Finance and Administration): \$605,000

Legislation roundup: Rev. David Bard for bishop, six petitions go to General Conference

By Christa Meland

Members of Annual Conference debated and voted on a number of pieces of legislation on Thursday and Friday.

Key items approved

• **Endorsement of David Bard to episcopacy:** Members voted unanimously (through a round of applause) in favor of nominating and endorsing Rev. Dr. David Bard for the office of bishop. The nomination will be forwarded to the North Central Jurisdictional Conference, which will take place July 13-16, 2016 in Illinois. Bard, who serves at First United Methodist Church in Duluth, was also nominated for bishop in 2008. Faye Christensen, who was elected last year as a lay delegate to the 2016 General Conference and who submitted the legislation, told members that Bard has “a deep and abiding spiritual foundation and love for God” and “a strong desire to see the church minister to all people with acts of compassion and justice.” Following the vote, Bishop Ough led members in a prayer for Bard and thanked God for his selflessness and deep humility.

• **Hamline UMC as 15th conference historic site:** Members voted to designate Hamline Church United Methodist be designated as the 15th Minnesota Conference historic site. The legislation was submitted by the Commission on Archives and History, which noted that this is a continuation of the story of Hamline University and the Market Street Church in St. Paul, both previously noted as conference historic sites.

• **Radon testing for parsonages:** Members approved an addition to existing standards for church-owned parsonages that includes testing for radon. If testing shows that radon is



Members of Annual Conference debated and voted on a number of pieces of legislation. Photo by Jill Shirley

found to be at an unacceptable level, the congregation must take steps to bring the levels into the acceptable range. The legislation, submitted by the conference’s Equitable Compensation Action Team, indicates that it is recommended that the testing be done every three years. Testing must be done in accordance with the current protocols for radon measurement in homes adopted by the American Association of Radon Scientists and Technicians.

General Conference petitions

Six of the items discussed and voted on were petitions for the 2016 General Conference—and members ultimately voted to send all of them on to be considered by the global church body when it meets next year in Portland, Oregon. Here’s a very brief summary of each one:

• **Avoid investments in petroleum, coal, and natural gas:** This petition, submitted by the Hopeful Earth Steering Committee and co-

sponsored by the Church & Society Team, asks the 2016 General Conference to amend a paragraph in the Book of Discipline in order to add the production of petroleum, coal, and natural gas to a list of types of investments that United Methodist agencies and institutions are asked to try to avoid.

• **Avoid investment in production of petroleum, coal, and natural gas:** This petition, submitted by the Hopeful Earth Steering Committee and co-sponsored by the Church & Society Team, requests an amendment to the Book of Resolutions that says that the United Methodist Church shall pursue its investment policy goals through widely practiced responsible investing tools such as portfolio screening.

• **Petroleum and natural gas investment screens:** This petition, submitted by the Hopeful Earth Steering Committee and co-sponsored by the Church & Society

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Team, asks the 2016 General Conference to adopt a resolution to create petroleum and natural gas investment screens.

• **Renew “evolution and intelligent design” resolution:** This petition, submitted by the Minnesota Conference delegation to the 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences, asks the 2016 General Conference to readopt Resolution 5052 from the Book of Discipline, which goes on record as opposing the introduction of any faith-based theories such as Creationism or Intelligent Design into the science curriculum for our public schools.

• **Water, electricity, and recognition of land titles in West Bank:** This petition, submitted by the Palestine Israel Justice Project and the Church and Society Ministry Team of the Minnesota Conference, requests that the 2016 General Conference call on

the nation of Israel to provide the same access to water and electricity in the West Bank as settlers in the Israeli settlements in the area receive—and to recognize existing titles to land within the West Bank that Palestinians hold.

• **Establish screen to remove and avoid investments in illegal settlements:** This petition, submitted by the Palestine Israel Justice Project and the Church and Society Ministry Team of the Minnesota Conference, requests that the 2016 General Conference establish a screen that excludes investment in companies with involvement in illegal settlements—defined as an Israeli settlement built on recognized Palestinian land.

Members also defeated several pieces of proposed legislation. After much discussion, members voted 272-210 against legislation that asked the Minnesota Conference to call on

its investment managers to apply a screen that excludes investment in companies with involvement in illegal settlements—defined as an Israeli settlement built on recognized Palestinian land.

Another defeated item proposed adding \$5,000 to the proposed 2016 budget for a program in North Minneapolis that would “help communicate our concern for young persons who may choose to go fight with extreme persons or communities in the Middle East.” Members also voted against a proposal to add \$100,000 in apportionments to the 2016 budget for initiatives related to all-day kindergarten, health care, a children’s ministry in Texas near the Mexico border, and programs in the Ukraine. And they defeated a proposal to call upon Israel to enter into conversations with its neighbors “that will lead to a just and lasting peace.”

Future annual conference dates

Next year’s annual conference will convene from Tuesday, June 21–Thursday, June 23. And the 2017 annual conference will be from Tuesday, June 20–Thursday, June 22. Both conferences will remain in St. Cloud. The later dates are in response to 2013 legislation that aimed to increase accessibility of annual conference session—particularly for teachers, school staff, and students who are still in school in late May. Revs. Carol Zaagsma and Marianne Ozanne, co-chairs of the Sessions Action Team that plans annual conference, said the two years of later dates will provide an opportunity to test and review their impact on accessibility and participation. The 2013 legislation also requested a Friday start date for annual conference, however, the costs were significantly higher on weekends, which leaders feared would cause an undue financial burden for participants. Zaagsma and Ozanne provided a few questions for conference members to ponder for the future: What if families came to annual conference, fostering relationships that extend for years to come? Who will make a genuine effort to encourage newcomers...especially young ones...and then listen to and encourage their leadership once here? Could annual conference be more about the experience than the obligation?