

Annual Conference 2015

This church is on fire! The theme of our annual conference was On Fire to Serve, and all aspects of the conference experience were built around that theme.

During the sessions, I jotted down some adjectives that came to mind about the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church. Here is my list: goal-directed, spirit-filled, intentional, deliberate, connected, diverse, patient, determined, enthusiastic, and innovative. Bishop Hayes is determined to go into retirement next year not by running to the tape but by running through the tape at the end of this race. He challenged all of us to join him in this work.

Jorge Acevedo, minister of a vital, growing church with several campuses in Florida, challenged us in his teaching address that *faithfulness precedes fruitfulness*. We cannot give what we do not have. Faithfulness requires *community*. We are the average of the five people we spend the most time with so it is important that we surround ourselves with those of faith. Faithfulness requires *abiding*. We exchange our heavy yoke of regret in exchange for Christ's lighter yoke of discipline. Faithfulness requires *pruning away* those things which separate us from God. Finally, Jorge challenged us to practice *indiscriminate compassion* for all of God's children.

Our conference established a strategic plan several years ago, and we are working that plan. Our goal is to make disciples for Jesus Christ, and the changes growing out of our plan are designed to help us achieve that goal. The twelve districts have been re-formed into eight. The Department of Congregational Development has become the New Faith Communities Ministry Team. This group is responsible for providing research information on demographics, lifestyle concerns, emerging cultural conditions, with emphasis on potential new church starts, restarts, multi-site endeavors, relocations, and mergers. In keeping with this, conference delegates approved the closing of some churches and the merging of their congregations with others.

Our number-one need is to connect more local people with vital ministries. Toward that end, new congregations will be formed where they are needed. Established congregations such as ours can utilize the New People, New Places

initiative which provides grants for local efforts such as the one our own Tim Ford applied for and received to provide after-school programs at multiple sites in and around Durant.

As we listened to the reports of the various ministries around our conference, I was amazed and inspired by the scope and breadth of what they do. Rather than waiting for people to find them, they are out finding the people, ministering to their needs, be those physical or spiritual, and generally serving Christ by their actions to the “least of these.” The work we are doing in so many places is heart-warming and humbling. A wonderful thing about attending annual conference is that it put a face on those vital ministries.

Questions that we were asked to think about included What Do We Do to Make a Difference? What is our plan? What do we hope to accomplish, and what steps can we take to achieve it? Overall, our conference worship attendance is declining at the rate of a loss of a mega-church per year. Stewardship has declined with lowing attendance. We did have more professions of faith this year than last, and we must build on that.

Because expenses are up as giving is decreasing, the budget was adjusted to show where we are putting our current emphasis. More funds will go to the New Faith Communities Ministry team while most other areas will receive somewhat less funding. I challenge our Sunday school classes to select one area of conference ministry--be it Circle of Care, Restore Hope, Office of Mission in support of a global ministries missionary, Criminal Justice and Mercy, Cookson Hills, or Project Transformation--to adopt as our target goal of assistance. This would make us feel more connected with that ministry and turn our attention outward into the world, as Christ instructed us to do. In so doing, I believe we could make a difference, an important difference, in our lives and in the lives of others.

The two worship services we had at St. Luke’s were very moving and meaningful. The music was incredible, and the congregational participation was better than any revival I’ve ever attended, and I grew up Baptist! The sermons by Jorge Acevedo on Monday evening and Bishop Hayes on Wednesday evening were more than mind-bending. They were heart-grabbing. There is something about

being in a room with a thousand or so people, all of whom have their hearts and minds going in the same direction. Worship is not a spectator sport, and we were all on the same team at those services.

The hardest part of conference was voting for delegates to general and jurisdictional conferences. I must confess that about three hours into the 4 ½ hour voting ordeal I was relieved to realize that we will be too old to do this in four years when that process will recur. The slates were chosen after multiple ballots were cast, and everyone was still speaking to each other at 11 p.m. when we left the room. That's rather remarkable in itself.

That one evening of voter fatigue aside, I would heartily recommend that you consider being a delegate to annual conference. We learned so much. We were inspired. We were thankful to be part of a group of people known as United Methodists who are going about the Father's business every day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Let's continue beginning with the end result in mind. Let's run the good race. Let's be a church on fire to serve.