



Michigan Conference

The United Methodist Church

Humility, hope, heart, and wisdom

A pastoral letter from Bishop David Bard on the upcoming General Conference

*Sisters and Brothers in Christ in the Michigan United Methodist Church, in this new year I bring greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of **God** and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.*

As 2018 came to a close, many of us watched portions of the funeral services for former president George H. W. Bush and some of the news specials about his life and career. Along the way, we encountered an acronym: CAVU – clearance, and visibility unlimited. It was something President Bush learned as a Navy pilot during World War II. I imagine CAVU was a joy to hear when flying.

Not long after that, I was in Washington, D.C. for some continuing education with the North Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops, followed by two days with our General Board of Church and Society, finding out about their work and having the wonderful opportunity to meet the Chaplain of the United States Senate, Rev. Barry Black. It was a great trip, except for the flight back to Lansing. My plane from D.C. left late and I did not have a great deal of time between connections. I was worried about making it, and the flight itself was one of the bumpier I have experienced. I need not have worried, though. My flight from Chicago, O'Hare to Lansing was also delayed, by over eight hours! A trip that was supposed to leave at 9 p.m. instead left Chicago at 5:45 a.m. Curling up on airport seats and sleeping for thirty minutes at a time is not the most fun I've had. The reason for the long delay was the opposite of CAVU. Lansing was experiencing significant fog.

As we turn the calendar to this new year, we are all aware that next month delegates will be gathering for a special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. Important decisions will be made about who we are going to be moving into the future. Whatever decisions are made, expect there to be hurt and disappointment, and some people may choose to leave the denomination. Just what will happen is unknown. Peering ahead we do not find CAVU conditions, but rather dense fog. Some days, thinking about all this, it feels a little like trying to sleep at O'Hare airport. By the way, did you know airports are rather noisy even in the middle of the night?

Yet there is something else that draws me. I think of the poem of Wendell Berry:

"When despair for the world grows in me/, and I wake in the night at the least sound/in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be.... I come into the peace of wild things.... For a time/I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

In the midst of the unknown, the uncertain, the fearful, in the midst of all the noise and discomfort, I invite us all to find some different places where we know grace, the grace of God in Jesus Christ. For those of you who have attended the fall listening sessions, the names of these places will sound familiar.

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” - 1 Peter 3:8

Go to a place called humility.

Humility is not about feeling bad about yourself. It is about knowing yourself, your gifts, your skills, your beauty, your strengths, your weaknesses, your blind spots, your stubborn places. Humility also knows that we can always learn more about the wonder and mystery of life, and the love and grace of God. We can still see more broadly, feel more deeply, think more imaginatively, and love more profoundly.

Go to a place called hope.

God is not yet done with God's church. The United Methodist Church may go through a hard time but the mission we have identified of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, that is, bringing people into relationship with Jesus Christ so that their lives can be different and the world can be different, that mission continues. God still calls each of us to that work. God empowers each of us for that work. Forms and structures may change, but God's love and our ability to know that love, show that love, and grow in that love, does not change.

Go to a place called heart.

There is fog up ahead and fearful things along the way. We all feel some fear, but we need not be defined by our fear. There is fog up ahead and fearful things along the way, but we can, in God's grace “be joyful, though you've considered all the facts” (Wendell Berry). We can be open-hearted and gracious, even when many want to pull us in other directions.

Go to a place called wisdom.

“Thinking is hard. Fear and blame are easy.” (philosopher Martha Nussbaum) We are called to think more deeply than we often do, think more deeply than perhaps we are even comfortable with. Are we at a moment where the danger is “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25), or a moment when the more appropriate word is “let all be fully convinced in their own minds” (Romans 14:5)? What reasons do we offer for our own point of view, and are we listening deeply to others who may differ? In all our thinking are we able to focus on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable” (Philippians 4:8)?

I invite you in the coming weeks to find places of humility, hope, heart, and wisdom, places where you can rest in the grace of God.

As the new year begins, we will quickly find ourselves in the church season of epiphany. Epiphany is a celebration of light, a celebration of a star that brought wise ones from the East to the place where Jesus was born. In the Bible, there are stories of light that shine so brightly and powerfully that people are blinded. In the story of the Magi, the light seems to shine a bit less brightly, maybe appearing through cracks. Why else would the wise ones stop to ask for directions? The rays of light of God's grace are sometimes spotlight bright and sometimes like the light seeping in under a door. Places of humility, hope, heart, and wisdom will sometimes be bright and easy to locate. They may sometimes be harder to detect. Find them. Find those places of grace. Regardless of what happens at General Conference, letting the light of God's grace touch us more deeply, profoundly and beautifully is always needed, needed for our own healing, needed for the healing of the church, needed for the healing of the world.

Grace and Peace,

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