

**Report on the 223rd Annual Session of
The Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church
May 24-26, 2007**

Holy Conferencing

In a letter to conferees before the Annual Conference, Bishop John Schol called for "holy conferencing" at this year's session held in Washington, DC. He wrote, "Holy Conferencing is biblical, and it is also Wesleyan. Methodists have used Holy Conferencing as a time set apart to testify, raise questions, discuss, consult, discern, set direction and account for the ministry of God among us. Conference gatherings were inspirational as members experience worship, spirited singing and prophetic and instructional preaching." But Bishop Schol worried that "The United Methodist Church has been drifting away from holy conferencing--inspiration, testimony, conversation, discernment, direction setting, and accountability--and drifted into reporting and the debate of differences."

The Bishop reported ways that the Conference planners had worked to reverse the drift at the Conference by increasing worship and Bible study time, shortening reports, increasing conversation time, celebrating aspects of common history, surrounding items of high debate with celebration and worship, and becoming more focused on the Discipleship Adventure of every church in the Conference.

This effort to return to Holy Conferencing stimulated my thinking about Foundry's annual scheduled Charge Conference. A Charge Conference is the local form of the General Conference of the Methodist Church held every four years, the Jurisdictional Conference held every four years following General Conference, and the Annual Conference, like Baltimore Washington's. I don't know about you, but each year I anticipate Foundry's Charge Conference not as a time of inspiration, conversation, discernment, and direction setting, but more a roundup of reports about Foundry's past year and about next year's leadership positions. Could we turn our scheduled Charge Conference into a Holy Conference with all those attributes described by our Bishop?

Keeping Our Clay Moist

The theme of this year's Annual Conference was "Developing our Faith: In the Potter's Hands." Potters worked on stage throughout the Annual Conference, demonstrating visually the way in which clay is worked to become something useful and/or beautiful. Bishop Sally Dyck from the Minnesota Area preached that "If God is our potter, and we are the clay, we've got to keep our clay moist." We must allow God to shape, mold, break, and redeem us. Clay that is not yielding can not be shaped: it is not effective if it is too wet or too brittle. Clay must yield to the touch of the potter. Dyck also noted that a potter makes a mark on the pottery when it is completed. Dyck asked, "Can anyone see God's pottery mark on you?"

Over and over, we were advised, "Keep your clay moist." As I thought about Foundry at this time in our development, I wondered to myself: "Where are we keeping our clay moist, and where have we let it become brittle enough to break or so wet that it can't be molded?" I also thought "What is Foundry's pottery mark?" and "What mark do each of us as leaders and members of Foundry bear?"

Sometimes we become so engrained in our ways that change causes us anxiety. We become brittle because we can not imagine how God can continue to mold us into new shapes. In a current example, as we imagine both continuity and change in our music program, we need to be open to further molding, to becoming a new shape based on the kind of clay our members today are and on what God is calling us to do and be.

The planning process is one way that we are keeping our clay moist. We are studying the consistency and makeup of the clay that is our congregation and our neighborhood, the shapes of churches in the past and in the present, and the ways in which the Bible helps guide us toward function and form. The Calling and Vision Planning Group, part of Foundry's continuous planning process, is explicitly listening for answers to "What is God calling us to do and be?" Because we don't want to be such wet clay that we don't take any shape, we are studying, thinking, and analyzing possibilities. We want to have God's

pottery mark on Foundry at any given time, but we also want to be moist enough for God to shape, mold, break, and redeem us.

Practical Piety

According to Bishop Schol, practical piety is the “spirit-filled combination of faith and works.” The Conference has a Big Holy Adventurous Goal, Conference Objectives, and a Baltimore-Washington Ten Point Plan. Along with the 688 other churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference--from Maryland, the District of Columbia, and the panhandle of West Virginia, Foundry is on a Discipleship Adventure that involves growing as disciples individually as we grow the church together.

Schol reported that 400 churches in the Conference have grown, but that the decline of the other 280 offsets the growth of those 400. Although numbers are not everything, they are indicators of people reached for the sharing of the word of God in this world. Where should we be reaching out to people to share with them the good news of Christ’s love?

A dramatic example which served as an exemplar at Annual Conference is the Hot Metal Faith Community, started in a tattoo parlor in South Pittsburg. This Bible study group of people from the surrounding community, which is, in the Community’s words “urban, artistic, bohemian and poor with homelessness and a touch of affluence,” attracts questioners who are welcomed to express ideas and beliefs that challenge one another in a spirit of inquiry and caring.

Ron Gebhardtsbauer, one of four Foundry lay delegates to the Annual Conference, has written about Jim Walker, the pastor of Hot Metal Faith Community: “It was clear to Jim that typical church methods were not going to work with the youth he met there. I see Jim as a modern-day Jesus reaching out to the marginalized of our time. A couple of ideas that resonated with me were his desire to be authentic with the youth there, to not judge them or correct them, but to love them, and first find out their concerns. In his Bible studies he encourages the kids to argue, be authentic, and not worry about expressing heretical ideas. At the end of the Bible Study, he encourages the youth to say what they learned from someone else in the group. It has created there a beautiful and growing community-koinania.”

Foundry has access to the demographics of our geographic neighborhood, and we’ve learned about both characteristics and practices of people in our surrounding zip codes. Since the Conference, I’ve been wondering, “Where is Foundry’s tattoo parlor?” It may be near our church building, or it may be somewhere else in our city or surrounding area.

We are all grateful for the wonderful influx of new members at Foundry: each time I read the descriptions of the vital new members, many young and involved in community and work lives that are very exciting, I am thankful for them and for the church that attracts them. But there are many more potential people to meet and invite into community, perhaps not as members, perhaps not into the physical space of Foundry, but into a community. Following on the beginning provided by the Neighbors Planning Study Group, Foundry can begin to identify locations and groups of people to reach out to in new and different ways. Where is Foundry’s tattoo parlor?

God’s Gonna Trouble the Waters

Mark Miller, whose musical leadership we enjoyed at Foundry recently, led all kinds of music at the Annual Conference. One song we sang was “Wade in the Water,” a spiritual that alerts us that “God’s gonna trouble the waters.” When water goes stagnant, it needs cleansing and movement for revitalization. One way that God has troubled the waters in the Baltimore Washington Conference is to challenge our denominational policy on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons.

This year Drew Phoenix, a Methodist pastor in our Conference, told conferees about his gender transformation that honors his “true gender identify” and his “spiritual transformation and relationship with God.” Through his public account of his transformation Phoenix hoped to help the United Methodist Church to become more educated about the complexity of gender identity and to welcome more explicitly

those we identify as transgender. Fortunately, UMC policy does not explicitly prohibit transgender persons in the pulpit, so Bishop Schol was able to reappoint Phoenix to a congregation that is thriving under his leadership.

In another matter regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, however, the waters need to be further troubled. The Baltimore Washington Reconciling United Methodists (B-WARM) worked carefully and strategically over time to prepare a petition to delete from the Discipline, which contains the rules of the United Methodist Church, the statement "Homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." Ralph Williams, another Foundry lay delegate to Annual Conference, calls the statement "not a reflection of the teaching of Christ, but a result of social prejudice." After acquiring twelve churches as cosponsors, receiving affirmation of the resolution from the Connectional Table of the Conference, preparing background materials, mailing supporting materials to lay and clergy delegates, and encouraging conferees to vote for the resolution, the resolution was, nonetheless, defeated 440-353.

Ralph, however, sees the positive in the vote. He wrote about B-WARM members following the vote, "We realized that something important and indeed miraculous had happened. We had triumphed over our fears and the morass that leads to inaction and had taken a stand. As a result we were changed. Gone were the fears and uncertainties that had clouded our visions of being full and whole children of God. We were with each other supporting each other, laughing and congratulating each other. In the doing, not in the winning, was our victory. We had become a community of love and support and purpose, and we realized that this Annual Conference would never be the same. When you overcome fear and make a stand, change happens within you. And, with this change in you and in me, the world can no longer be the same."

God is using Ralph and others to trouble the waters. Good news is that Ralph was elected a lay delegate to the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference where bishops are selected. He will carry with him the confidence to stand for the inclusion of all persons of all orientations in leadership roles in our church.

The role of Ron Gebhardtshauer, Jane Malone, Ralph Williams and others in work throughout the conference for change can motivate more and more Foundry members to take on roles that can influence policies of the United Methodist Church. Ron and Ralph were both willing to run for election as delegates beyond our Conference, and I hope other Foundry members will take on that challenge in the future.

Conference Commitment to the Hope Fund and to Disaster Relief

With great pride on behalf of Foundry at Annual Conference I submitted our church's check to the Hope Fund. The Conference has so far received over \$670,000 of its goal of \$1,000,000 by the 2008 Conference. This year through the Easter calendar the Foundry Mission Council did an excellent job of helping us learn about all the uses for Hope Fund donations; during this next year Foundry can continue to focus on contributions to this collective effort. Also Foundry can continue to address through people power as well as funds the needs of Katrina victims. By May 2007 the Conference had had over 2,705 volunteers provide over 15,729 hours of labor in Katrina relief. Foundry's VIM team during the past month has already added to that number.

Materials about the Annual Conference are available in the Church Library if you would like to know more about the commitments, activities, and structure of our Conference.

Presented to Church Council by Barbara Cambridge
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