

The Report from the Courtesies and Appreciation Committee
Submitted by Dr. Wesley H. Wachob, Sr. Minister, First UMC Pensacola, Florida

Bishop Leeland, Bishop Duffey, District Superintendents, delegates and friends of the annual conference, sisters and brothers, all:

Two hundred twenty-five years ago at the 1784 Christmas Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, our forbears organized the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. On Trinity Sunday (June 7) 2009 we began our annual conference at Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. We began in worship.

Dr. Lester Spencer (Chair, Committee on Episcopacy), Dr. Steve Furr and Dr. John Ed Mathison (AWF Representatives of the SEJ on the Episcopacy) introduced our new episcopal leader, Bishop Paul L. Leeland, and his wife, Mrs. Janet Leeland.

In his sermon, Bishop Leeland reminded us of the duties of a bishop and challenged us to remember our heritage, to look forward, and to move into God's future for us. With winsome manner, gentle demeanor, and a careful, firm resolve Bishop Leeland has guided us through the business of our conference. And now, as we near the close of our annual gathering, we again bless God for sending Bishop and Mrs. Leeland to us, and we thank Dr. Furr, Dr. Mathison, Dr. Spencer and the members of our episcopal committee for bringing them to us.

Let us remember that we have covenanted together to pray for Bishop and Mrs. Leeland every day this next year. Let us do so with grateful and thankful hearts.

To Dr. Barry Carpenter and the Rev. Rusty Taylor, the staff and volunteers of Frazer Memorial, we offer our great appreciation for hosting our annual conference. Your hospitality has blessed us. Thank you.

To Dr. Lawson Bryan, his excellent staff, and the kind and welcoming members of First Church Montgomery, we extend our thanks for hosting our Service of Commissioning and Ordination (Monday, 8 June 2008). It was, as it always is, "a high and holy event." Thank you.

Bishop Joe E. Pennel Jr., preached at that service of worship. His sermon, "The Inadequacy of Words" was marvelous. It was for me the "second best" ordination sermon that I have ever heard. The "best" ordination sermon that I have ever heard was preached by our own Bishop Paul A. Duffey. The "third best" ordination sermon for me was preached by Dr. William Holmes Borders, some thirty years ago. I am grateful to God for Bishop Joe Pennel; I shall never forget his sermon. When he preached, the Holy Spirit spoke. Let us give thanks to God for Bishop Pennel.

Appreciation is due Dr. Jason Borders (Assistant Professor of Religion, Huntingdon College) for leading us in an insightful Bible study, focusing on Luke 9:18-27. Thank you.

We are grateful to the Rev. Jim Harnish (Sr. Pastor, Hyde Park UMC, Tampa, FL) of the Florida Conference for blessing us and challenging us in his teaching sessions on “Transformed Leadership for Transforming Congregations.” Thank you.

Special appreciation is offered to Jeff Steele and Kevin Steele, guest speakers at our Laity Banquet, and to the wonderful lay people of the AWF Conference. And we clergy offer our thanks to Mr. Robert Powell (First UMC, Dothan, AL) who reminded us that without the laity we would have no job. Thank you.

Our conference officers: Bishop Leeland, Dr. Shirley Woodie, the Rev. Sara Shaver, the Rev. Ed Deabler, the Rev. Mike McKnight, and Mr. Frank Dunnewind, our District Superintendents, our Connectional Ministries Staff, and our Office of Communications have done their usual “excellent work” in preparing for and helping us in our annual conference. Thank you.

On Monday (8 June) our hearts were filled with thanksgiving as we remembered and celebrated the lives of the clergy and clergy spouses who died since last we met. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”

We rejoiced in celebrating the ministry of fifteen clergy who retired at this conference. Together they have served 415 years! Thank you!

We delighted in recognizing one new associate member and in the commissioning of three provisional deacons and eleven provisional elders; and we celebrated the ordination of two deacons and ten elders and elected them to full membership in our annual conference.

“No, no, no, no – no, no, no, no.” Do you remember this? Sing it with me! “No, no, no, no – no, no, no, no – no, no, no, no – no, no, no, no.” That’s the way you voted on the proposed constitutional amendments.

Throughout this meeting of our annual conference, we have voiced repeatedly the sobering news of the financial crisis that grips our world. We have been called upon to remember that the financial trials that we face as a church are hardly limited to us. The whole world is now struggling with and in this crisis. We have been challenged to deal with this in the name of Jesus Christ. Let us.

We have listened to the statistician’s report and the realities this reveals. The news is sobering. But let us remember: Christianity is now growing faster than it has ever grown before. There are more Christians in the world than ever before. In Africa in 1900 there were some 10 million Christians; in 2000, one hundred years later, there were 360 million Christians. In the last century, in Africa alone, some 350 million people became Christians. Christianity is growing gloriously not only in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America. (See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*; and *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*).

Christianity is becoming a religion of “color.” It is projected that in the year 2050 only one in five Christians will be a non-Latino white person. The world is changing right in front of our eyes. The center of Christianity is moving to the global South. The Holy Spirit blows where it will.

Our part of God’s vineyard is in the global North. It is here that we are called upon to worship and serve God. We are being challenged to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Somewhere I read that the little book First Peter was used in the early church to instruct new Christians in the faith. In 1 Peter 1:3 it says: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” We have been called to “a living hope.”

Let us pray for God’s wisdom, as the Epistle of James (1:4-6) teaches us. Let us seek God’s guidance in this time of trial and transition (Jas 1:2-12): let us practice our faith locally and globally: “the world is our parish.”

Let us remember that our faith in Christ is not primarily about us. Our worship and service are primarily, fundamentally, and always about God. Let us ask God how we should live in God’s world.

I have a confession to make. For the past four weeks the good people of First Church Pensacola have listened to me whine and moan about attending annual conference. When we gather for worship this next Sunday, I shall apologize and publicly repent. The simple truth is that this annual conference has been for me a time of renewal. I am grateful to all of you, brothers and sisters. And, I am thankful to God that I am a member of the Alabama – West Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

To everyone who worked and prayed to make this year’s conference the joy that it has been, we offer our thanks and appreciation.

May God bless and keep us all, until we meet again.