

LAY MEMBER ANNUAL CONFERENCE REPORT - 2017

The 2017 Greater New Jersey Annual Conference was held at the Wildwood Convention Center on May 21-23. The sessions were ably led by our resident Bishop, John Schol. This year's theme was **REJOICE** 1 *Thessalonians 5:16*. The theme was repeated many times during the Conference.

Conference officially began with the Service of Ordination and Commissioning. 500 robed clergy processed into the conference hall to the hymn, MARCHING TO ZION. As always, it was an impressive sight. Bishop Schol was assisted in the service in "the laying on of hands" by retired Bishop Ernest Lyte. Bishop Lyte, a native of New Jersey, served Old Orchard's Church before becoming Bishop, first in New York and then in West Virginia. Eleven people were commissioned for the work of Provisional Elder, one person was ordained a Deacon and nine people were ordained Elders. In addressing the group Bishop Schol reminded them that they are called to serve not to be served.

The Teaching Moment was presented by Erin Hawkins, General Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race. Her topic, CULTURAL COMPETANCE, was both thought provoking and edifying. "Our perception of things is influenced by our culture. We see the world through our culture and the information that we have. We want to label people and say to them, 'this is how you should be'. Are the cultural norms that we have been given sufficient for today's world? It is time for a new prescription—a new way of being in the world as Christians. We can be "bridge builders" by connecting with someone else's story. As Christians, we must strive to distribute the trials of the world with everyone".

Our next speaker was retired NJ Supreme Court Judge, Gary Stein, who spent 17 years on the bench. He is dedicating his retirement years to the integration of NJ public schools. NJ is one of the most segregated school systems in the country. It is the most segregated by race and poverty above the Mason-Dixon Line. Students in these schools are more likely to fail since it is harder to get qualified teachers, teacher turnover is great, there are inadequate learning materials and there is little family support. Students perform much better when there is a racial and socio-economic mixture.

Throughout the conference proceedings, we were shown video clips of mission activities which are happening in GNJ. Following are some of them:

----- The Morrow Memorial Church in Maplewood has done much to help refugees. They are part of a group called "First Friends" which works with refugees, especially those incarcerated while waiting to learn if they may stay in this country. They have also sponsored a Syrian family, despite the governor's announcement that New Jersey will not accept them. A Jewish member of the community learned of the help being given the family and gave a donation to the Christian church to help a Muslim family. A member of the church held a Syrian Supper Club. She asked members of the Syrian community to prepare ethnic dishes and invited friends from the church. The cooks received the revenue that was realized from the event.

----- WE learned that four Methodist ministries have come together to sponsor the FEED TRUCK CAFÉ. This is a place where college students and young adults can come to a safe and anxiety free environment. It gives them a chance to get away from the many pressures of the college campus and to have an encounter with church people that is positive and reassuring.

-----The Clinton Church has a church app. On it you will find a daily devotional, a community group curriculum and an on-line church. Their viewership is 80%. The Clinton pastor greeted a new visitor one Sunday morning. She was excited about the sermon series she had been watching "live stream" each week and felt that she needed to be a part of this faith community. She has been attending regularly ever since.

----- Another new and unique idea is the MOSAIC MINISTRY which trains young clergy. Two seminarians will co-pastor a small church enabling them to share ideas and support each other. A new and different idea was developed by one of the co-pastor at First Church Mt. Holly. He appeared one Sunday morning, in costume, as Gerald the generous giraffe. The congregation loved it, understood the message and increased their offerings through generous hearts.

----- The Simpson and Sayreville Churches have combined to form the SHARE GOOD THRIFT SHOP. They collect donations of clothing and household items from their communities. Some items are sold and some are distributed to other organizations. At present, 22 organizations benefit from these donations.

The Bishop began his Episcopal address by saying, "the world needs the grace and teaching of Jesus Christ as urgently now as at any time in history. This is what God has you and me for. He has called us to be Christ's redemptive voice in the world". Bishop Schol also talked about happiness and joy. "Happiness comes from without, joy comes from within. Joy is sustained by hope and hope never fails." Since 2014 GNJ has seen an increase in small group participation. There are more disciples in hands on mission work. 26 new faith communities have been started. AFWH has rebuilt 256 homes with 11,810 volunteers who have come from 46 states and three countries. A total of \$17M has been raised from various sources. \$5,452,346 has been raised in GNJ which went toward rebuilding after Super Storm Sandy and IMAGINE NO MALARIA. However, there are still many challenges for us to face. We have seen a decline in church attendance. We have 18 fewer churches than we did five years ago. "This is happening because we are not adapting fast enough. We need to connect with new people in the community and with younger generations. We can meet their needs with new and transformational ideas."

At the SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE, we gave thanks for the service and dedication of our clergy, spouses and laity who have departed this life during the past Conference year. Among those remembered were Rev. Edward B. Cheney, founding pastor of St. Andrew's, the Rev. Champion S. Goldy, former District Superintendent of the Camden District and Bonnie Finch, wife of our interim pastor in 2005, Rev. David Finch. This service was followed by Communion.

The Council on Finance and Administration announced that they were planning a reduction of \$900,000 in the budget over a five-year period. As a result, St. Andrew's Shared Ministry percentage will decrease for several years. The formula and percentages will require the Conference to budget and spend Shared Ministry funds based on the health and vitality of the congregations.

Again, this year, the Laity sponsored the RISE AGAINST HUNGER project, formerly called STOP HUNGER NOW. 30,000 meals were packed by 200 volunteers. Each package contains a packet of vitamins, a cup of dehydrated soy, a scoop of dehydrated vegetables and a cup of rice. The meals are given to children in third world countries through their schools. The organization's mission is to end world hunger by 2030. St. Andrews will be hosting a RISE AGAINST HUNGER event on Sunday, October 8th. More information will be forth coming.

WE were saddened by the need to close three churches in the Conference. But we rejoice for the witness these churches have had for many years in the communities they have served. We know that the light of Christ will continue to shine through the lives that have been changed by their witness.

The Conference voted to recognize three churches as historic sites. The first, found in Sussex County was originally built in 1710 as a log cabin by German Lutherans. The second, in Cumberland County is the home church of many members of the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape Nation. Elders of the tribe can trace their Methodist roots back to 1799. The third is located in Rockland County, NY. Built in 1812 it is known as the "Mother Church" of the Nyack region.

During the *Service of Passage*, we recognized 37 retirees who have given a total of 700 years to the work in Christ's kingdom. They were then anointed by the District Superintendents. The mantel, represented by a stole, was then passed from the retiring clergy to the newly commissioned and ordained clergy. The mantel represents the yoke of responsibility these clergy have assumed. We were reminded by Bishop Schol that Moses passed the mantel to Joshua, Jesus to the disciples and John Wesley to Bishop Asbury.

It was announced that 1347 people had registered for Conference. An offering of \$44,500.44 was collected for the mission fund.

Each session began with praise music accompanied by a Praise Band. Chris Heckert, senior pastor at the Haddonfield Church is a guitarist with the group.

During the entire Conference, we acknowledged our diversity in the following ways:

-----all conference proceedings were signed for the hearing impaired.

-----youth conference members read scripture and offered prayers.

-----songs were sung and scripture was read in the languages of the various nationalities represented in the GNJ Conference.

-----we were greeted by a Nanticoke Native American, also a United Methodist, in his tribal language.

With the reappointment of Pastor Richard to St. Andrew's, we look forward to another year of his creative and inspiring ministry as we participate in some new activities and perhaps experience new ways to worship. We are grateful also, to Lydia, Shafer and Caleb for their contributions to the life of St. Andrew's.

As some of you know, I did not attend Conference this year. A fall the previous week made it necessary for me to keep my leg elevated and to apply cold and hot compresses. However, I watched the sessions "live stream" on the computer and so was able to experience all of the proceedings. I saw things that perhaps I would have missed in person.

As always, I am in awe of the unique and creative ways that United Methodists have found to raise money for mission, connect with other people and minister to the hurting and oppressed as they work to advance the kingdom of God though out the world.

IN GREATER NEW JERSEY WE **REJOICE**-----

-----that the Morrow Memorial Church understood when Jesus said ---“*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*”---.
-----that fewer African mothers will experience the heart break of losing a child to Malaria because United Methodists in GNJ care.
-----that the CFA have been good stewards of GNJ’s finances, enabling Ministry Shares to be reduced there by allowing churches to increase their programs and mission projects.
-----that AFWH is nearing its goal of rebuilding homes for victims of Super Storm Sandy through the willing hands of thousands of volunteers and the generous hearts of many more.
-----that the GNJ Conference is concerned about food insufficiencies around the world and spends time during the Conference sessions packaging meals for distribution by RISE AGAINST HUNGER.
-----that the FEED TRUCK CAFÉ helps college students connect with Christian mentors.
-----that a retired State Supreme Court Judge is concerned that all our children have an equal and adequate education and is working to made it happen.

AND HERE AT ST. ANDREW’S WE **REJOICE**-----

-----that we can provide children in need with clothing and age appropriate books and stuffed animals through LHLF.
-----that we have a faithful group of volunteers who serve at Cathedral Kitchen which provides meals for the disadvantaged of Camden.
-----that we were charter members of the Cherry Hill Food Pantry and continue to participate in the program.
-----that our long association with DCP&P through Christmas parties and Easter baskets continues to bring joy to many children each year.
-----that for several years we have sent “surprise” gift packages to the children at the Wayam Timon Orphanage and this year church members have visited the orphanage to connect with the children and staff by providing food, activities, help and love.
-----that we are able to provide housing and meals for the men in the IHOC Program.
-----that a dedicated group of members look forward each year to building another house in the Dominican Republic.
-----that the Youth Program enables our future leaders to experience a variety of mission activities which will help to equip them for life in our ever-changing world and to be “bridge builders” by connecting with someone else’s story.

-----that God will continue to lead ALL METHODISTS in GREATER NEW JERSEY to new and better ways of serving Him.

AND FOR THIS WE **REJOICE.**

Carol Allen