

Report on Norwalk UMC Delegate Attendance at the 2023 Iowa Annual Conference

By Kate Baldwin

I was the 2023 delegate representing the Norwalk United Methodist Church at the Iowa United Methodist Church Annual Conference, held June 2nd – 4th at the West Des Moines Rec Plex. This article provides a summary on the main proceedings that were acted upon at the Conference. I will try to be brief and succinct in my message, because given time and encouragement, I could go on for hours on the topics and points of view that were presented at the Iowa Annual Conference. The United Methodist Church, like all large organizations, are subject to bureaucracy. Even though some would say, I worked as a bureaucrat all my life, the drudgery and doldrum of it all wears me thin. As a delegate representative and a member of the United Methodist Church, you accept that fact and do your best not to add to the bureaucratic web. In keeping my summary brief, I will share three main action items that would be of significance to you.

Bishop Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, opened the proceedings with a message centered around the 2023 conference theme, “Remembering Who We Are”. A theme that reminded all of us that we are children of God-no matter who we are, what we have done, or what we believe. We are all children of God. Her message was very clear that God loves each of us unconditionally and expects us to love one another unconditionally as well. She was clear this expectation applies to all individuals, including all members of the LGBTQ community. She spoke of God providing a “big tent” that protects all of His children. Pastor Karen referenced a big tent or canopy in her June 11th sermon, where all of us can find shelter, companionship, and peace. The Bishop and other leaders, also referenced the fundamental teachings of John Wesley. God’s “prevenient grace”, is present in all creation. And we are called to “Do no harm, Do good. And Stay in love with God”. To truly follow these teachings means that Christians are called to love one another unconditionally, as God loves us.

I offer three major points of business that the delegates acted upon at the conference.

1. To decide upon the disaffiliation of 83 churches whose congregations have voted to exit the United Methodist Church. These churches will either move to a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church or form new church altogether. This matter was approved by the conference.

Many would say the desire for disaffiliations were caused by disagreements over beliefs centered around how the Church recognizes LGBTQ members. I'm sure there are more differences that led these congregations to sever from the United Methodist Church. The future of these churches is in God's hands, and we are called to pray for them. These 83 churches represented 11% of the 750 Iowa United Methodist Churches.

2. A vote was held to determine the Iowa delegates for the next General Conference that will be held during April 23 to May 3, 2024 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Norwalk's own, Pastor Karen was selected to be an alternate delegate.
3. The last important order of business was to approve the 2024 Iowa Annual Conference budget. The Iowa Annual Conference has been forced to reduce their operating budget multiple times over the past several years. This year, leadership was required to make the most significant reduction, cutting the total budget by almost 20%. Total conference expenses were \$11.5 million in 2020, \$10.9 million in 2021, \$10.6 million in 2022. This year (2023) the total budget is \$10.6 million. We approved a budget of \$8.6 million for 2024. The reason for this large reduction is the loss of apportionments (revenue) from the 83 disaffiliated churches and adjustments to post pandemic reductions of overall church giving. The conference wanted to make the necessary adjustments to the new level of income to avoid future cuts. In a brief conversation with the new conference treasurer, Emily Graber, it will be nearly impossible to reduce the budget anymore and still maintain a functional framework of personnel and activities at a state level.

I want to share a few final observations I made this year. In 1995 or 1996 I served as a conference delegate for another Iowa Methodist Church. Those proceedings were similar to the discussion topics this year, having had passionate debate over the religious privileges afforded LGBTQ individuals. However, I noticed the number of participants and the composition of the players has changed over the past 25 years. In the late 1990's the number of attendees demanded a larger venue, being held at the Hilton Coliseum in Ames. This year, the attendees comfortably fit on the hockey rink of the West Des Moines Rec Plex, with very few audience spectators and 30% of the attendees participated online. And the percentage of lay representatives compared to active and retired clergy was significantly reduced. Several of the active speakers during the proceeding debate were retired ministers

with only a couple of lay representatives speaking. I remember several passionate lay people speaking back in late 1990s conference. I believe the Methodist Church that Wesley envisioned was founded on grassroots lay leadership and governance. I hope this imbalance does not continue to grow because it represents less engagement from our congregations and a potential further decline in membership across Iowa.

In closing, I will quote a message from Bishop Kennetha, *"This is the church Wesley envisioned when he said, 'Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike.' Wesley said we may not be of the same opinion, but can't we be of the same heart? Can't we have hearts centered in love?"*

Remembering who we are is also knowing that United Methodists are people who center grace.

We are a people immersed in grace, washed in grace, upheld by grace, embraced by the grace of God, and called to be extenders of that grace to the world."

I was reminded at conference, that as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of the United Methodist Church, I have far more in common with my brethren here at Norwalk United Methodist than I have differences. First and foremost, everyone in our congregation and all Methodists across the world, believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. That single belief binds us far more than our differences.

Thank you for allowing me to represent this congregation at Annual Conference.