Greetings from the General Secretary

Warm Christian greetings on behalf of the World Methodist Council!

This New Year’s Eve will look like no other. Instead of the feastings, fireworks, and festivities, I will light a candle to stand in solidarity and express condolences with people around the world who lost friends and family to COVID-19.

The COVID pandemic has affected all of us in some way or another. We have been through a time of anxiety in which the fault lines of global inequality were exposed. We have also seen extraordinary acts of compassion by the philanthropic community, faith-based organizations, and individuals. Please know that every small act of kindness counts.

I can assure you that we identify with your struggles, understand your pain, and share the hopes, dreams, and aspirations. For that reason, the WMC continues to raise our prophetic voice seeking justice, and life over death and destruction.

The WMC has continually called on its members to be good stewards of the earth’s resources and live in harmony with nature in our fragile planetary home called earth. This health crisis can also be a new beginning in global relations, realizing that we are one human family. We are interdependent and need each other.

As we stand on the threshold of a New Year, and there is a reason for optimism as vaccines for COVID-19 are being developed and rolled out in many countries. However, we still need to be hyper-vigilant. We are a people of faith who, like Paul and Silas, know how to sing at midnight to bring about transformation, healing, and wholeness. Faith looks to the future despite the here and now.

No matter your circumstances, hear Moses’ words afresh as he stands at the River Jordan overlooking the Promised Land. “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear …. for the LORD your God goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6)

As we move into the New Year, Mary Bowley Peters (1813 – 1856) hymn comes to mind.

Through the love of God our Savior, all will be well
Free and changeless is His favor; all is well
Precious is the blood that healed us
Perfect is the grace that sealed us
Strong the hand stretched forth to shield us
All must be well

Though we pass through tribulation, all will be well
Ours is such a full salvation, all is well
Happy still in God confiding
Fruitful if in Christ abiding
Steadfast through the Spirit’s guiding
All must be well

Continued...
On December 17th, 2020, Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church and Regional Ecumenical Advisory and Service Center (CREAS), launched the book “Mission Roundtables, a Paradigm of Sharing,” the result of a collaborative research project on mission roundtables in South America.

The publication, authored by Dr. Humberto Shikiya, vice-president of CREAS, responds to the expressed interest of different Methodist Churches in the region to develop methodology and theology of Mission Roundtables as a main focus of work on relationships, mutuality, reciprocity and partnership for global mission.

“The central theological understanding for roundtables as a methodology for strengthening mutuality in mission comes from a commitment to reciprocity among all partners in mission. ‘Mutuality’ here means the pursuit of goal-oriented assets-based relationships, strategic in outlook, that share a vision of God’s Mission and God’s coming Reign among all people and creation as a whole,” stated Rev. Dr. Luis de Souza Cardoso of the Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, when recently presenting the book.

This publication includes experiences and learning from the implementation of 31 roundtables over the last 15 years (up to 2018) in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela.

The editors intend for this publication to be a theoretical, theological, methodological, and practical tool to generate knowledge and evolve mission roundtables in South America, as well as contribute to bolstering cooperation among mission partners and the Methodist Churches, and others, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This research initiative was supported by Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, CONNEXIO – Network for mission and service of The United Methodist Church, The Methodist Church in Britain, and The United Church of Canada.

You can access the book launch and live stream on the CREAS Facebook live account: https://www.facebook.com/CreasLAC

Mission Roundtables, a Paradigm of Sharing can be downloaded here (http://creas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Mesas-Redondas-de-Mision-Un-paradigma-del-compartir-V9-FULL.pdf)

Submitted by the CREAS Communication Office
Respectful Conversations and Same Sex Marriages

“(The) One and only thing for us to do in this season of good tidings is to go radical ... Christ’s Reconciling Love compels (2 Cor. 5:14) us to be radical. It urges us to be united in deconstructing the walls that are divisive and discriminatory in terms of race, caste, ability, sexuality or gender ... (The) Peace of Christ unites and reconciles while peace of Empire divides and rules ... When you dare to build another dividing wall among you or between you and the least of those who are members of the one household of God, think and let think whom you will serve, Jesus or Caesar.” Greetings from Dr. JC Park, WMC President in December 2020

The United Methodist Church, an international but mostly North American Methodist denomination representing a membership of 12 million souls out of a WMC’s global membership of 80 million, faces fragmentation over the issue of gendered relations, same-sex marriage and LGBTQI clergy. In the face of Dr. Park’s call for the people called Methodist “to be united in deconstructing the walls that are divisive and discriminatory in terms of race, caste, ability, sexuality or gender,” the United Methodist Church appears to face a divided if not fractured future.

According to National Public Radio, an American privately and publicly funded non-profit media organization based in Washington, D.C, Rev. Tom Berlin, pastor at Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Va., signed a protocol representing a centrist view which could put the ideological conflict of same-sex marriages to rest. The “Protocol of Separation through Grace,” says Berlin, allows (the UMC) to be “more inclusive” and to remove “a stumbling block toward our larger mission.” The Rev. David Meredith, a self-described gay pastor at Clifton United Methodist Church in Cincinnati, married since 2016, however, points out one of the contradictions in accepting the proposed protocol. While his congregation had been happy with his appointment, the church (UMC) has charged him with a breach of marriage license use. The UMC has until 2024 to decide on policy choices regarding gender equity and LGBTQI relations. The WMC Conference, on the other hand, which will now assemble in 2022, may provide a forum for the processing of further global and Methodist representation of views on the same.

The arena is open to a broader input of restorative and relationally just contributions which some refer to as “respectful conversations”. For instance, is there a consistent understanding of the concepts of relational justice, peace and human dignity amongst our people called Methodist? Why do I get the feeling that church group opposition to civil society’s affirmation of LGBTQI rights belies some of their opposition to reproductive and sexual health, the promotion of capital punishment and the right of the West to wage war in order to determine “global order?” If the telos of “Christian Unions,” marriage and/or partnership is an abiding love, friendship and joy that would stand the test of time, why do many constrain same-sex partners to silence?

Dr. Park advises that Christ’s reconciling love calls on the people called Methodist to think and let think what be-hooves service to Jesus! This column will be reserved in 2021 for restorative, healing and relationally just responses and comments amongst others.

Further thoughts on Same-Sex Marriage and LGBTQI relations by Keith Vermeulen may be found in Melanie Judge, Anthony Manion & Shaun De Waal (Eds.) To Have and to Hold: The Making of Same-Sex Marriage in South Africa (Jacana Media, Auckland Park, South Africa. 2008).
World Methodist Historical Society announces new General Secretary

Dr. Ashley Boggan Dreff, a Methodist historian, a lay member of the Arkansas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, and the daughter of two ordained United Methodist clergy is the WMHS’s new General Secretary.

She earned her Ph.D. from Drew Theological School (specializing in Methodist History and Women’s/Gender Studies), serving as the Director of United Methodist Studies and Assistant Professor of Christianity at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, N.C. She also served as Director of Women’s and Gender Studies and Assistant Professor of Religion at High Point University in High Point, N.C.

As a scholar, “I focus on the intersections of the histories of American Methodism, American constructs of gender, and American sexualities,” she explains. Dreff’s published works include, Nevertheless: American Methodists and Women’s Rights (2020) and Entangled: A History of American Methodist, Politics, and Sexuality (2018). In my position as General Secretary of GCAH, I will emphasize the various ways that Methodist history speaks to current moments, specifically the institutional challenges and changes within The United Methodist Church, the need for worldwide conversations on anti-racism, and the continuing recognition of women’s equality around the globe.

“In my work with the WMHS, I hope to work with you all to highlight how our historic and common Methodist DNA evolves into distinctive expressions of Methodism in our own contexts. I look forward to joining the World Methodist Historical Society and to living into the ministry of memory with you all,” she concluded.

“I am sure all WMHS supporters join me recognizing and celebrating the excellent work that Rev. Fred Day has done for our historical society these several years. We pray blessing on him and his family in this next season of service. We also congratulate Dr. Ashley Boggan Dreff as the new General Secretary and very much look forward to her new contribution,” said the Rev. Dr. Richard Waugh, President of the WMHS.

UMC Council of Bishops call for optimism and hope in 2021

Despite the trials and tribulations of 2020 brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, bishops in The United Methodist Church are calling on United Methodists and other people of faith to be optimistic about 2021 and to trust that God will make things better in the coming year.

In the 2020 Advent letter the bishops urged people of faith to continue to have love, joy, hope and peace, especially during the season of Advent, which is a time of anticipation and longing in the Christian year.

“We bask in the hope that something new is coming and in the promise that we can face the future unafraid. As people of faith, we stand in the confidence that God, who began a good thing in us, will see it to fruition,” said the letter signed by COB President Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey on behalf of the more than 120 bishops in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

The letter also pointed out that apart from the pandemic, those in the United States - where more than 60 percent of United Methodists reside - had witnessed a season of discontent as the call for racial justice and an end to racism resounded loud and clear.

“We recognize that uncertainty will accompany us into 2021,” the letter said, adding: “As the Council of Bishops, we must remain on our knees in prayer, asking God to open our minds, thoughts, and hearts to discern what God would want us to do and who God would want us to be as we lead this global denomination.”

Click here to read the letter  https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/umc-bishops-2020-advent-letter-14860510
Holston grant provides face masks for 2,500 in East Africa

More than 2,500 people in East Africa now have some protection from spreading COVID-19, due to a United Methodist effort to distribute face masks, sanitizer and gloves through pastors.

Jaka Joice, mission supervisor for the United Methodist Church in South Sudan, proposed the health project in early October. By mid-November, Joice had led an effort to distribute 2,584 masks, 34 large bottles of sanitizer, and 17 boxes of gloves to congregations in Uganda, South Sudan, and Congo.

“People were very happy to receive the masks, and they arrived very timely when [coronavirus] is spreading very rapidly in Uganda with many rampant deaths,” Joice said in an email.

According to Johns Hopkins University, Uganda experienced a record daily high of COVID-19 deaths with 14 on Nov. 6. Uganda recorded a record daily high of new coronavirus cases with 1,859 on Dec. 9.

Joice received a $1,868 grant from Holston’s South Sudan Ministry Team to get the masks made and to buy sanitizer and gloves.

“We delivered the masks to our regional pastors, and they in turn delivered the masks to the churches within their region,” Joice said.

Seventeen congregations received the supplies, including six in Imvepi Refugee Settlement, three in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, and four in Rhino Camp, all in Uganda.

In addition, masks and supplies were distributed to three churches in Yei, South Sudan, and one church in the Democratic Republic of Congo. United Methodist staff and 46 orphans in Grace Home for Children also received masks.

“They received these masks at a time when the coronavirus is at the rise, and everyone feels obliged to take care of themselves and the persons around them,” Joice said. “It is mandatory for all worship leaders to use masks including the congregation.”

On Sept. 21, Uganda President Yoweri Museveni reopened churches after six months of a nationwide lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Museveni allowed places of worship to reopen as long as worshipers wear face masks, sanitize, and sit at a distance from each other.

Danny Howe, chair of Holston’s South Sudan Ministry Team, sent an email to Joice, thanking her and other United Methodist staff for their mission.

“This is an awesome report and great work toward meeting the requirements and safety measures so that the 17 churches can return to in-person ministry,” Howe said. “It is very impressive and shows the determination of the leadership of the UMC.”

The new black cloth masks replace the cardboard masks that children were wearing in a photo accompanying a story in The Call last summer. Joice said many resorted to the homemade masks in the earlier days of the pandemic because other masks weren’t available.

The Rev. Fred Dearing, a retired Holston clergy member who served as district superintendent for the United Methodist Church in South Sudan, asked Joice to thank all who helped make the health project possible. “We pray that the use of the masks produced, the ability to remain safely distanced, and God’s grace will soon alleviate the need for all of us to wear masks and stay apart.”

Rev. Fabian Duli holds a bag of masks in Bidibidi Camp.

Read more at https://www.holston.org/
The Church of the Nazarene in Nigeria has grown through an emphasis on missions, sharing Christ with others just as the love of Christ was shared with a Nigerian soldier many years ago.

Dan Iwok, a Nigerian soldier, was serving with the alliance troops in Burma in 1946 during World War II. There he met several American soldiers, and among them was a Nazarene chaplain. Iwok was interested in learning about these soldiers’ Christian roots, so he accepted when the chaplain offered him Gospel tracts as well as the 1944 Manual of the Church of the Nazarene. Iwok read them, placed his faith in Christ, and fell in love with the Nazarene church.

When Iwok returned to his home in Nigeria, he found a country that was becoming dissatisfied with the current practices. People were hungry for a new life, one marked by holiness and purity of heart. He found a newly formed church in southeast Nigeria that was searching for a name. Remembering the tracts and Manual that he was given, he showed the church leaders all that he had learned. They unanimously agreed to call themselves the Church of the Nazarene and organized themselves according to the Manual.

This independent church worked for years to become a part of the international Church of the Nazarene, and on 3 April 1988, the congregation was authorized to join the Africa West Field.

The church is growing throughout the Africa Region, and it is predicted that soon, one in three Nazarenes globally will be from the continent. The church in Nigeria has played a huge role in this growth, and the Nigeria Southeast District is now the first Phase 3 (self-supporting) district on the Africa West Field.

One of the reasons this district has been so successful is its emphasis on missions. The Nigeria Southeast District has been involved in sending national missionaries all over the country, as well as planting churches in close-to-home communities. According to District Superintendent Okokon Eshiet, this process heavily involves the youth. They are a critical force, especially considering that the median age in Nigeria is 17.9 years old.

Friday Udofia is a second-generation Nazarene who surrendered his life to Jesus during his teen years. In 1989, during a revival meeting in his home church, he felt God’s calling on his heart. He was the only one who went forward to the altar that night, and he also settled his call to preach.

“I gave up many other things I was doing and went off to Bible college to prepare for lifelong ministry,” he said.

Later, while he was a student at Africa Nazarene University in Kenya, his perspective on ministry changed.

“I became so missionary-minded that on my return back home, I went to my district superintendent and told him what the Lord is telling me,” Udofia said.

Rather than assigning him to a pastorate in the one state with established Nazarene work, the district sent him to a new state. His goal is to help bring the holiness message into all areas of Nigeria, including his home area in the northeast.

From its beginnings until the present day, Nigeria has emerged as a positive force for Christ on the Africa West Field and the Africa Region. With its long history of supporting and sending missionaries, Nigeria is well equipped for its leadership role in making Christlike disciples in Africa.

Read more stories at https://www.nazarene.org/
Cars start lining up at 8 a.m., six hours before the distributions begin. It’s Tuesday at a northwest Houston community center where as many as 1,000 families receive food weekly.

United Methodists at the location, Bridging For Tomorrow (BFT), have been vital volunteers in helping their neighbors throughout the uncertainty of the pandemic. During the past eight months, food donations have totaled more than 1 million pounds.

Pre-pandemic

BFT, which originated as an outreach ministry at Faithbridge United Methodist Church and became a standalone nonprofit in 2013, never intended to be a mega food bank.

Prior to COVID-19, BFT partnered with neighborhood families for relief and rehabilitation services, including counseling, afterschool programs for kids, flu vaccine clinics and vision screenings, ESL classes and tutoring. Providing food donations on a small scale was only one part of BFT.

Changes in 2020

Annually, BFT was distributing about 13,000 pounds of food as part of its usual operation. When the Coronavirus pandemic hit, needs rose in the neighborhood of primarily Hispanic and Vietnamese families. Thankfully, resources did too, including an official partnership with the Houston Food Bank and an influx of volunteers from Faithbridge UMC. Many Faithbridgers, as church members call themselves, were eager to help when the initial call went out.

“This is exactly what I need to be doing,” says Jeff Marsh, a Faithbrider who retired in early 2020. “For me, it goes back to being obedient to God’s Word. (The Book of) James tells us faith without works is not true faith. We are called upon to live that out. One of the ways to live that out is to serve others. And when we serve in this capacity, we’re also serving Him.”

“As I read through the Bible, I see where God told us to help those who need help,” shares Kim Oswald, a Faithbrider who retired earlier this year to, as she puts it, “become a professional volunteer.”

Oswald spends 15 hours per week in the BFT office with a variety of tasks, including helping with client intake forms and registering volunteers. Post-COVID, she plans to add reading to the younger children to her list.

“I do it because I want to do it. I can do it. Not for recognition but because God says that’s what you need to do,” Oswald states.

Jennifer Burton, another Faithbrider, is a longtime BFT volunteer who helps with fundraising for the nonprofit. When the call when out for food distribution workers, she signed up.

“I got hooked and fell in love with the process,” she says, explaining that her shift involves packing dry goods, packing produce, putting boxes in vehicles and interacting with the people in line.

“There’s always this impact of seeing all of these cars drive up and realizing what it’s really about and knowing that someone is waiting for five or six hours for a box of food and they don’t even know what they are getting,” she says. “It’s super powerful to see their smiles and appreciation. I feel God’s presence every time I’m there.”

Serving more than food

In addition to serving more than triple the number of families within BFT’s previous capacity, BFT hit the remarkable milestone of distributing more than 1 million pounds of food in 2020, an accomplishment only made possible by BFT’s faithful volunteers.

“I think when people will look back on the time of COVID, yes, there has been hardship and heartbreak,” says Christy Sprague, BFT executive director and Faithbrider. “But what I will remember is the way that this community of believers has come together.

“As God’s people, as the church, this is our opportunity to be a light in the midst of darkness, to be joy and peace in the midst of fear and pain. When cars are coming through, volunteers are saying ‘God bless you. Jesus loves you,’ just blessing the people as they go by. I know that’s why our little pantry is serving so many people. Even if they don’t know it, they are being blessed by the love of Christ.”

Read more stories at https://www.umc.org/
When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Camels carrying potentates from the East bearing gifts feature on many Christmas cards: these are the three Magi from wherever! They come, visit the palace in Jerusalem, travel on the few miles to Bethlehem to find the child. On doing so, they offer him their strange gifts and travel home by ‘a different route.’

Then Joseph takes action. Had the visitors dropped a hint, told him to expect a visit from the volatile and evil Herod? Had they confided that they would not be respecting the king’s wishes? Whatever, Joseph follows the advice of the angel and takes his family south to Egypt.

Several major trading routes ran through Palestine from Mesopotamia to Egypt; there was a history of Jewish people finding refuge in Egypt, with Jewish communities in several places in North Africa. Egypt was an obvious destination to which to go, travelling inconspicuously among other groups on the road.

There have been Christians in Egypt and in North Africa from a short time after the death of Christ – centuries before the faith reached our various countries. In Egypt, 10% of the population is Christian, with the majority being of the ancient Coptic Orthodox tradition.

Christians in Egypt are proud that it was their country, their continent, which offered shelter and hospitality to the Holy Family. On a visit to Egypt two years ago at the invitation of the Coptic Archbishop in London, a group of us was taken to a number of sites where the Family is said to have stayed, to churches built to commemorate their stay and to see beautiful mosaics and paintings illustrating their journeying. It was like Christmas all year round – God with us!

Christians in Egypt are often harassed and persecuted - remember the 21 Coptic Christians martyred for their faith in February 2015? Christians in many parts of the world similarly die for their faith. We need to ask ourselves how much our faith means to us.

And there are millions of people round the world fleeing for their lives for a variety of reasons - persecution, war, famine, climate change, for example. Think of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, people in Syria, Tigray, Yemen, south-eastern Europe, the Pacific islands… the list goes on. It is said that never in the known history of the world have so many people been on the move, not because they want to be, but because they have to be. And some of them have arrived in our countries - and this raises questions…

How have we welcomed them? Have we offered them the hospitality offered to the Holy Family by the people of Egypt two thousand years ago? Have we thanked them for doing willingly some of the jobs we seem not prepared to do? Do we see them as made in the image of God?

The Christmas story raises uncomfortable questions…

[Just a note to say that camels and donkeys do not actually feature in the Nativity narratives, but we may safely assume they were there!]

Submitted by WMC Vice President Gillian Kingston
Please send press releases, articles and resources! Submissions should be a page or less (500-700 words), edited and ready to publish. Contact us by Monday, January 25 at communications@worldmethodistcouncil.org if you would like your story to be included in the February edition of the First Friday Letter.

On the Web

This and past First Friday Letters can be found online at FirstFridayLetter.worldmethodistcouncil.org.

The World Methodist Council’s website may be found at worldmethodistcouncil.org.

The World Methodist Museum’s website is at methodistmuseum.org.

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