First Friday Letter

The World Methodist Council June 2021

Greetings from the General Secretary

Dear Friends,

Warm greetings from a world radically changed by the COVID 19 pandemic!

Our hearts go out to those who are in the third wave of the pandemic and the many who have lost loved ones. We continue to call for global solidarity and vaccine equity in response to the pandemic.

For many years three issues featured prominently in the social witness of the World Methodist Council: Opposition to the South African Apartheid regime, Resolution to the Palestine/Israeli conflict, and Peace on the Korean Peninsula. In 1994 we celebrated with all South Africans as they went to the polls to elect a democratic government. We continue to work for peace on the Korean Peninsula through the "Korean Round-Table," and together with other agencies, we are committed to finding lasting solutions to peace and Palestine/Israel.

I am sad to report that a fire destroyed most of the olive groves and crops on the Nassar family farm, host to the Tents of Nations in Palestine. The Nassar family was the 2018 recipient of the World Methodist Peace Award.

In this issue, Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath, in an interesting article, raises the question, are we Palestinians' keepers? The World Methodist Council joined other leaders in a call for peace and an end to provocation in Jerusalem. I recall how the global icon Nelson Mandela often reminded South Africans that they could not regard themselves as free until Palestinians are free and referred to the question of Palestinian liberation as "the greatest moral issue of our time." I was also recently reminded that when Theodor Herzel, the architect of political Zionism, launched his movement in 1897, three rabbis from Vienna went to Palestine, and after observing a thriving community reported, "The bride is indeed beautiful, but is already married." Leath also identifies Christian Zionism, a religiously motivated program rejected by most Christians worldwide that adds to the conflict in Israel/Palestine.

Karen Armstrong, the author of books on religion, including *The Case for God, A History of God, The Battle for God, Holy War, Islam, Buddha, The Great Transformation, and founder of the Charter of Compassion, writes;* " One of the chief tasks of our time must surely be to build a global community in which all people can live together in mutual respect; yet religion, which should be making a major contribution, is seen as part of the problem."

I want to believe that Methodists people seek to live by Wesley's "rules of life";

"Do all the good you can
by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the places you can,
to all the people you can,
as long as ever you can!'

Regards,

Ivan

Annual conferences plan online, hybrid events

Themes for United Methodist annual conferences in 2021 include (clockwise, from top) "A Continuing Journey of Faith (conferences in the Manila Episcopal Area), "It's Time to Get Up" (Sierra Leone), "Story" (Louisiana), "Building Bridges" (Western Virginia), and "Connected in Christ" (Iowa). Graphic by Laurens Glass, UM News.

Annual conference meetings will largely remain virtual this year, but some are planning hybrid events as the coronavirus threat ebbs in the U.S. Petitions about race, sexuality and other issues will be considered.

"Nothing can replace gathering together for worship and study and listening for the voice of the spirit in the conversations on the floor and in the hallways," said the Rev. Donnie Wilkinson, senior pastor of Broadmoor United Methodist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"I could see some sort of hybrid model where many of the reports could be done online. You come to the meeting itself having prepared by having time for technical questions where a conference committee is having a Q&A session on Zoom."

For now, the Louisiana Conference meetings will be entirely online, the choice of most for 2021.

In the Western Pennsylvania Conference, the meetings will be a blend of in-person and virtual. Paper ballots on three or four essential items will be used, the first of which is a resolution suspending the rule that voting be done in-person. That's being done just to get through this year.

Other paper ballots will be tabulated to approve the 2022 budget and a slate of nominees for boards and agencies, said the Rev. Alan J. Morrison, chair of the conference sessions team.

"I think we're in the midst of a generational change," Morrison said. "If we can start doing some of the business items in these other ways, then we can get together and have it be more about celebrating and relationship-building. I would hate to see us go completely online because we do lose something very much in relationships."

The Michigan Conference meetings will be entirely virtual, running 36 hours and featuring more than 300 video segments, said Mark Doyal, director of communications.

The North Georgia Conference also will be online, with a one-day business meeting and livestreamed ordination and memorial services, said Sybil Davidson, conference communicator.

In Europe, the Hungary Provisional Conference already completed its meetings, said Urs Schweizer, assistant to the bishop for the Central and Southern Europe Episcopal Area in Zurich. The Austria Conference met May 13-16 and Switzerland-France-North Africa is set for June 16-20. All the European meetings have been hybrid. Postponed until the fall are Bulgaria-Romania, Serbia-North Macedonia-Albania, Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics.

Annual conference meetings in the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area will be held virtually in December, said Bishop Eben K. Nhiwatiwa.

"But ordination we are going to meet personally at a proposed place whilst maintaining social distance, sanitizing and masking up," he said.

Continued...

Annual conferences plan online, hybrid events continued...

Issues such as the status of LGBTQ people and racism are subjects of petitions and resolutions in multiple conferences.

In Michigan, resolutions are proposed to create training for clergy and congregations who are experiencing or will experience cross-racial, cross-cultural appointments and also anti-bias and anti-racism training for active clergy, conference and district staff.

"To be blunt, the church has been far too quiet on the matter of race and bias," said the Rev. B. Kevin Smalls, senior pastor of Hope United Methodist Church in Southfield, Michigan, and a member of Bishop David Alan Bard's anti-bias/anti-racism working group.

"We want to equip congregations and pastors to address it. … The bishop will ask every congregation to undertake some of this."

Other conferences with petitions or resolutions on race include Oregon-Idaho, Louisiana and East Ohio.

The Liberia Conference in Africa concluded March 21 in Gbarnga City with an affirmation of its previous decision to support the traditionalist position on church issues.

"We want to be a part of the traditionalist Methodist church that will make disciples of Jesus Christ," said Liberia Bishop Samuel J. Quire Jr. during his episcopal address on March 19. "We are also confident that the God whom we serve is not broken. God will sustain God's Church."

In the U.S., resolutions and petitions supporting inclusiveness for LGBTQ people have been filed in conferences including Susquehanna, West Ohio and Michigan.

"We're of the viewpoint that the church's mission is to be inclusive of people and that the matter of inclusiveness has not been taken as seriously as it needs to be taken," said the Rev. Michael Minnix, pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

In the past, some Methodists have argued against total inclusion for women and Black people, Minnix said.

"In every instance where the church has worked to exclude a group of people, we have reached the point in history later on when we have had to repent and apologize for doing so," he said.

"My hope is that the church will be able to embrace its mission to the world and place that at a higher level of importance than the differences that divide us … and work on negotiating and resolving our differences and stay united in our mission."

In Louisiana, Wilkinson has filed a petition requesting officials work to make most conference meetings open and available for anyone to view.

"Given the heightened level of anxiety and mistrust that is across the entire global denomination right now, communication is one of the best ways to lower the anxiety and rebuild trust," Wilkinson said.

"Part of what I realized was that for the first time the technology exists to actually do this in an intentional, broad-based, inclusive way. One of the upsides from the pandemic was seeing how readily people adapted to online meeting."

Read more at https://www.umnews.org/

Youth and Young Adult Scholarship Application registry now open

Scholarship opportunities for the 22nd World Methodist Council Conference are open now. Register by clicking on the link below.

https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/what-we-do/youth-and-young-adult-scholarship/

Photo by The World Methodist Council

Methodists join other Christians in appealing for peace and an end to provocative actions in Jerusalem

Statement from the World Methodist Council, Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church and the Methodist Church in Britain, which are partners in the Jerusalem Methodist Liaison Office.

We stand together to support the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem who have expressed their concern about continuing violence in Jerusalem and who have called on those in the international community to put an end to what they describe as 'provocative actions.'

We have been horrified by the scenes of violence in east Jerusalem which threaten the fragility of the Holy City, and call on the Israeli Government to permanently halt the threatened evictions of Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, where clashes have also taken place.

We urge calm on all sides and ask the politicians to enable an environment where justice and healing can be experienced by all and we join with the Heads of Churches to continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. We continue to stand in solidarity with our Christian sisters and brothers who live and work in the Holy Land.

Read more at *https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/*

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Statement of the patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem concerning the recent violence in Jerusalem

We the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem, are profoundly disheartened and concerned about the recent violent events in East Jerusalem. These concerning developments, whether at the Al Aqsa Mosque or in Sheikh Jarrah, violate the sanctity of the people of Jerusalem and of Jerusalem as the City of Peace. The actions undermining the safety of worshipers and the dignity of the Palestinians who are subject to eviction are unacceptable.

The special character of Jerusalem, the Holy City, with the existing Status Quo, compels all parties to preserve the already sensitive situation in the Holy City of Jerusalem. The growing tension, backed mainly by right-wing radical groups, endangers the already fragile reality in and around Jerusalem.

We call upon the International Community and all people of good will to intervene in order to put an end to these provocative actions, as well as to as well as to continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem

Photo and Statement by *https://www.lpj.org/archives/patriarchs-and-heads-of-jerusalem-churches-concerned-about-alaqsa-mosque-worshippers-and-sheikh-jarrah-families.html*

Thoughts on WMC Conference: The Move, Journey, and Destination

PEOPLE OF THE WAY

Before the early witnesses in Antioch tagged Jesus' followers "Christians", they were known as "the people of the way." They bore the way of the cross, the way to and in the new age or the Reign of God already in our midst and which only God can create. Jesus, of course, was known as "The Way" in accounts of John 13: 12-20, 14: 5-7; Hebrews 12; 1 Peter 2: 21-24. Without claiming exclusive rights to the "Basileia to Theou" or Reign of God, as destination toward which believers move, it is sufficient to note that a movement or Christian movement in a manner of pilgrimage and journeying walk "in the way" as a "people of the way."

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE LIVE AN ANTICIPATORY WAY OF LIFE

Anticipatory communities work out in nuts-and-bolts, trial and error fashion, ways of life that might just map the ecology of community for greater numbers of people on the far side of a jangled, precarious, extended time of transition. The purpose of such anticipatory communities is to give social form to a hoped for future, thus showing that what might someday be undertaken on a larger scale has already taken recognisable shape. ***John Howard Yoder***, author of ***The Politics of Jesus***, amongst others, says such movements involve an integrated moral style in which both the journey and the destination are an integral whole of community and social justice. He adds that "their distinctness is not a cultic or ritual separation, but rather a non-conformed quality of ("secular") involvement in the life of the world ... (constituting) an unavoidable challenge to the powers that be and the beginning of a new set of social alternatives." Such a movement involves an integrated moral style in which both the journey and the destination are an integral whole of community, social, political and economic justice. I am reminded of the lasting wisdom of ***Margaret Mead***, the late American anthropologist best known for her studies of the peoples of Oceania. Commenting on a wide array of societal issues, such as women's rights, nuclear proliferation, race relations, environmental pollution, and world hunger, she said: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has."*

FINDING A BETTER WAY

Larry L. Rasmussen argues extensively in "A People of the Way" that each person is immeasurably dignified by God. No one is an alien and barbarian and belongs at the bottom. Nor dare any be consigned to silence or deprived of the powers that mean full participation as a member of community. For a people of the way, faith doesn't make distinctions that violate this basic equality and universalism. Indeed, the lasting achievement of contemporary society – Universal Human Rights – emphasise that God's love and grace exalt all. According to Ephesians 2 and the Jesus movement, "church" happens when all are gathered together on equal terms into a caring community across the global divide. Here the better way is to be found.

Keith Vermeulen, WMC Researcher

Photo credits: Photo 29866071 / Gothenburg Sweden © Olgacov | Dreamstime.com

Nazarene churches in India serve during pandemic surge

Photo by Nazarene Compassionate Ministries

The number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in India are breaking world records, with the total reported number of deaths exceeding 215,000 and rising. Deaths have nearly tripled in the last three weeks and reached more than 3,600 in the last 24 hours. The true death toll is believed to be much higher.

The dramatic surge in cases has overrun the health care infrastructure; both hospitals and crematoriums have run out of space, and there is a critical shortage of oxygen. The surge in cases and deaths has also slowed the country's vaccination rollout.

Nazarene churches in India have been actively involved in distributing aid since the beginning of the pandemic a year ago, ensuring that hundreds of families have food and supplies. Most recently, the project began distributions for 500 families. This has become particularly important during the surge. While it is vital that people maintain proper safety measures, it also means a significant loss of income. Those who are living in poverty have even fewer resources than usual.

The Reynolds Memorial Hospital, a Nazarene entity started in 1938, is providing frontline care to patients with COVID-19. The Church of the Nazarene is mobilizing support for the hospital by providing oxygen and other urgent items. The surge in cases has impacted this hospital, too, and staff members are working extremely hard to treat those in their care. About 16 of the staff have also been infected and are being treated at the hospital themselves.

Lazarus, a district superintendent in India, is recovering from COVID-19 along with four members of his family. The support from the Nazarene church helped them with steep medical bills, and he said that he would like to continue the work by showing love to others in need.

"Please continue to pray for me and the church in India and all of our leaders," he said. "Especially pray for my country to get the safety under God's protection and to get a healing touch."

Large portions of the population have lost their income during the pandemic, making it nearly impossible to count on essentials like groceries and housing. Support provided by churches alleviates some stress as communities strive to make it through the loss of income caused by the pandemic. This includes supporting pastors, who aren't receiving their normal pay while churches are closed.

Pastor Pratik tested positive for COVID-19 in April, along with his parents. He says that the support from the church was a great help.

"I seek your prayers for our country," he said. "I seek your prayers for our pastors and the families who have lost their dear ones. Please pray for the whole country."

How to help

Pray

Pray for those who have lost loved ones, and pray for those who are trying to find medical care for their loved ones. Pray for the staff at all the hospitals, including Reynolds Memorial Hospital, who have treated an increasing stream of patients for weeks. Pray for those who are ill, that they would be healed and recover quickly, and pray for the spread of the virus to slow. Pray for those who are most vulnerable during crises, especially senior adults, individuals with disabilities, and people living in poverty. To send a prayer or note of encouragement, go to ncm.org/pray.

Give

Churches and individuals around the world can provide support through the COVID-19 Response – India. Donations will be used for immediate health needs.

Watch the YouTube video at
https://youtu.be/-c114T_BUCg

Read more at *https://www.nazarene.org/*

Archbishop joins Red Cross Red Crescent, UNHCR and global faith leaders in urgent call to end vaccine nationalism

Worldwide Christian and other faith leaders have joined with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the International Committee of the Red Cross President and humanitarian groups urging global leaders to ensure equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines around the world.

On the opening day of the World Health Assembly, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have said that global leaders must choose between "vaccine nationalism or human solidarity."

In a joint Declaration co-signed on May 24 by international faith leaders and humanitarian groups, Archbishop Justin Welby and ICRC president Peter Maurer said that equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines is a humanitarian imperative.

The statement is signed by Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (IFRC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The faith leaders include senior representatives from all the major Christian denominations, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and Azza Karam and Rabbi David Rosen of Religions for Peace.

The Declaration, which calls for decisive leadership from countries and organizations across the world, states: "There is a choice. The world of the next 10 years can be one of greater justice, abundance and dignity. Or it can be one of conflict, insecurity and poverty. We are at a turning point."

The catastrophic impacts of the pandemic, combined with existing issues of conflict, disaster and famine, mean that the world is facing the challenge of reversing "devastating dynamics", the leaders say.

"People not only need vaccinations – they need access to healthcare workers who are skilled and equipped to deliver adequate medical support. We need to build a world where each community, regardless of where they live, or who they are, has urgent access to vaccinations: not just for COVID-19, but also for the many other diseases that continue to harm and kill. As the pandemic has shown us, in our interdependent world no one is safe until everyone is safe."

The Declaration calls on world leaders to:

- **Ensure equitable vaccine** access both within and between countries by providing vaccines and funding as well as sharing knowledge and expertise.
- **Leave no one behind**, including stigmatised and marginalised communities for whom access to healthcare is already a challenge.
- **Focus on the broader health picture** for vulnerable populations – so that people aren't protected from Covid only to die from Polio.

See the full text of the Declaration at: *https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/2021/05/21/archbishop-joins-red-cross-red-crescent-unhcr-and-global-faith-leaders-in-urgent-call-to-end-vaccine-nationalism/*

The list of signatories is as follows:

The Most Reverend Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross

Bishop Ivan M Abrahams, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council

HE Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon, Ecumenical Patriarchate

The Reverend Dr Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

Henrietta H. Fore, Executive Director, UNICEF

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General

Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The Reverend Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation

Dr Azza Karam, Secretary-General, Religions for Peace

Francesco Rocca, President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Rabbi David Rosen, Co-President, Religions for Peace

Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, The Grand Imam of al-Azhar

HE Cardinal Peter Turkson, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Rome

San Salvador, Zacamil Hospital. A nurse takes care of a COVID-19 patient (Photo by ICRC)

Five new churches organized in Philippines amid pandemic

Amid the challenges of the pandemic, five new churches were organized in the Philippines in one month.

Medanny Punsalan, superintendent of the Panay District, recently found himself in a little church located in Barangay Sambag Nueva Sevilla, Barotac Viejo, on the island of Panay to organize Glorious Church of the Nazarene with 23 members.

Pastor Rolando and Pastora Marcela Rubrico have pioneered the Glorious Church of the Nazarene since 2014. They have given themselves to ministering to children and families in their nearby communities. The couple supported the ministry by working as tricycle drivers and giving tutorials.

A couple of weeks later, on the island of Mindanao, four churches were organized. Regional Director Mark Louw, accompanied by Philippine Field Strategy Coordinator Arnel Piliin and District Superintendent Nicolas Cacho, organized the four churches via Zoom. They all were organized out of Panabo Church of the Nazarene. These new churches are:

- Cabili Church of the Nazarene, led by Faustino Secretaria
- Baybay Church of the Nazarene, led by Eugenio Pejera
- Katipunan Church of the Nazarene led by Johnrey Sedayao
- Cagangohan Church of the Nazarene, led by Remlani Nacario.

Erene Pastor has served in Panabo since 1997. At that time, the church was dilapidated and had only four members. Growth was slow, and many times, he was tempted to give up. Nevertheless, God gave him a vision of 300 worshipers, and he believed this vision.

The growth started with a kinder school in 2015 where his wife, Vivian, taught. The church also participated in church planting training, and the first graduates committed to planting a church. They also began a jail ministry every Tuesday, and many inmates were saved by God's grace. When they were released, they testified in the church services.

Panabo Church of the Nazarene had the opportunity to partner with other organizations to provide Christmas gifts to children in the community. Through outside organizations, they were able to distribute "Manna Packs" of fortified rice, vitamins, seeds, and facemasks to more than 1,000 families during the pandemic.

"I know it is was nearly impossible for Panabo Church of the Nazarene to plant four churches at the same time, but it is the Lord's work," Pastor said. "He gave me the vision of one church in every barangay. I simply obeyed Him, because I believe that when He calls, He provides. I will go wherever He wants me to go and do whatever He wants me to do."

--Church of the Nazarene Asia-Pacific

Read more at *https://www.nazarene.org/*

Photo by Church of the Nazarene Asia-Pacific

Bishops' election plans draw mixed reaction

United Methodist bishops are no longer pushing for a hold on all U.S. episcopal elections, but church voters still have differing views on when those elections should take place. The bishops' decision to delay elections until 2022 — announced at the end of their spring meeting — has frustrated some General Conference delegates while winning praise from others. Nevertheless, most delegates who spoke with United Methodist News expressed gratitude that the bishops have rescinded their original recommendation that no elections occur until 2024. The delegates are the people who ultimately vote on bishops and other denominational leadership.

"This definitely does what I was hoping for," said David Stotts, delegate and Mississippi Conference treasurer. "Each jurisdiction will decide the number of bishops they need and then the committee on episcopacy will make the assignments."

The Rev. Jay Williams, head of the New England Conference delegation, also commended the bishops for changing their minds. However, he added: "Elections should be held this year." He is part of a group of delegates who urged the bishops to convene special jurisdictional conferences this year to allow elections of new denominational leaders. "The church yearns for fresh leadership on the Council of Bishops and agencies," he told UM News. "As bishops and board members continue to retire and run out of energy, let's refresh the pool of leaders by electing new ones immediately." Much of the difficulty faced by bishops and delegates alike centers on how to handle a situation never anticipated in the Book of Discipline, the denomination's policy book.

Twice now, the global COVID-19 pandemic has delayed General Conference — the denomination's lawmaking assembly that draws together lay and clergy delegates from four continents. The international gathering first scheduled for May 2020 is now set for Aug. 29-Sept. 6, 2022, in Minneapolis.

That has put a number of big decisions on hold — including a proposed split of the denomination after decades of debate over the status of LGBTQ people.

The pandemic and slow rollout of vaccines worldwide also has disrupted the usual order of church business.

Typically, General Conference meets in the spring every four years. The five jurisdictional conferences convene in July to handle the elections of U.S. bishops, agency board members and other leaders. The seven central conferences — the jurisdictions' counterparts in Africa, Europe and the Philippines — then hold their respective elections for bishops and other leaders from their regions in the months following jurisdictional conferences.

But before General Conference can meet, more than a dozen of the 46 active U.S. bishops plan to retire or already have taken on new roles with the Council of Bishops this year. Eight central conference bishops also plan to step down, and delegates expect to elect a successor to Sierra Leone's Bishop John Yambasu, who died last year.

Faced with shrinking financial reserves and denominational uncertainty, the Council of Bishops in November recommended delegates hold off on electing any of the retiring U.S. bishops' successors. But the recommendation soon faced pushback from delegates across the United States as more drastic than finances warranted.

Bishops don't have a vote at General Conference or jurisdictional and central conference sessions, but they do have authority to convene special sessions of those meetings.

As COVID-19 vaccines have become widely available in the U.S., debate has emerged about whether the Book of Discipline requires that General Conference always precede jurisdictional conferences.

The Rev. William B. Lawrence, a former president of the Judicial Council — the denomination's top court — argues that church law has no such requirement. "Therefore, jurisdictional conferences could meet in person as soon as this summer or fall, if such assemblies are feasible in the United States under health regulations," he wrote in a memo widely circulated among U.S. delegates.

Dave Nuckols, co-head of the Minnesota Conference delegation, echoed that view. He said the jurisdictional conferences meeting as soon as it's safe would be the most faithful remedy to the pandemic delay because they can replenish church leadership.

Nuckols also identified another dynamic in play. After the contentious 2019 special General Conference that saw delegates strengthening bans on same-gender weddings and "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy, many U.S. annual conferences elected a different slate of delegates who oppose those bans. "The will of the voters deserves to be heard in the jurisdictional election processes," Nuckols said. Ultimately, bishops called for these voters to wait. They scheduled the five jurisdictional conferences for Nov. 2-4, 2022, with central conferences to follow.

Council of Bishops President Cynthia Fierro Harvey said the council affirmed that that colleges of bishops (that is, the bishops in each jurisdiction) can call special sessions of jurisdictional conferences at any time "but not for the purposes of electing members of boards and agencies nor to elect bishops."

Continued...

Bishops' election plans draw mixed reaction continued...

Harvey, who also leads the Louisiana Conference, said the bishops came to that conclusion based on their reading of the Discipline's Paragraph 521. That paragraph talks about when bishops may call special jurisdictional conferences to fill vacancies.

Some church leaders dispute the bishops' interpretation of that passage. But as a practical matter, the top executives of the denomination's 13 general agencies also support delaying electing new board members until after General Conference.

Dawn Wiggins Hare, the top executive of the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women, spoke on behalf of the agency executives at the recent Council of Bishops meeting.

Among the problems with doing things out of the usual order, she said, is that some agencies have submitted legislation to General Conference to shrink their boards. If jurisdictions vote before General Conference acts, that raises the possibility of more people being elected than there will be available positions to fill. The current order of business also allows most new board members to receive orientation at the same time, she said.

"The entire church, in our opinion, will be benefited considerably by having experienced boards during this very disruptive time and by following a fair and equitable process for membership across the connection," she said.

Another issue is that General Conference passes the denominational budget that determines the number of bishops. Electing bishops ahead of a new budget could further threaten financial sustainability. In this interim time, bishops are already making plans to take on new duties and expand the areas they cover so colleagues who plan to retire can do so.

"When I look at something like this, I look at who is paying the price," said Dr. Steve Furr, a delegate from the Alabama-West Florida Conference. Furr is among the delegates who is pleased to see a delay in bishop elections. That way, he said, delegates can use their usual rigorous process in evaluating bishop candidates.

"I don't often pat the bishops on the back, but I appreciate they are making the sacrifice," he said.

For now, there is broad consensus that when U.S. delegates do meet for jurisdictional conferences, they will be electing fewer bishops than the number retiring. The North Central Jurisdiction is already making plans to reduce its bishops from nine to eight. But determining the total number of bishops to be elected remains a work in progress, Furr said. He is the chair of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy.

The Rev. Kim Ingram, head delegate from the Western North Carolina Conference and a fellow episcopacy committee member, said how bishops handle their expanded workloads in this interim time may provide some insights into how many bishops need to be elected. She praised bishops for heeding delegates' voices and adapting. However, she also urged more transparency in decision-making.

"When there is transparency, it builds trust," she said. "When, for example, bishops make a decision not to hold elections and people don't feel like they understand why and how that decision was made, it leads to doubt and distrust."

The Rev. Sara Isbell, a delegate from the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, said much of the conversation around forgoing elections has been around finances. "But another question we should be asking ourselves is: 'When we do elect new bishops, to what kind of church are we electing them?'" said Isbell, who is the chair of the North Central Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy.

"The pressing questions about 'how many' bishops will be needed, and for 'what kind' of leadership, are in some ways dependent on how General Conference turns out."

Read more at: *https://www.umnews.org/*

The Holston Conference's Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor embraces the Rev. David Graves following his election as United Methodist bishop at the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference in 2016. On April 30, the Council of Bishops affirmed its decision to delay electing any new leaders until after the postponed General Conference. File photo by Annette Spence, Holston Conference.

IAMSCU Declaration on Global Vaccine Equity

"We worship a God whose character is equity and who intends the well-being of all people. Therefore, advocating for vaccine equity should be seen as a part of the mission of the Church," said Bishop Joaquina Nhanala from the United Methodist Church in Mozambique at an online conversation organized by the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges and Universities (IAMSCU) on May 4, 2021.

An international group of academics and church leaders affirmed the sacredness of life demonstrated by Jesus Christ and stated: "We understand health care as a fundamental human right, including vaccine accessibility to combat diseases affecting millions of people worldwide, and we recognize that we continue to be at risk from mutations of COVID-19 until all people are vaccinated."

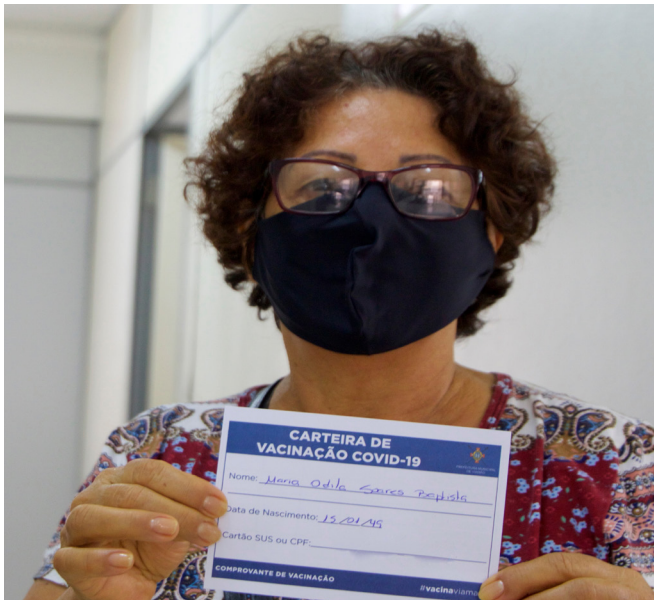
IAMSCU, a global network of more then 1000 schools, colleges and universities in eighty countries established by the World Methodist Council in 1991 - in partnership with the Methodist network of disaster response and health clinics - is committed to provide key resources, including reliable scientific information, and to expedite equitable distribution and accessibility of the COVID-19 vaccine worldwide.

IAMSCU is committed to challenge governments, businesses, and media outlets to respond to the social needs of their communities and to take actions that will promote wellbeing, address economic stress, and generate social improvement of all people, especially in impoverished and vulnerable communities, to combat disinformation by educating people about COVID-19 and its variants, promoting global vaccine equity, and working in partnership with relevant institutions in these activities, and to join with other organizations and people of good will in enhancing the common good by promoting these actions for the sake of human flourishing.

The Declaration is available at *https://umcmission.org/news-statements/declaration-on-global-vaccine-equity/*. A video of the consultation can be found here: *https://echo360.org/media/9f0eb2d6-a390-470b-8b68-6b9396b8ae82/public*.

Submitted by Rosemarie Wenner

Medial professional preparing vaccine. Photo by Marcelo Schneider/WCC



A woman shows her vaccine certificate after receiving the first jab of the Coronavac, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Photo by Marcelo Schneider/WCC

Are We Palestinians' Keepers?

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath, 5th District

Today, the world seems to be asking itself, "are we Palestinians' keepers?" (i.e., should we care for Palestinian survival and the restoration of stolen land, rights, and resources?). Before the question is asked, the answer is already "YES!" (Genesis 4.9). And as violent injustices persist and worsen in Israel/Palestine (notwithstanding cease-fires), this obligation is more important now than ever.

Following the genocidal antisemitic Holocaust of Nazi Germany and its allies, surely, we agree that Jews and all who were persecuted needed – and need keeping (i.e., protection). We sympathize with the founding of modern-day Israel on 14 May 1948 because of these very oppressive genocidal circumstances. However, in order to establish the modern-day state of Israel, countless Palestinian people, Arab people, were violently displaced and killed. Palestinians' rights to and safety in their indigenous land have been stripped since the establishment of modern-day Israel.

Sadly, some of us have been convinced by corrupted evangelical "Christian" rhetoric and incomplete biblical exegesis that it is the right of Jewish people to return to Israel and that this is part of G*d's salvific plan. Some of us believe that this right should be realized regardless of who must suffer – even if it means the denial of rights and self-determination to others. The United States not only helped establish Israel but has also contributed untold sums of money for its militarization. Geographically, Israel is just a bit larger than New Jersey (without its post-1967 expansions), but it boasts the most technologically advanced and eighth most powerful military in the world. Meanwhile, over 70,000 Palestinians displaced as a result of the most recent airstrikes join the ranks of more than seven million before them, water is undrinkable, electricity is unreliable, and the free movement of Palestinians is prohibited. Again, we empathize with and accept the call to "keep" our Jewish siblings following the persecutions of the Holocaust and generations of antisemitism preceding and succeeding it – especially as people of African descent surviving the aftermath of the genocidal Transatlantic Slave Trade. However, we cannot suffer the lie that says that some can and should be protected at the expense of the rights and protections of others. We cannot defend the idea that our salvation should come through the suffering of others.

Jesus sets this example for us: through his actions he says I would rather suffer and die than that any of you (i.e., any of us) should have to suffer and die. How many of us would suffer first? Why do the liberation struggles of some always seem to demand the suffering, persecution, and death of others? Who can accept that the liberation struggles of post-reformation Christians justifies the genocide of indigenous people in the stolen states of "America"? And as these indigenous people still ask: how can the liberation struggles of those who fled Egypt for Beulah land justify the oppression of those found in Canaan?

Consider the ethics of Jesus, who was Black – and a first century, Palestinian Jew (James Cone):

(1) Jesus does not protect abuses of power. Jesus does not protect lies. Jesus does not protect those who crush others to save themselves. Jesus does not protect those who step on others to benefit themselves.

(2) Jesus makes sacrifices. Though he suffers (including suffering for defending those he defends), Jesus will notbe completely destroyed. And though we may have to suffer – despised, rejected, and even accused of the hate we seek to dismantle, we defend the defenseless – those who throw stones at tanks, those without the missile defense of an iron dome. We, too, prevail.

(3) Jesus empowers those with less power. We never see Jesus trying to become the Roman Emperor; Jesus never tries to unseat the Chief Priest because he wants that job. To the contrary, notwithstanding Jesus's relative poverty and powerlessness as he walked the earth, Jesus was always finding those who had less than him and strengthening them in mind, body, and spirit. Jesus was not looking up to climb. Jesus was looking down to lift.

Today we must take "risks of faith" (James Cone) to be Palestinians' keepers – to give an account for their survival, for their access to resources for thriving and just peace, and for the security and belonging of their land. Their blood, along with the blood of our Black, first century, Palestinian, Jewish ancestor, Jesus, cries out from the soil. Listen. Yes, we are Palestinians' keepers.

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