First Friday Letter

The World Methodist Council

July 2022

Greetings from the General Secretary

Dear Friends,

I am happy to write to you from home after spending the last couple of weeks representing the World Methodist Council at two meetings held in Geneva, one of the great centers of the Protestant Reformation.

My first meeting was as an ecumenical representative to the Lutheran World Council (LWF). There were Methodist representatives at the founding of the LWF in Lund in 1947 in the aftermath of the Second World War. We have journeyed with Lutheran ever since and presented a dialogue Report, The Church, a community of Grace to our various communions in 1984. The LWF signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with the Catholic Church in 1999, and the WMC was the first World Communion to adopt and sign the JDDJ in Seoul, Korea in 2006.

The second meeting was as an "advisor" to the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee Meeting. I was privileged to serve on the Executive Committee of this body from the Porto Alegre, Brazil (2006) to the Busan, Seoul Assembly (2013). The World Methodist Council (WMC) has been actively involved in every phase of today's Ecumenical Movement. The work of the Ecumenical Methodist Conference, established in 1881, was passionately pursued by great laymen like Dr. John R. Mott, who called for and chaired the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. This Conference was, in turn, the precursor of the WCC, established in 1948 with Dr. Mott being named honorary President. Other great ecumenists from the Methodists tradition who served as General Secretary of the WCC are Phillip Potter, Emilio Castro, and Samuel Kobia. Today the WMC and its member churches are not just actively involved in the work of the WCC but in national and regional Councils of Churches as well as ecumenical affairs in their various churches across the world.

It is important to remember that to be Methodist is to be ecumenical! It is part of our DNA. John Wesley in his sermon, "Catholic Spirit" shares how Christians, though not able to be united in one body must have love and goodwill across denominational or confessional lines. Randy Maddox together with Michael Hurley and many other Methodist theologians argue that Wesley's "Letter to a Roman Catholic" needs to be considered as a model for contemporary ecumenical cooperation.

Over the years, the WMC has been in dialogue with the Catholic Church, Anglican, Baptist, Orthodox, Lutheran, Salvation Army and the African Instituted Churches, but the greatest challenge is to share the rich harvest of the dialogues in a simple form with the people in our pews. (All the Dialogue Reports are available on the WMC website)

This edition of the First Friday Letter introduces you to the new General Secretary of the WCC and the Anglican Communion as well as the new Chair of All We Can, a Methodist development and relief organization working with global partners to serve the world's most marginalized communities. We also share news from Ukraine and Nicaragua.

Enjoy the read.

Ivan

Holding together a world plagued by violence and division

Photo Left to Right:
Rev. Prof Ioan Sauca,
Fr. Dr Augustinus Sander,
Rev. Dr Hanns Lessing,
Bishop Ivan Abraham,
Dr. Jean-Daniel Plüss

Photo by LWF/S. Gallay

Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal, Reformed and Orthodox church leaders have been speaking at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Council meeting about the urgency of deepening theological understanding and stepping up practical cooperation in order to become "credible witnesses to a world that is plagued by division, violence and selfishness."

LWF Council members are meeting in Geneva from 9 to 14 June for their first in-person gathering since the start of the pandemic, reflecting on the theme 'In Christ all things hold together' (Colossians 1: 9-20).

Among the ecumenical guests addressing the meeting was Rev. Dr Hanns Lessing, Acting General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), who noted the important cooperation with LWF on justice and peace issues, including the recent response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He also pointed to two joint conferences that will be held at the end of this year on post-pandemic theological education and on freedom of religion and belief.

Reflecting on the theme of the Council, he said: "At a time when we feel that so many things are falling apart, you guide our attention to that place where even the grossest contradictions and the fiercest enmities hold together." Though this place is "invisible to the human eye" and "beyond our understanding," he added, "this verse calls us to see the 'holding together' as a palpable reality, a divine gift that is already there and needs to be received in our understanding and in our lives."

Representing the Pentecostal World Fellowship, Dr. Jean-Daniel Plüss praised the LWF's "unwavering ecumenical commitment" of the past twenty years which led to the inauguration of the first official dialogue between the two world communions in 2016. The concluding document of that dialogue will be available for the Thirteenth LWF Assembly in Poland next year, he noted, and "will be an encouragement to Lutherans and Pentecostals alike," especially at "regional levels where concrete ecumenical relations can bear much fruit."

The Pentecostal leader called for "a continuation of our dialogue and common initiatives" and he invited the LWF to be present at the Pentecostal World Conference which will take place from 12 to 14 October in Seoul, South Korea. It is only "in Christ," he affirmed, "that our different practices and beliefs can be understood, appreciated and brought to productive interplay by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Speaking from a Catholic perspective, Fr. Dr. Augustinus Sander from the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, also reflected on the theme of the Council meeting and the forthcoming 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Through the Nicene Creed, which is common to all Christians, he noted, "we are united in the common praise of God – many voices but one song!"

He expressed the hope that the Nicaea anniversary in 2025 can be a significant "place and time of pause" on the common journey "from conflict to communion," a moment of "spiritual concentration […] to gather new strength for the journey through time." Sometimes, he added "we would like a faster tempo, but we are not short-distance runners, we are long-distance runners. We need the long breathe to reach the goal."

Bishop Ivan Abrahams, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, noted that the LWF Council meets at a time when "we are very conscious of the war in Ukraine and many other places of violence and conflict in the world." As we "reimagine a post-COVID world, we realize our vulnerability and growing inequality to basic health care," he added.

"In the face of these and many other challenges, the Methodist leader continued, **We reaffirm our commitment to radical discipleship and stand ready to work with all ecumenical partners to be agents of hope and healing to create a just and sustainable future for all."**

World Council of Churches elects new General Secretary

Rev. Prof. Dr. Jerry Pillay, General Secretary- Elect of the WCC

Photo by Peter Williams/WCC

The Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay of South Africa was named as the ninth World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary Central Committee at its 17 June meeting.

In a hybrid press conference at which he was asked about his vision of the WCC, when he takes up his post, and other questions, he said, "Our task here is not to play church. Our task is actually to follow God's command," a member of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa who is currently dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.

"Important for me is the idea of justice and unity. I think unity is the task of the WCC—to continue to work at visible unity, and Christian unity is so important. And I will say it again, that a divided church presents a very weak and feeble and fragile witness to a very fragmented world."

Dr. Pillay said that unity is important, as justice is important. "Some people tend to favour one over the other. I hold both in equal terms." He said that the God of justice demands for us to care for the poor and the neglected….and to stand with the oppressed in their situations.

"And the WCC has done this in the past. Me coming from South Africa, it's bigger than my personal experience of how the WCC played a very vital role in dismantling apartheid, in standing with Christians in solidarity," explained Pillay. "So we will continue to do with other parts of the world as we stand with the oppressed."

When Pillay studied at university in the 1980s, the institutions were segregated for undergraduates, and as an Indian South African, he attended the University of Durban Westville. Later, he got a PhD from Rhodes University, which had been for whites.

One journalist asked Pillay about Moscow's Patriarch Kirill "supporting Russia's brutal war of aggression" in Ukraine and if it could result in the Russian Orthodox Church being suspended from the WCC. "The WCC would advocate dialogue, conversations, bringing people across the table and asking, what is it that prompts and inspires as well?" said Pillay. "We need the Patriarch; we need the Russian Orthodox Church with us in these conversations; we can't have them without them. So, suspension is not on the cards at the moment, especially if we advocated things like dialogue."

Pillay said that is the way to get a "deeper understanding and appreciation of the issues and be able to make more calculated decisions based on incisive wisdom."

Pillay was asked about his origins in South Africa and said he was born and bred as a South African Indian - of Indian descent, "but I have had no connections whatsoever with India; my great-great grandfather, probably five generations ago, came to South Africa. have visited India many times; I've tried to look at some of these connections…But for myself, I'm really of South African descent, as an Indian."

Asked about the South Africa of Demond Tutu and Gandhi, Pillay said one of the things about South Africa specifically that kept them sane in the midst of the insanity of apartheid "was our spirituality."

"In those dark days of apartheid, I would go into the (black) townships, and I would be so deeply inspired, and yet even sometimes troubled by the fact that I would see people laughing and praying and rejoicing and dancing on the streets. And I would ask myself, how in the world can you do this in the midst of suffering? And then I realized very quickly the spirituality in that suffering."

Pillay believes that growing up during a period of conflict and suffering in South Africa will stand him in good stead when he takes up his position as the head of the ecumenical body in January as a leader who believes in dialogue.

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

Council extends sympathy to the Johnsons

The World Methodist Council extends sympathy to the family and friends of 2014 Peace Award recipient Shirliann (Fritzi) Johnson who died 2 June in Montélimar, France at the age of 86. She and her husband, Dr. Hugh Johnson, jointly received the award for their longstanding service as missionaries in the United Methodist Church in North Africa. The Council asked that you remember Dr. Johnson, their two children and three grandchildren in your prayers.

"Shirliann Johnson was an example of what we should strive to be in this hurting and troubled world," explains General Secretary Bishop Ivan Abrahams. "She brought hope to the weak and light into the darkness, always putting others first as she often loved others even more than herself. She will be missed but her example continues to be felt."

For more than 40 years, the Johnsons operated under the motto: *The church has to be where the needs are the greatest, and this philosophy carried their ministry.* As missionaries in North Africa, they served during times of great unrest. From their beginnings with the General Board of Global Ministries in Algeria, the couple served throughout the nation during the country's war of independence and the following turbulences.

Serving first in Laarba Nath Irathen in the Kabylia Mountains and later in Algiers, the couple's tirelessness and drive to connect the gospel with the lives of the people of the Maghreb region led them to become fluent in Arabic and in Kabylian (a Berber language) as well as preaching in French, making sure there were no barriers between the Word and the people. When the Algerian government closed orphanages, hospitals and other diaconal institutions of the church in 1972, the Johnsons helped establish an English- language library, which served as a meeting place for people in the region and an unofficial place for Christian fellowship.

In response to the condolences he was receiving, Dr. Johnson shared the following:

Thank you very much for your very kind words bringing comfort in a new and inevitable life phase, in which Fritzi would have brought wisdom and support, both of which are much needed right now! She was and will continue to be a remarkable woman, a guiding light not only in the communities which we served so closely for over half of our lives, in a world which, too, was suffering cruelly.

She was beset with ill health for much of her life, and still brought healing to others who were suffering! She brought beauty into a world that needed her love and wisdom! The last years of her life she suffered gravely and bravely, bringing her light to a darkened world! We needed her and the world still needs her, but she is now closer to the Giver of Life and Love, and we realize that this is one burden with which her helpless broken body could no longer give immediate aid, but her spirit continues to be a beacon of hope for a better world for all of us still in it!

We all thank God for these days, years and decades in which she strove to bring happiness and justice to so many who were in need of that particular ministry which we must shoulder as an eternal benefit of being in her presence, and getting to know God and His Love, and did so effectively!

But we will still miss her and struggle without her at our side! She will be given over to God's love as a memorial to his powers! We are grateful to the numbers of people who bear thankful witness for all that God has done through her loving service for so many people! She is no longer physically among us, but having been in this world with her at our side, we have been richly blessed as witnessed by the many who have been blessed by her strong witness of God's love!

Her unique gift of transmitting God's love to us and others will make us all beneficiaries of her years of generous and loving service! We can literally hear God taking her by the hand and saying, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'

The late Shirliann Johnson receiving 2014 Peace Award Medal from Bishop Abrahams.

Final Call on 2022 Peace Award Recipient

2018 Peace Award Recipient

Rev. Dr. Inderjit Bhogal

If you have been planning to nominate someone who exemplifies Courage, Creativity, and Consistency for the World Methodist Peace Award, you must act now.

Applications submitted by **July 15** will be considered for this year. Any application received after July 15 will be reviewed later for 2023. Note, all supporting documents must be included.

The nominee should show courage in regard to physical danger or putting personal interest at risk. Creativity should include opening new initiatives and attracting others in working for the cause of peace. Consistency is judged by effort over a period of time and intensity, despite setbacks.

Here is the link to read the full criteria:

http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/whatwedo/world-methodist-peace-award/

The recipient receives a medallion, citation and US $1000 which is symbolic of the larger recognition achieved in working for peace, justice and reconciliation. The recipient is included in the World Methodist Council Peace award booklet and their photo is hung on the wall of the World Methodist Council Headquarters with other recipients of this prestigious award.

Go to www.worldmethodistcouncil.org and click on the "About the WM Peace Award" tab on the left side of the homepage and complete the online application. Please send all nomination forms to Bishop Ivan Abrahams at info@worldmethodistcouncil.org.

Methodist pray for Unity at WCC Assembly

"Listening to the stories of triumph and pain from our diverse communities, it was easy to see why the Methodist family is not uniform but rather unified by our common Methodist/Wesleyan heritage sharing a journey towards Christian perfection," said Bishop Ivan Abrahams from the World Methodist Council, and moderator of the meeting.

Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, from the World Methodist Council, started with a prayer: "Wind of God, keep on blowing. Sail over the barriers that we build to divide ourselves from each other."

The representatives of the global Methodist family renewed friendships and shared about the situation of the global communion. Every representative gave updates about their national church context and how they continue to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities are now adapting to a new normal, investing in hybrid solutions to reach out to more people.

Rev. James Bhagwan, general secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, shared about the situation in Fiji and the Pacific. He underlined the continuing presence of COVID-19, how it deeply impacted the economy, and how Tonga and Samoa are about to reopen their borders after a long time. Tonga continues to rebuild after the volcanic eruption in January 2022.

"We see the resilience of our people and we see the role of the church to mobilize communities," said Bhagwan. He also shared his concerns about the important upcoming elections in Fiji.

Bishop M. A. Daniel from the Methodist Church in India, shared his joy at seeing his church growing in India, as is the case in other Asian countries, saying, "Churches are going where institutions aren't, despite opposition."

An important part of the discussion was dedicated to planning, first for the WCC 11th Assembly, and then for the World Methodist Conference in Sweden in 2024.

During the closing prayer, Bhagwan said: "There are many things that can divide us but you bring us together; none of us is alone in your presence and the Methodist family, thanks for the burden and the joy we bring with us."

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

30th General Assembly for Nazarene Church

Board of General Superintendents

"Jesus is Lord" will be the theme of the 30th General Assembly and Conventions, the Board of General Superintendents announced this week. The General Assembly, which will be attended by Nazarenes from across the globe, is scheduled 9-16 June 2023, in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.

The theme "Jesus is Lord" is the "foundation for our unity," General Superintendent David Busic said. "Jesus is not *a* way; He is *the* Way. Jesus is not *a* truth; He is *the* Truth. Jesus is not *a* life, He is *the* Life."

The inspiration for the theme arose from the Quadrennial Address delivered by Busic at the 2017 General Assembly. The emphasis is grounded in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

In his address, Busic reminded the church from Ephesians 4:6 that, "one Lord is the foundation for all oneness."

" . . . who you say is 'lord' declares your ultimate allegiance," Busic said. "If you say Caesar is lord, that means something. If we say culture is lord, government is lord, even the church is lord, all of those are statements. But when you say 'Jesus is Lord,' that means that He is the pinnacle, the ultimate authority."

The BGS believed the message was especially powerful in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and determined to designate it the 2023 General Assembly theme.

"If we try to unify around political ideologies or cultural mores, there are just too many," Busic said. "None of them — no matter how good or bad they may be — none of them come to the ultimate reality, which is that Jesus is Lord. Every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

During the Assembly's five corporate worship services, members of the BGS will examine how the concept 'Jesus is Lord' interfaces with the various aspects of the mission of the Church of the Nazarene: "To make Christlike disciples in the nations."

"How do we think about Jesus as Lord in our discipleship, worship, evangelism, missions?" Busic said. "Those are the various sermon topics that the general superintendents will focus on."

General Assembly is the "supreme doctrine-formulating, lawmaking, and elective authority of the Church of the Nazarene" (Manual, 300). The assembly, conventions (Nazarene Discipleship International, Nazarene Missions International, Nazarene Youth International), and additional activities bring Nazarenes from every world region together for a time of business, celebration, and worship.

For more information on the 30th General Assembly and Conventions, click here.

The World Methodist Council Steering Committee to meet 25-26 August 2022 in Stuttgart, Germany to continue planning the 2024 Conference.

For Conference information click on the link below....

http://worldmethodistconference.com/

Anglican Communion names next General Secretary

The Right Rev. Anthony Poggo, South Sudanese bishop who was forced with his family into exile before he was one year old, has been named as the next Secretary General of the Anglican Communion. The former Bishop of Kajo-Keji in the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, he is currently the Archbishop of Canterbury's Adviser on Anglican Communion Affairs.

Bishop Anthony was selected for his new role by a sub-committee of the Anglican Communion's Standing Committee following a competitive recruitment process led by external consultants and will take up his new role in September,

The Anglican Communion is the world's third largest Christian denomination. It comprises 42 independent-yet-interdependent autonomous regional, national and pan-national churches, active in more than 165 countries. The churches of the Anglican Communion are in communion (or relationship) with the Archbishop of Canterbury. They are structurally independent and there is no "head office".

The Secretary General of the Anglican Communion leads the staff team at the Anglican Communion Office, the international secretariat serving the four "Instruments of Communion" – sometimes called the "Instruments of Unity". These are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Lambeth Conference.

Born in 1964, in what is now South Sudan, Bishop Anthony and his siblings were taken by his father – an Anglican priest – and his mother into Uganda to flee the first Sudanese Civil War. In 1973, at the age of nine, he returned with his family to South Sudan.

Bishop Anthony said that when he was about 12, somebody shared with him the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he said. "I then took the step of accepting Christ and following him. "At the time, I thought 'my father is a priest. Why am I being asked to take this step'. But then I realised that your relationship with Christ is a personal relationship. You have to take the step of faith on your own accord rather than through your parents. Later in life I learned that God only has children; he doesn't have grandchildren – which means that you become a child of God on your own accord, not through your father and not through your mother. I have found it very important to spend time reading the Word of God, especially with my Scripture Union background, because the Word of God is an important aspect of our lives for our spiritual growth."

After graduating from Juba University with a degree in Management and Public Administration, he joined the ecumenical mission agency Scripture Union. While there he felt a need for theological training and gained an MA in Biblical Studies from the Nairobi International School of Theology in Kenya.

He then returned to Uganda to minister to Sudanese refugees with Scripture Union, the Bishop of Kajo-Keji then, the Right Rev Manasseh Binyi Dawidi, who himself was serving the Sudanese refugees in exile in Uganda asked him to consider ordination. "I said 'Yes, I would', because I was already training clergy and he felt that it would be important for me to be ordained clergy in order to train clergy."

He was ordained a Deacon in 1995 and a Priest in 1996 and continued working for Scripture Union before joining Across, a Christian mission agency working in Sudan from Nairobi, leading the charity's publishing arm. While there he studied for an MBA in publishing at Oxford Brookes University in England. He rose through the ranks at Across, eventually becoming the Executive Director of the organisation.

In 2007 he was elected Bishop of Kajo-Keji, a position he held until 2016 when he moved to Lambeth Palace to support the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, as his Adviser on Anglican Communion Affairs.

"It is a huge privilege to be appointed as the next Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, taking over from the Most Reverend Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon. His are big shoes to fill, Bishop Anthony said. One of the things that we will be focusing on from September is to support the instruments of the Anglican Communion as they implement the outcomes of the 2022 Lambeth Conference", Bishop Anthony said. "Please pray for me as I take on this role in leading the ACO team so that the Anglican Communion family will continue in its role of being 'God's Church for God's world' in such a time as this."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd and Right Hon Justin Welby, said: "I am delighted that Bishop Anthony Poggo has been appointed Secretary General of the Anglican Communion. Over the past six years he has built up an immense knowledge of our global Communion and its people as my Adviser on Anglican Communion Affairs. And in that time many people in the Communion have got to know Anthony too – and I am sure that they will join with me in welcoming his appointment."

Read more here: *https://www.anglicannews.org/*

All We Can names Spencer new Board Chair

Linbert Spencer, Officer of the Order of the British Empire, Co-founder and Chairman of The Windsor Fellowship, a national non-profit, and Co-founder of The Centre for Inclusive Leadership has been appointed Chair of the Board of Trustees for All We Can. Linbert is an accomplished international consultant, trainer, and coach who has been helping organisations and individuals to transform themselves for more than 30 years. With a background in community development, he specialises in inclusion, leadership, performance management as well as executive coaching. Linbert has facilitated learning and development seminars and workshops across more than 20 countries, including the UK.

Alongside his work in organisational transformation, Linbert has appeared in many documentary television and radio programmes including two appearances on the BBC's Question Time. He is the author of several books, including The Diversity Pocket Book and Building a Multi-ethnic Church. Linbert is also a former professional actor and television presenter, and a committed Christian. Linbert's appointment will help All We Can deepen its strong commitment to diversity and inclusion agendas. This commitment, combined with the organisation's approach to decolonised and locally-led partnerships, attracted Linbert to the role.

Linbert's expertise in this area will help All We Can as it strives to be an even more inclusive and diverse organisation, supported by a rejuvenated Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy recently adopted by the Board of Trustees. His passion for decolonised development will also ensure that this remains at the forefront of governance discussions and oversight, as well as in the daily operations of the charity.

Speaking on his appointment, Linbert said: 'It's a privilege to have the opportunity to play a role in an organisation that's engaged in actively supporting sustainable, locally-owned solutions to some of the problems faced by some of the poorest, most vulnerable and excluded people on the planet. I'm very much looking forward to doing all I can to add value to the work of the organisation and leading the Board of Trustees as we provide good governance, and support and challenge All We Can's committed, professional, and effective staff who are making a difference in the world every day through the work that they do.'

Graeme Hodge, Chief Executive, said 'As we look towards the future, we are immensely excited about the ways the All We Can movement will benefit from Linbert's wealth of wisdom, expertise, and experience – and know that under his guidance we can continue to work towards a future in which every person's potential is fulfilled.'

More information about All We Can's Board of Trustees can be found at: *https://www.allwecan.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/trustees/*

Linbert Spencer named Board Chair of All We Can Trustees

Sharing a meal with Ukrainians in Frederikshavn

In the community, Frederikshavn, in the north of Denmark, the local authorities have facilitated a website translated into Ukrainian where you can offer all sorts of activities for Ukrainians. The UMC in Frederikshavn has opened the church for prayer and a dinner together with the locals.

Some weeks ago, the first few Ukrainians turned up for the dinner, and after a few minutes they called their friends and suddenly 25 Ukrainians, mothers, and their children and 5 locals were having dinner together. Everybody was eager to share their stories and show photos from Ukraine. The mothers are very grateful for having a place where their children can play while the mothers relax over a cup of coffee and a good chat with their new Danish friends. Most of the Ukrainians live in small rooms or flats or stay as guests at friends or relatives which leaves them with very little space for privacy. The church is like a safe haven.

A week after, the Ukrainians came back in more than double numbers, a total of 43 Ukrainians and 15 members of the Frederikshavn UMC congregation. The women had planned everything for preparing a Ukrainian national dish called Varenki which everybody enjoyed. Children were playing, a woman was playing the piano, and tears were shed. Everybody prayed together for friendship and peace which is much appreciated. They ask many questions about the church, also about the UMC in Ukraine and seem eager to learn more about it.

Dinners will continue every week, and the plan is to invite the women and children for a scouting evening in Strandby.

Read more here *https://www.facebook.com/nbarea/*

United Methodists celebrate Juneteenth

Juneteenth Emancipation Day Celebration, June 19, 1900, Texas. Public domain photo via Wikimedia Commons.

On June 19, 1865, two-and-a-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, federal troops under the command of Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas. They brought a life-changing message for the estimated quarter-of-a-million slaves in the state: "All slaves are free" and entitled to payment for their labor.

This important day in history became known as Freedom Day, or Juneteenth, now a U.S. federal holiday.

Celebrating freedom

Juneteenth has special meaning for Edna Reeves, member of Warren United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas: her great-great-grandfather was freed in Texas. "He was 15 years old when freedom came," she said. Reeves recalls attending Juneteenth festivities as a child. In the early 1950s, her father's workplace would close in observation of the holiday and sponsor a day of celebration at a local park.

"[Juneteenth] has developed a sense of unity, pride and community among African Americans. … It's a time to celebrate the day our ancestors were completely released and freed from slavery," said Cliff Dobbins, a member of McMillan United Methodist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas. Dobbins took his children, and now takes his grandchildren, to Ft. Worth's festivities to teach them about the holiday's history.

Arlene Youngblood, member of Wesley United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas, shared, "Juneteenth is celebrated in a grand and glorious way, it marked a change that had to happen: slaves freed from bondage. Black Texans had a chance to chart their own course and their own futures." Youngblood participates in as many celebrations and activities as she can during the month of June, noting that slaves who migrated after receiving freedom started many of the events held across the U.S.

Commemorating Juneteenth

Celebratory events, both new and those that have become traditions, are growing, including parades, festivals, family activities and worship services, reminding all of us that freedom was long sought and should never be taken for granted.

"Juneteenth is a sacred celebration culturally and religiously. It is the same as Passover for the Jewish people," said Dr. Randy Kelley, former pastor of Goodsell United Methodist Church in Lanett, Alabama.

Dr. Kelley points out that John Wesley was an ardent abolitionist, leading many slaves to follow the Methodist tradition. Goodsell United Methodist Church was founded in 1866 by freed slaves who "hit the ground running. They were interested in God and education…a way to spiritual and social uplifting."

The church led the way in establishing their city's Juneteenth celebration, a collaboration with various civic organizations and churches. The festival was founded as an opportunity for community outreach and unification, welcoming participants from all backgrounds.

"Our theme [during Juneteenth] is not just about celebrating, we educate people about why we celebrate," he said. "We look at the past to leap forward."

Laura Buchanan works for UMC.org at United Methodist Communications. Contact her by email.

Youth raise money to supply Nicaraguan village with water

Epworth Sunday at First United Methodist Church, in the tiny town of Clover, South Carolina celebrated Epworth Children's Home and all things mission.

The church especially celebrated the conclusion of a mission project, the Youth Water Project, that began in fall 2019. The youth selected an international mission project with the church's mission partners in Nicaragua. The mission project was to supply a rural village in Wina Central with fresh water. The goal for this mission was $20,000, which was a large mission goal, but the youth were determined.

As one of the youth members remarked when the mission was selected, "Fresh water is where it all starts. Health and nutrition and the rest come later." So the youth began the Youth Water Project.

When the mission started, it was a slow process that began with offering bottles of water in the church lobby area for a donation, and other fundraising began as well. But soon COVID-19 began to impact not only the church but the mission project. Throughout 2020 into 2021, the mission project slowly moved, not really making any major headway, until spring 2021.

That is when the church lost one of it dearest and most loved members, Larry Beamguard, who passed away suddenly after a medical procedure in late winter 2021. The church called Beamguard a true example of a mission worker, and he had visited Central America several times on mission trips with the church in addition to all his contributions at the church. He was very respected and loved by all for his work and dedication.

Even though the church was dealing with COVID-19, some of the youth made attempts to meet and participate in youth group. During one of the youth meetings after Beamguard passed, the youth decided to change the Youth Water Project to the Larry Beamguard Youth Water Project. Donations in honor of Beamguard began to come in.

Before they knew it, they had reached the goal. The youth collected $20,139.05, which was sent to Acts 1:8 to begin the water project for the small community, Wina Central, off the Rio Bocay in Nicaragua. There are no roads or power in this area of the country, so the building materials were brought in by boat and the community would cut wood to frame up the concrete tank.

A freshwater spring box was built high up in the mountains, then pipes were put into the ground all the way down the mountain to the concrete water tank, which would supply water to the various homes in the community. The youth and the church received pictures of each step of the project from the contract signing with the community to the children playing in the fresh water in front of their homes.

First UMC, Clover, was truly blessed with the mission opportunity and the youth of the church that led the way. It was such a blessing to have Beamguard as a part of the congregation, and all said they have so much joy knowing that somewhere in Nicaragua there is a water tank and system with a plaque on it that tells people of the wonderful man who it was built in memory of.

He was a man who loved the missions he was a part of and was an example of mission in life.

Shore-Hollis is lay associate at First UMC, Clover.

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Please send press releases, articles and resources! Submissions should be a page or less (450-650 words), edited and ready to publish. Contact us by **Monday, July 25** at communications@worldmethodistcouncil.org if you would like your story to be included in the August edition of the ***First Friday Letter.***

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