

2019 Mountain Sky Annual Conference Report to Ogden First UMC

Presenters: Rev. Kim James (odd #s) with Victoria Hair (even #s) Lay Member to AC
Presentation Date: June 30, 2019

1—Today we're going to give you a report about the 2019 Mountain Sky Annual Conference, which was held in Billings. The Mountain Sky Conference covers all of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, plus one town in Idaho. Clergy and lay representatives from all those churches and ministries were in attendance.

2—Because our Lay Leader Chris Hicks was injured during Vacation Bible School, she didn't get to go to Annual Conference this year. Fortunately, I (Victoria) was able to go in Chris' place. Lay member Becky Buxton from First United Methodist Church of Salt Lake City rode along with us in our church van.

3—Our journey to Billings took us through the town of West Yellowstone. So we made a fun stop at the Grizzly Bear and Wolf Discovery Center. That non-profit organization rescues grizzlies that have gotten into trouble with humans and would otherwise have been killed. We enjoyed watching two of the bears dig up some food that had been hidden under rocks and logs.

4—We also got to see some wolves and a variety of birds, including these two bald eagles.

5—The annual conference was held at the Billings Hotel and Convention Center, along with the Red Lion Hotel and the Montana Convention Center, which were located nearby. Guest and meeting rooms in all three buildings were needed to accommodate our group of more than 600 people.

6—For the clergy, especially, annual conference is like a big reunion of friends and family. Here's a picture of Rev. Alane Currier-Griggs, who was the pastor here at Ogden First UMC, 1999-2013.

7—Our meetings began on Thursday morning with some pre-conference learning. Victoria and I both attended a session called "The Future of Methodism." During that early session, we heard leaders express the need to prepare for a likely split of our denomination.

8—At noon on Thursday, both of us attended a luncheon sponsored by COSROW, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women. We heard from some clergy and lay women about their experiences of combatting sexism in the church and business world.

9-- This picture shows our Bishop, Karen Oliveto, with a cardboard cut-out of Rev. William Wesley Van Orsdel, affectionately known as Brother Van. Brother Van was a Methodist minister who lived from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. He was a visionary preacher who founded most of the Methodist churches, universities, and hospitals in Montana. Together, Bishop Oliveto and Brother Van called our annual conference plenary session to order.

10—The first big item on the agenda was leadership reports. This is Matthew from Loveland, Colorado. Matthew is the President of the Mountain Sky Conference Youth Council. This high school student gave a heart-felt speech about how the decision of the February General Conference has damaged the youth of our churches. Matthew believes that God's church should reflect the diversity of all God's children.

11—Then we heard from the three adult Lay Leaders of our conference. I especially liked Gayla Slauson's talk. Gayla, in the red, is a college professor from Grand Junction, CO. She spoke about how she loved a house where she and her family used to live. She was reluctant to leave it. But eventually she grew to love her new home. Gayla indicated that her experience with changing houses could be a metaphor for the changes our denomination is under-going. We may find change difficult, but—if God builds the new house—it will be good.

12—Next up was an invited guest speaker. J.J. Warren is from upstate New York. He just graduated from college this spring and is enrolled this fall at Boston School of Theology. He plans to get his Master of Divinity degree and become an ordained minister. J.J. became well known in United Methodist circles after his impassioned speech at the February General Conference. As you can tell from his rainbow colored garb, J.J. is a supporter of expanding LGBTQ rights in the church. J.J. preached to us from Acts 10, the Bible story that tells how God opened Peter's mind to include more people in God's salvation.

13—Bishop Karen Oliveto then gave her state-of-the church address. She affirmed what so many of us have been feeling. The United Methodist Church as we knew it died at the General Conference in February. But, she assured us, we Christians believe that, when there is death, there is also the possibility of resurrection. Bishop Karen made it clear that she will do all in her power to protect LGBTQ persons from harm. She indicated that United Methodists around the U.S. and the world are asking us in the Mountain Sky Conference to be leaders for the church.

14—On Thursday evening, after our District dinners, we broke up into separate clergy and laity sessions. While the clergy were introduced to new candidates for ministry, we heard speeches from the lay candidates for General and Jurisdictional Conferences. We also heard a talk from Rev. Junius Dotson, who is the leader of the United Methodist Discipleship Ministries. He talked about what it means to make disciples for Jesus Christ in a changing world. He said we need to stop thinking that discipleship means more programs and activities at the church and realize that discipleship that works today is more about relationships in the community.

15—On Friday morning, we were back in plenary session, engaging the theme of our conference which was healing sickness and brokenness. First we heard from Rev. Calvin Hill, a Navaho who is the pastor of the Blackfeet Parish in Browning, Montana. Calvin spoke to us about God's love which gives worth to all persons.

16—Then we heard from Rev. Yvette Christy about our need to be in ministry with those who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Speaking from her own experiences, Yvette told us that this isn't a ministry for the faint-hearted. Our faith can't be in our own helping skills or in the addict's ability to recover, she said. Our faith must be in God.

17—Chiming in next was Rev. Ryan Canaday from St. Luke's UMC in Highlands Ranch, CO. He admitted to us that he is an alcoholic, whose last drink was in 2013. Ryan spoke of the ministry he started at his church that meets every Saturday evening at 7:30. Those persons with addictions meet together because they know that isolation and secrets make and keep people sick. Ryan told us that addiction affects more Americans than heart disease, diabetes, and all other major health problems. He asked us to stand if we were impacted by anyone who was addicted. That turned out to be most of us in the room.

18—Once we were inspired for our ministries of healing, we were blessed and sent out to do a variety of mission projects around Billings. I (Victoria) went to the Billings Food Bank and did

19-- I (Rev. Kim) went to Billings First United Methodist Church, where we expected to package food for homeless students. It turned out that our group didn't do that, as the program had enough food kits made up already. But we did hear an interesting talk about the challenges homeless students face.

20—After the mission projects, we returned to the plenary session.

21—Bishop Gregory Palmer was our guest preacher for Friday afternoon worship. Bishop Palmer has served as bishop for a number of conferences in the North Central Jurisdiction. He also served on the Commission on a Way Forward, and he serves on a committee to find unity with the Episcopal Church.

21 (continued)—Bishop Palmer preached enthusiastically on the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. He said that the Holy Spirit has always been multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-national, multi-racial, multi-whatever. God's vision is always bigger than ours. We shouldn't worry about immigrants and new people coming in, he said. We should embrace them! What miracles would unfold if we would go along with the Holy Spirit!

22—After the Friday evening Missions Dinner, we all went outside for the Tug-o-Love. You can see that there were four different teams to start (orange, blue, purple, and green). This event raised \$8607. Part of that money will go to local suicide prevention ministries. Another part of it will fund the salaries of United Methodist pastors in East Angola. Because of this Tug-o-Love, several East Angola pastors will receive salaries of \$50/month that they wouldn't otherwise have.

23—(Watch and hear video of Tug-o-Love)

24—On Saturday morning, I got up early and went to the United Methodist Women's breakfast. Mission u was promoted there, including the one we will host here at our church on August 10.

25—After breakfast on Saturday, we all headed to our particular Legislative Committees. There we dealt with petitions that had been submitted. My committee voted on petitions regarding clergy and conference staff compensation. A third petition directed the conference leadership to form a team to plan for various future denominational contingencies.

25 (continued)—Other petitions had to do with payments of Mission Shares and selling off a camp property.

25 (continued)—The Traditional Plan came up in one petition, and the vote was more than 97% for non-compliance with the "punitive and exclusionary policies . . . against gay and lesbian persons . . . or their friends."

26—Then we were back to worship again. Rev. Junius Dotson told how he was a gung-ho pastor of a dynamic and growing church until one day he collapsed in the middle of a funeral he was conducting. His doctor diagnosed him with "extreme fatigue." Rev. Dotson couldn't work while he had to walk through that dark valley. He confessed that it was in that dark valley that he found out how much he needed to pray and how much he needed God's grace. He said he found out that you can't just talk

about God. You actually have to take time to talk *with* God. He reminded all us clergy and lay leaders that our first responsibility is to care for and heal our own souls, for it takes spiritually healthy people to grow healthy churches.

27—After worship, we got busy voting. We had to elect clergy and lay delegates to the May 2020 General Conference and July 2020 Western Jurisdictional Conference. Clergy voted for clergy, and laity voted for laity. We took some initial rounds of balloting in the morning.

28—Then we broke for lunch. While I (Victoria) went to the Laity Lunch, Rev. Kim went to the clergy retiree lunch. Rev. Dennis Shaw on the right is retiring from Hilltop UMC in Sandy.

29—On Saturday afternoon, the bishop and district superintendents read the appointments, and everyone prayed blessings on the clergy who were being deployed to their mission stations.

30—Later on Saturday afternoon, there was a worship service that memorialized the clergy and clergy spouses who had died in the past year. The use of handheld candles made the service special.

31—On Saturday evening, Victoria and I attended the Reconciling Ministries dinner. J.J. Warren and others invited us to keep on opening our hearts and our churches to those persons God is calling to serve in ministry and as valued persons in the church.

32—It seemed no small thing that the rainbows weren't only inside the conference center but also in the sky outside.

33—After dinner, we were called back to an extended business session because we had more voting to do. Finally, our votes started reaping results.

34—The first clergy and lay delegates elected were from the legacy Yellowstone Conference.

35—Then, from Rocky Mountain Conference, sufficient votes came in to elect Rev. Jasper Peters and lay person Harvey Tukutau.

36—After many more ballots, Legacy Rocky Mountain voters elected Rev. Kent Ingram and Lay Leader Gayla Slauson. That was all for General Conference, but many more persons needed to be elected for the Western Jurisdictional Conference. Voting continued past midnight.

37—Annual Conference culminated on Sunday morning with the service of Ordination. Because of the red spotlights, it looked like everyone had the Holy Spirit fire of Pentecost falling on their heads. One of the newly ordained clergy was Rev. Cherie Cobb, who is the pastor at Mountain Vista UMC in West Jordan.

38—When Annual Conference was over, we said good bye to friends, wishing them God's blessings in ministry and in life.