

SERMON TITLE: "The Journey Is Our Home"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 4:1, 6-18; 5:1, 6-8
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James (in tandem with Lay Leader Chris Hicks)
OCCASION: November 7, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Standing beside me here today is Chris Hicks. For six years, Chris has been our church's Lay Leader and dynamo cheerleader. For seven years, she has also been our Lay Member to Annual Conference. Over those years, you could say that Chris has become a lay expert in the local church and the United Methodist connection. Because of increased family responsibilities, Chris is going to pass her batons to Tim Conrad for next year. But, before she does that, she's going to give one more Annual Conference report with me. Thank you, Chris, for your service to God through First United Methodist Church and the United Methodist connectional ministry. I know it has been a labor of love for you. And, for me, it's been a lot of fun having you along for the journey.

That said, I'm now going to turn our Annual Conference report over to ^{Chris} ~~me~~ to tell the congregation what happened first, as the 2021 Mountain Sky Conference began online over Zoom on Thursday evening, October 21.

1—CHRIS—Report on Laity Session

2—REV. KIM—Report on Bishop's Address

Thanks, Chris, for telling us what happened at the Laity Session on Thursday evening. On Friday morning, the laity and clergy were all together on Zoom when we were introduced to the theme of this year's Annual Conference, as Bishop Karen Oliveto gave her state-of-the-conference-address. Her scriptural text was from 2 Corinthians 4 and 5. Like the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, we in the Mountain Sky Conference have been engaged in ministry in a difficult time. Under the duress of the COVID pandemic, we have been afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus. By God's grace, however, we have not been crushed, driven to

despair, forsaken, or destroyed. Walking by faith, “we do not lose heart.” The key verse of Bishop Oliveto’s address was 2 Corinthians 5:1—“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

The pandemic certainly upset the routine of our local churches and caused us to lose individual people that we know and love. But that hasn’t been our only disruption in recent years. Bishop Karen also reminded us that it wasn’t that long ago that we dismantled the old structures of the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain Conferences. Ever since our two conferences voted to merge in 2018, we’ve been trying to build and inhabit the new house of God known as the Mountain Sky Conference. Like all major changes, that rebuilding hasn’t been easy, and COVID has made it much harder. Since we weren’t able to gather together in person in 2020 or 2021, the union of the two conferences kind of feels like a couple that got married, went on their honeymoon, and then had to live apart for two years because of a military deployment. The extended family met at the wedding, but hasn’t had much opportunity to get acquainted since then. It’s no overstatement that the Mountain Sky Conference family got off to a rough start.

But, believing that the journey is our home, and that we’re all pilgrims on a spiritual path to God’s eternal home in the heavens, we keep trying to imagine what that good and perfect house looks like. As the Mountain Sky Conference, we try to assist in the building of a home on earth that is as close as possible to what God has in mind for us. To that end, the Mountain Sky Conference has journeyed and built together through our excellent support of missionaries around the world, through our disaster response team, through weekly online workshops on a variety of topics of interest to the local church, and through book studies on racism. The Mountain Sky Conference has provided young people’s ministries and mental health first aid training. The conference established a Stewards of Creation resource group and led a Just Love Lenten series. Our conference has been building a strong fiscal foundation through monthly Responsible Stewardship trainings for local church treasurers and pastors. As a means to reduce costs, the conference also decided to sell the conference office, and rent a much

smaller space in a nearby church. Additionally, our partner organization, The Methodists Helping Methodists Foundation, offered grants to local churches for new ministries. By providing all these resources and educational trainings to local church leaders, the Mountain Sky Conference has served the local church and joined us together to build a house where love can dwell, and where all are welcome. Bishop Karen closed her address by quoting the lyrics to the song which we will sing toward the end of our worship service today.

3—CHRIS—Report on Rev. Grace Imathiu Bible Study

4—REV. KIM—GC and Petitions about Protocol of Separation & Grace and Christmas Covenant

Even as we're on the journey and trying to find that perfect home, we United Methodists have to admit that our treasure is in clay jars; that we walk by faith, and not by sight; and that we are afflicted in many ways. One of the big afflictions of the United Methodist Church is the disagreements we've been having over LGBTQ issues of human sexuality.

At the General Conference in 2016, our United Methodist denomination nearly split. You may recall that, in order to hold the denomination together, a lot of negotiating and praying was done. Still, we ended up with a specially-called General Conference in 2019, which produced results that were unsatisfactory to large numbers of United Methodists. After that, we hoped for resolutions at General Conference 2020. Due to COVID, however, that General Conference was postponed to 2021, and then again to 2022. Now, there is serious doubt that all the international delegates will be able to come to the United States even in 2022. With each delay, anxiety rises.

Whenever the General Conference is able to meet again, there are two major proposals that might help us find a way out of this impasse. At our Mountain Sky Annual Conference, we were asked to give our support to our General Conference delegation to vote in favor of both of those proposals.

The first proposal is known as The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation. That protocol would make it financially possible for some United Methodist conferences and local

churches to split away either because they take a more traditional or a more liberal stance on LGBTQ issues. “The Global Methodist Church” has been proposed as a conservative breakaway denomination. “The Methodist Liberation Connexion” has been proposed as a progressive alternative.

The second proposal we were asked to endorse is called The Christmas Covenant. The Christmas Covenant tries to hold together the world-wide United Methodist umbrella denomination by forming regional areas which are more self-determining. To a certain extent, such culturally-appropriate, self-determination has already been allowed for United Methodist regions outside the United States. The Christmas Covenant would extend that cultural sensitivity and self-determination to a U.S. regional body.

While different in significant ways, both of these major proposals seek to keep Christian harmony through varying degrees of separation and independence. Our Mountain Sky Conference delegates endorsed both proposals by votes of about 87%.

5—CHRIS—Report on Missions

REV. KIM—CONCLUSION

Normally, one of the final acts of annual conference is the declaration of when and where the next annual conference will be held. Because there are so many pandemic variables, however, no such announcement was made this time. Will it be in June, like usual? Will it be in person, like it has been in the past? Or will we have another digital annual conference at an odd time of year? We don't know yet. So stay tuned. When we find out, we'll let you know! In the meantime, please feel free to go to the Mountain Sky Conference website to find out about the many classes and groups that are meeting online, and the many resources for our local ministry. As the theme of our conference indicated, we're on a journey together, and—for now, at least—the journey is our home.

Hi! I'm Chris Hicks, First UMC Lay Member to annual conference

1) LAITY SESSION

The first thing that happened at Annual Conference was the Laity Session on Thursday night. (And Bishop Karen joined us too!) We heard from the conference co-lay leaders: (Nancy Flint, Barry Welliver & Gayla Jo Slauson), who discussed the Board of Lay Ministry and what entities fall under it, including United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women. The UMW shared an incredible video on how much is done when they... "put faith, hope & love into action"!

The speaker and author, a lay member herself, Dr Ann A. Michel, took us through some leadership break out times, as she spoke to us. She wanted us to concentrate on synergy, or the way in which we lead by inclusivity, and empowerment bringing clergy and laity together in partnership. One of her books entitled, Synergy: A Leadership Guide for Church Staff and Volunteers, is recommended reading within the Mountain Sky Conference.

Dr Michel will be a part of Mtn Sky Conf Vital Conversations on Nov 18th catch her there!

#3 REV GRACE IMATHIU...

Was Saturday morning's Keynote speaker. Energetic and hard charging, Rev Grace thinks "the world is her parish". And, did you know she is the pastor of Paul Kriekard's sister? Ask him about it? Originally from Kenya, she was the *travel agent* for The Journey Is Our Home. Rev Grace talks about embracing, befriending and loving the journey. We should always be ready to move like Abraham and Sarah. In preparing to move, we need to think about all the stuff we will get rid of and what we will take with us. On our breakout sessions, she asked us to think like our church... What 3 things will we put out in the yard sale? What 3 things will we pack for the journey? Wow were the responses vast and varied! Just think about it –mind boggling, right?

So...Rev Kim and I got thinking what would the Mountain Sky Conference put out in the yard sale? Or, better yet, First UMC, what will you have in your yard sale?

#5 MISSION OPPORTUNITIES AND CAMPS

All throughout annual conference, we viewed video vignettes of camps and mission opportunities, in various states. WOAH! Do we have a bunch?! Here are some examples:

Pinecliff (which we know and have experienced), Circle J Camp, Grand Mesa Camp, Flat Head Camp, Buckhorn Camp, Eagle Creek Camp, etc. Most of these camps provide chances to serve the adjacent community and participate in various missions. A little research will help our church figure out what camp/mission/age range might be appropriate for us. And we can also go into Mission & Ministry at mtnskyumc.org to see the lists and points of contact, including...

AMANDA DANIELL...

Who is the Mountain Sky Conference Coordinator of Young People's Ministries and Camping Ministry. She and her staff have a new concept in doing missions! They want anybody (especially youth) to be able to connect with any service project/mission, in any area of our conference, at any time, with people of their same age group. It's still in the planning stages; but sounds GURREAT!