

"WHAT HAPPENED AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE"

INTRODUCTION Every June since 1957 I have attended the annual conference session of the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. It's usually a Thursday to Sunday gathering in the second week of June and it brings together ministers and laymen from some 450 churches - Methodist Churches - in the New York Conference.

The New York Annual Conference takes in the area from Staten Island right up the Hudson River - both banks of the Hudson - to the area just south of Albany. It takes in the area from the East River out to Montauk - the tip of Long Island. It also swings up through Connecticut, from Greenwich to Hartford. It's urban, sub-urban and rural and some 200,000 Methodists are a part of it.

AN ANNUAL CONFERENCE I've been to many a Methodist Conference, probably close to 35 if you include those I attended when I was a teen-ager living upstate and thinking in terms of the ministry. It's always exciting, full of good fellowship, emotion, rhetoric, humor and faith.

I'm reminded of a story that I heard recently about a little girl who was sent to her Annual Conference. She set out with anticipation and dread, curious to know what an Annual Conference was and not sure if she would recognize it or like it when she found it.

She soon overtook a group of travelers and asked them if they had ever seen an Annual Conference. They all said they had and were eager to tell her what it was like.

"Annual Conference is like a camel" said one person. "It has been patched together every which way, its parts don't seem to belong together or look like they can function in harmony. But, for the long haul through dessert terrain, it's the best thing we've got."

"No" insisted another, "Annual Conference is like an elephant. It's practically impossible to get it to move at more than a snail's pace and once it does get moving, getting it to change direction takes courage and strength. However, when it makes up its mind where it wants to go, there's practically no stopping it."

"I think it's more like a giraffe" chimed in another traveler. "Its head is always up in the clouds and it never seems to take heed of the grass roots. On the other hand, the giraffe is great for breadth of vision and taking the long view."

"The Annual Conference is more like a great seal to me" said yet another traveler. "Many think it's rather ugly and that it's not very efficient in getting around on land. But only death can keep it from returning to the place of its birth, to participate in the continuing cycle of life and growth."

The travelers continued their lively debate as they walked along, each one having a different animal to suggest. The little girl became more and more confused. Finally, they rounded a bend and saw the Annual Conference spread out before them. The little girl exclaimed in amazement, "You are all right!"

"The Annual Conference is like a zoo!" It's a camel, an elephant, and giraffe and a great seal.

It can be awkward and clumsy, hard to move and direct, visionary and out of touch, ugly and struggling. But it also has the possibility of faithfulness and stamina for the long journey. It represents to me some powerful motivation and has a strong sense of direction. There can be hopeful vision of the future right along with the life-enchanting regular return to celebrate the connection we have with other churches and people called United Methodist.

OUR LAY REPRESENTATIVES Our Church was represented by two lay delegates and we are asking them to share with you this morning some of their impressions of the conference....what they saw and felt...what touched them.

I think it's important to have this "feed-back" and I'm sure that you'll find their observations to be interesting and down-to-earth and heart-warming.

First, Joyce Veenstra Gartrell is going to speak. Joyce is Chairperson of our church's "council on Ministries". Then, Shiro Oda, chairperson of our Ecumenical Concerns committee and former chairperson of our Vietnamese Friends Committee will share his thoughts.

I present them to you at this time: Joyce Gartreel. Shiro Oda.

*Ruth Frame - Christine Brewell DEACONESSE: -
JM.*

FOLLOW-UP Something that Bishop Roy Nichols said recently has been in my thoughts here this morning as we have listened to Joyce and Shiro. He said, "It's in the local church where the wheels of faith hit the road".

And how true it is. This is the place where it all happens - where the concerns and decisions and positions and programs enacted at a United Methodist Annual Conference find their meaning, their relevance and their application. This is where we bring it down "out of the clouds" and put it into operation.

One of the meaningful popular songs of recent years has been the song, "People". I would summarize our 1982 conference session "People and Peace". It was the story and the song of people - a "rainbow of people" with a story and a song in their hearts. There is a richness in the diversity of people that gather together in a session of the NY Annual Conference - here more than any other conference in the UM Church. It was the song and story of friends and colleagues in ministry celebrating together the mystery of Christ's love and his presence in our lives. How blessed we are!

*PEOPLE
PEACE*

and to leave you with a challenge...

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION In thinking how to bring this report and "Feed-back" sermon to a fitting conclusion I found myself thinking of an imaginary conversation that's reported to have taken place between Jesus and the angel Gabriel, after the ascension. Gabriel is asking Jesus what plan He has made for completing his work of telling everyone on earth about God's love. Jesus answered Gabriel,

"I asked Peter and James and John and some more of them back on earth to make it the business of their lives to tell others. And the others are to tell others and the others still others until every man has heard the message and had his life transformed by it."

Gabriel stood in meditation as though he saw a flow in the plan of the Master. He said,

"Yes...but Master....suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses his enthusiasm. And what if their successors down in the 20th century get so busy or so timid that they do not have the time nor the inclination or courage to tell others. What will you do then?"

It's reported that the voice of Jesus answered quietly and confidently, "I haven't made any other plans, Gabriel. I'm counting on them!"

Jesus is counting on each of us to share His message ~~and spread His way~~ through word and through deed. It's "in the local church where the wheels of faith hit the road". The challenge is to each of us.

LET US PRAY

How better to express it than in the prayer of St. Francis:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sew love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console. To be understood as to understand. To be loved as to love.

For, it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.