

Texas Annual Conference 2018—Highlights

The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church took place at The Woodlands UMC May 27-30, 2018. The Theme was **We Love All God's Children**. It was led by Bishop Scott J. Jones and well attended by about 1,000 Clergy and 1,000 Lay Delegates and many more staff, volunteers, visitors and members. The following are highlights of the Conference:

1. The Opening Celebration was at 7:00 p.m. Sunday in the sanctuary, with an overflow audience in the Harvest Worship Center. An 84-member choir from the Windsor Village Church Family Worship and Arts Ministry participated along with 17 Praise Dancers and a 32-member Youth Choir from St. Paul's UMC.
2. Bishop Scott J. Jones gave the Bishop's Episcopal Address, titled "**The Main Thing**", which is not to be distracted, but focus on the Mission which is to Make Disciples of Jesus. A separate report on the Episcopal Address is available from the Ashford office.
3. John Esquivel, the Conference Lay Leader, noted that many volunteers were involved in the assistance and aid for Hurricane Harvey affected people, and lately, families of the Santa Fe, Texas mass shooting tragedy. We are the hands and feet of Jesus, and need to put into action what He would do. Tomorrow will be shaped by the Love we share today.
4. Rev Preston Greenwaldt, Core Leadership Team, indicated that we evaluated ourselves (The Conference) in 2005 and this resulted in implementing many improvements—like the Center for Clergy Excellence, and the Center for Congregational Excellence along with the Vibrant Church Initiative that is being done by more than 70 churches thus far. Now is time to undertake another Self-Analysis to be on the forefront of proactive action. Accordingly, a motion was made and approved to form a Strategic Mapping Team to help us move forward effectively and best serve our mission field over the next ten years.
5. The Chancellors' Report by Mary Daffin and Frank Jones was short and sweet—the Conference is in good shape, **no lawsuits pending**.
6. The Episcopacy Committee report by Karen Dorris evaluated the Bishop's work using guidelines from the Lewis Center Computer Survey which evaluated Unique Gifts (Talents), Skills/Relational Bias, ability to cast a Compelling Vision, and ways to develop Leadership. The team of 20 appointed evaluators, including a Bishop, concluded that Bishop Jones had an excellent Transition, was authentic, was a Scholar and a Teacher. Growth Areas identified: Build Work Teams; Use of Time; and Diversity and Unity (Good, and need to Continue). His Goals: Lead TAC through Turmoil; Preserve Unity; Shepherd us (We Love All God's Children Initiative); Strengthen ties with Thailand; African American Church Revival; Congregational, Clergy and Missional Excellence.
7. At the Laity Session a Panel of five experts on Children's Programs (including Bea Garza from Ashford) shared best practice experiences with the theme, We Love All God's Children. Many suggestions, including: Approach schools with the attitude, "How can we help?", work with non-profits and county health departments to offer needed services, many kids are friends of church members—welcome them, possibly join PTOs to learn the needs of the school, have a special Sunday service to celebrate teachers, school workers, bus drivers. The United Way can identify non-profits that are already doing specific work.

8. The Perkins School of Theology of Southern Methodist University now offers a program through Perkins Houston/Galveston where a student can obtain an MA in Ministry without having to reside on the SMU Dallas Campus.
9. Rev. Scott Moore, Dir. of Missional Excellence, showed a video of Hurricane Harvey Recovery efforts, presented five of his key staff members, and gave an account of the assistance provided by the Texas Annual Conference. Foundry UMC, Chapelwood and many other churches opened their doors to accommodate people and supplies. UMCOR provided 12,600 Flood Buckets (8 truckloads) and many pallets of drinking water. They also donated \$4.8 million to the TAC for the Harvey response.
10. Rev. Michelle Hall, Missions, spoke of the Book Fair, underway, to restore libraries damaged by the Harvey Flood. She introduced the Advance Special: Objective, Eliminate Illiteracy in the TAC Area. The motion was officially endorsed by the Conference.
11. The candidates to be ordained were presented to the Conference: 5 Deacons and 11 Elders with Provisional status; and 5 Deacons and 8 Elders in Full Connection. They were questioned by the Bishop and affirmed by the Conference. Seven people received Professional Certifications; 5 in Youth Ministry and 2 in Christian Education and Children's Ministry.
12. The "Refresh" Program of Clergy Retreats for reaching anniversary milestones was announced. The names were scrolled on the screen quickly to save time. The program marked its 5th year of operation as well. Also, 9 College Summer Interns were introduced.
13. The Heartspring Methodist Foundation and the Texas Methodist Foundation announced that they are combining together under the name of the Texas Methodist Foundation.
14. Rev. Deborah Vaughan, Chair of the Committee on Finance and Administration, introduced the 2019 Budget of the Texas Annual Conference. It is \$21,896,944, a 5.19% reduction from the 2018 Budget. It was approved by a voice vote. Separately, a special study committee evaluated the impact of the existing Apportionment Formula and surveyed Conference respondents. They recommended that the formula remain as it is (no vote needed).
15. Dr. Stansell, Conference Treasurer, indicated that there are no exceptions in the Conference financial statements. The Conference is solvent and debt free.
16. The 2018 retirement class of 26 Conference Pastors includes Rev. Ernie Turney, and our own Rev. Hazel Jackson of Ashford UMC.
17. The Reports on Group Health Benefits, and Pensions, pages 63-98 in the Pre Conference Journal were approved by voice votes of Conference attendees.
18. The Conference Keynote Presentation was given by Mr. Neil Bush, Chairman of the Points of Light Board and Dr. Julie Baker Finck, President of the Barbara Bush Houston Literary Foundation. Seven million children in Texas are under 18 years old, and about one quarter of them live in poverty. Two out of five fail the third grade reading test. Texas is ranked 43rd in the states (out of 50) for economic well-being of children. Their goal is to break the cycle of low literacy—read proficiently by 3rd Grade. 90% of brain development occurs by age 5. Yet the qualification to teach child care is only 24 hours—it is not enough. Some kids are already two grades behind by age 5. Schools are struggling to get kids back on track, because they are four times more likely to drop out of school if they fail the 3rd grade reading test. What can you do? You can make a meaningful difference by making books available to children. 61% of low

income families have no books in the home! Mentoring works—it has a 95% success rate, and only takes 30 minutes, once per week. Reading is the best predictor of proficiency—host a reading program during the Summer. Other ideas are, Host Book Clubs, start Early Childcare, and sponsor group parenting sessions.

19. A few Retirement Videos were shown during non-business time, and seemed to be not as prominently displayed as in recent years. For a look at the Retirement Videos, including those of Ernie Turney and our own Pastor Hazel Jackson, look up www.txcumc.org/2018retirees.
20. The four Resolutions (pp35-41) voted on at the Conference were given at different times, debated extensively, and voted on by paper ballot, with results communicated later. The resolution to suspend rules to consider General Conference Resolutions at the General Conference needed a 2/3 affirmative vote but got only 54%, therefore failed. The Resolution on Affirmation of the Movement of the Holy Spirit... p35, failed by a 391/782 vote. For results of the last two resolutions, Gracious Accommodation, and Heart and Mind Listening Sessions, please check the Conference web site.
21. The Conference Director of Development, Mary Linda Portner, at a new position created October 2017, is seeking to acquire \$5 million to complete funding of the Pastoral Leadership Programs (endowment). They received a \$500,000 challenge grant towards the Emerging Leaders fund from The Woodlands UMC. Also received was \$500,000 from the Greater Houston Community Foundation for Hurricane Relief. Smaller grants have been received and more are sought for other needs.
22. The next year 2019 Texas Annual Conference will be held at the Marriott of the Americas in downtown Houston. More information on this, and other videos are available for viewing on the Conference website www.txcumc.org/. A copy of the Pre-Conference Journal will be available for reference in the Ashford UMC church office.

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Bishop's Episcopal Address

On Sunday May 27, 2018, Bishop Scott J. Jones addressed the Texas Annual Conference gathered in the sanctuary of The Woodlands United Methodist Church at 7:00 p.m. for the Opening Ceremony celebrating the 2018 Conference. The title of his presentation was, "**The Main Thing.**"

He started with quoting Ephesians 4:1-7, Unity and Maturity in the Body of Christ, and vs 11-16, that we be not swayed by false interpretations, but speak the truth in love. He maintained that we should remain focused on Making Disciples of Jesus Christ, and not be sidetracked by petty skirmishes that distract us from our main mission. In other words, "**the main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing.**" He described Making Disciples as a four-fold process: Evangelize everybody, bring them into the fold, nurture people in Christian Love, and be compassionate.

He declared that the four Words to live by are **Love, Unity, Truth, and Ministry**. He gave an example with Chapelwood UMC who formed the Chapelwood Navy, with volunteers in boats who rescued people caught in the Harvey flood waters. Regarding the first word Love, **Love All God's Children**. Offer programs like health, literacy, and discipleship. It is easier to invite the children in than adults. We should help children read at grade level by grade 3. We just need to live into our Methodist DNA. Bishop Jones mentioned a pathway offered by Cedar Creek Lake UMC that includes a weekend feeding program, mentoring/reading, treating kids with dignity, stocking a food pantry, offering Summer programs with other churches, getting everyone involved, partnering with a Baptist church to offer mid week programs.

The second word, **Unity**, merits our special attention as there is serious contention in the Methodist Church at this time. Think creatively about what Unity means. Through the years we have had serious divisions in the Church caused by challenges from people who could not reconcile differences; the Reformation, splits with the Lutherans, AME, AME Zion, CME, and others. We need to learn to live together with dignity. Let us pray for the delegates of the next Methodist General Conference, in February 2019.

The third word; we need to speak the **Truth** in love. Do not avoid discussion when there is disagreement. In that case, we should engage more, not less. How do you speak the truth in love? You should speak your convictions, but with humility. To some, the idea that "I might be wrong" is disturbing, but nobody is infallible. Keep that in mind in conflict discussions.

The fourth word is **Ministry**. It is every Christian's responsibility. How do we build up the Body of Christ? Remember that we are not in this task alone. He is there to help us accomplish God's purpose. The Bishop shared with Conference attendees that he had a challenge of negativity in his life in November 2017 that he was able to overcome with the grace of God. We all need to face credible opportunities to love God and to love our neighbors.

The Bishop's Episcopal Address was warmly received by all in attendance.