

“Write the vision clearly on the tablets, that one may read it on the run.” – Habakkuk

# THE VISION

The Newspaper  
of the New York  
Annual Conference  
of The United  
Methodist Church

January 2017



## Finding Ways To Connect People to Purpose

These last few months have been a whirlwind of activity for me as I have been blessed to travel into every district visiting and (prayerfully) assisting churches. One of the most common themes I'm encountering is the concern over declining membership in our churches. What is surprising is the opinion held by some that the people "out there" (that is, those of us "out there") have no need and/or time for those of us "in here."

So, what are we doing to make our churches relevant to the people out there? (I just know someone is asking that very question!)

I read and hear plans that include major building renovations or repaving and relining the parking lot. I read and hear plans that include rearranging the pulpit and/or the style(s) and time(s) of worship. I read and hear plans that address the symptoms, but are (in my humble opinion) missing the real root of the problem. I once heard it said—and have found it to be true—that "worship or praise without community engagement is entertainment, and community engagement without worship is charity."

So what are we doing to make our churches relevant to the people out there?

I would suggest we seek to connect people to purpose. By that, I mean providing the "space" for people to discern their purpose—where we fit in God's plan ... where God is moving us ...

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## BISHOP'S CONVOCATION

# A Time to Learn, Engage

BY JOANNE S. UTLEY

Editor, *The Vision*

In what was framed as a time of "getting to know one another," some 130 clergy and spouses joined Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton for the conference's annual bishop's convocation. The group returned to the Villa Roma Resort in the Catskills on January 10–12 to relax, re-connect and worship.

Bishop Bickerton, who became the episcopal leader of the New York Area on September 1, told the group that their time together would be a mix of things—some teaching, some introduction, and some visioning. He shared about his upbringing, and the role his parents—and particularly his grandfather—had on his faith and early ministry.

Three of the sessions also drew on information from the bishop's book, *What Are We Fighting For? Coming Together Around What Matters Most.*

"I'm a bit of an open book," he said. "I like being transparent." He noted that he and



Rev Gabriel Akinbode and his wife, Grace, share their passion for singing during the Wednesday night talent show.

the cabinet and extended cabinet have been "discovering what their life together" will look like. He stressed their covenant to work together as a team, and said some of that same

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Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton speaks about his personal theology, and his hopes for the conference.



For a full lineup of events, go to: [www.nyac.com/conferencecalendar](http://www.nyac.com/conferencecalendar).

### **2/6–10 Clergy/Spouses Health Clinic**

There is one space available for a woman in this health clinic and seminar at New York–Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital (formerly New York Methodist Hospital). Overnight accommodations and virtually all expenses beyond a \$50 registration fee are covered by the hospital. Give yourself this gift to check out your health. Find the [details](#) on the NYAC website, or contact coordinator, Rev. [Elizabeth Braddon](#) by email, or at 203-481-2789.

### **2/18–25 WV Disaster Recovery Trip**

The torrential rains and flash flooding of June 23 left in its wake more than 4,000 homes and businesses damaged or destroyed and at least 1,800 West Virginians without a home. This is a mission opportunity. Please contact Ross Porter at [wrporter115@verizon.net](mailto:wrporter115@verizon.net) if you are interested in participating in this mission opportunity.

### **2/25–26 BMCR Weekend**

The weekend theme is “How to Build the Beloved Community—Moving Beyond Racism, Classism and Sexism.” A panel discussion will be held from 9 a.m. to 12 noon on Saturday. At 3 p.m. Sunday, Bishop Tracy S. Malone of the East Ohio Conference will preach and Bishop Thomas Bickerton will preside over Holy Communion. A meal will follow. [Register](#) online by February 13 for this event at Crawford Memorial UMC, 3757 White Plains Rd., Bronx, N.Y.

### **3/23 Pre-Retirement Seminar**

Check the conference calendar for additional details about this [event](#) scheduled from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Contact is [Sally Truglia](#).

### **4/22 Disaster Response Forum**

Greg Forrester, president and CEO of National VOAD, will be the featured speaker at this one-day forum, “When Disaster Strikes—the Church Responds.” The 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. forum will be held at the White Plains Conference Center. Presentation topics will include the role of the church in a disaster, understanding the big picture, and toward a district-based disaster response ministry. Breakout sessions planned are ERT recertification class, nuts and bolts of leading a response team, caring for the community and developing care ministries.

### **4/24–28 Clergy/Spouses Health Clinic**

Active clergy and/or their spouses are eligible for this health clinic and seminar at New York–Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital (formerly New York Methodist Hospital). Overnight accommodations and virtually all expenses beyond a \$50 registration fee are covered by the hospital. Give yourself this gift to check out your health. Find the [details](#) on the NYAC website, or contact coordinator, Rev. [Elizabeth Braddon](#) by email, or at 203-481-2789.

### **5/20 Missional Community Engagement Forum**

Douglas Powe, author of “Transforming Community,” will facilitate this 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. training event at the Dorral Arrowwood Conference Center, 975 Anderson Hill Rd., Rye Brook, N.Y. David Gilmore, director of congregational development and revitalization, is the contact. The fee per person is \$55; [register](#) online.

### **6/7–10 2017 Annual Conference**

Stay tuned for more details about this [event](#) for laity and clergy at Hofstra University on Long Island.

### **Vision Deadlines for 2017**

The Vision is a monthly online publication of the New York Conference. Deadlines are always the first Friday of the month, with posting to the web site about 10 days later. Deadlines for 2017 are: February 3, March 3, April 7, May 5, June 2, July 7, August 4, September 1, October 6, November 3, and December 1. Please send any stories, photos, ideas, or questions directly to [vision@nyac.com](mailto:vision@nyac.com).


 <p>The <b>Vision</b></p> <p>The News of the New York Conference of the United Methodist Church</p>
<p>Bishop: <b>Thomas J. Bickerton</b>          Editor: <b>Joanne Utley</b>          New York Conference of The United Methodist Church          20 Soundview Avenue, White Plains, NY 10606          Phone (888) 696-6922          Fax (914) 615-2244; Website: <a href="http://www.nyac.com">www.nyac.com</a>          Vision e-mail: <a href="mailto:vision@nyac.com">vision@nyac.com</a></p>



PHOTO BY TIM RISS

## “Little Chapel in the Woods” Comes to Life

On December 18, 2016, the former the Westbrookville UMC was resurrected as the Westbrookville Community Chapel (UMC). Rev. Charles Ryu, center, confirmed three new members as nine others reaffirmed their baptismal vows during the service. Catskill-Hudson District Superintendent Tim Riss preached. Revs. Kevin Mulqueen and Robert Hewitt teamed up with Ryu to facilitate the revival of the church that had suspended ministry in September 2014.

## Church & Society Suggests Lenten Creation Study

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . that the world might be saved through Him . . .”*

These familiar words from the Gospel of John are often contemplated during the holy season of Lent. We know this quote. But look again—God is not giving his Son to save people or humanity, but “the world.”

This Lent, spend some time reflecting on what it means to us, as Christians, that God loves and wants to save the world. The Board of Church and Society is recommending the Bible study, “To Serve and Guard the Earth” by Beth Bojarski as a church Lenten scripture study that will help all of us come to a better understanding of the biblical underpinnings of concern for our environment and “world” and initiate practices that support creation’s sacredness.

This resource is divided into six sessions related to the seven days of creation (the second session combines Genesis days 2 and 4) and environmental concerns related to each day.

**Session 1** Day 1: Light/energy consumption, outdoor light pollution

**Session 2** Days 2/4: Sea and sky/potable water, air pollution, climate change

**Session 3** Day 3: Land and plants/

deforestation, industrialization, waste management

**Session 4** Day 5: Birds and fish/habitat destruction, species extinction

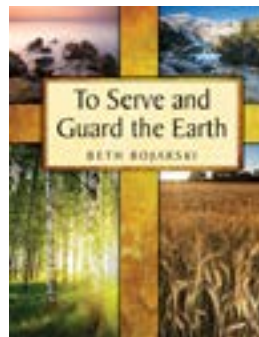
**Session 5** Day 6: Land creatures/consumption & greed, human disparity, overpopulation

**Session 6** Day 7: Rest and reflection/being content with life, the importance of rest

Although Genesis is the foundational organizing scripture of this study, each session includes discussion and references to other scripture. For example, Session 1 builds on passages from John, Matthew, Ephesians, 1 John and Psalms.

“To Serve and Guard the Earth” is available as a [downloadable pdf](#), for \$9.95, and this one download can serve an entire group. The study includes participant handouts and a leader’s guide, along with all kinds of extras including prayers and activities.

If you have any questions, contact Sheila Peiffer at [churchandsociety@nyac-umc.com](mailto:churchandsociety@nyac-umc.com) or visit their [web page](#), which also has additional resources beyond the recommended study.



## Connect People

**Continued from page 1**

what God has in mind for us—then we are on the right path to connecting people to purpose.

The days of the church dictating to the community are long gone because the church has lost touch with what the community truly needs. We believe if we feed a family or offer some slightly used clothing once a week we have met the needs of our community. However, I would offer that if we are not actually spending time in our community away from our ivory towers, meeting our neighbors where they eat, shop or even socialize, then we do not really know our neighbor or our neighbor’s needs.

I would suggest that those of us “in here” begin spending quality time around those of us “out there,” listening with a non-judgmental ear and caring heart. I would suggest making a conscious effort to become a partner with a school where we actually spend time and resources. I would suggest our pastors take our youth to visit the local fire stations, police stations and hospitals. Finally, I would suggest weekly prayer walks around the neighborhood surrounding our houses of worship.

Who knows? Doing these three things just might move us into positions to make our churches relevant to those of us “out there” and “in here.” #connecting people2purpose

*Stepping away from the window . . .*

# Believe, Market Most Relevant Message

Just recently I heard on the evening news that three retailers—Macy's, K-Mart, and Sears—were making the decision to close a large number of their stores. The rationale was based somewhat on low sales in comparison with a high volume of shopping being done online. The day after those announcements were made a story appeared on the morning news. The title of that piece was, "Is this the Death of Department Store?"

There is a clear reality facing stores that do business in a traditional fashion. People are choosing to stay at home and getting exactly what they need from their computer screen rather than going out, facing traffic, and having no assurance that they will find what they want at the price they want to pay.

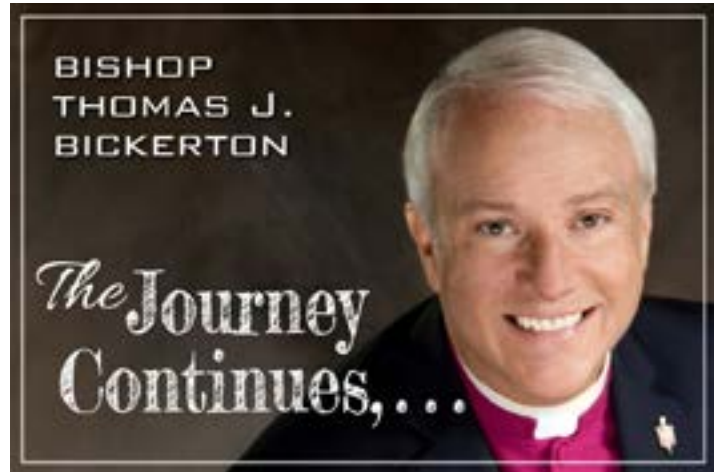
At just about the time that this news story broke, Sally and I were looking for a particular item to purchase. We found out that we could buy the exact item we wanted for one half the price online rather than the price being advertised in the store. We also discovered that we could get the item within 24 hours of pressing the "purchase" button. What we wanted, what we needed, when we needed it, and how we were going to acquire those wants and needs were being satisfied without ever having to go into a store to make a purchase! And, it all could be done at a cheaper price!

All of this has got me to thinking about the product that we offer as a church. I frequently argue that, as a church, we are the best-kept secret in our communities. We, who offer the opportunity for someone to embrace faith as their own. We, who provide an alternative word of hope and joy in the midst of the current rhetoric of fear and anger. We, who provide the consistency of relationship and the reality of love as the best "products" on our shelves. Yet, we are consistently being beat to the punch by those who are selling their products better than we are.

If you browse Facebook or Twitter, you discover that the dominant message on social media has little to do with what we are selling in our churches. If you turn on the television, you become aware that there is a different ethic and motivation in the stories being told. If you even descend into the basement of some of our homes, you quickly encounter a generation of young people sitting at a computer screen with the ability to engage with others, play games, socialize, and find "meaning" without ever having to leave their home.

All of that is to say, that it is harder today than ever to sell the product that we are advertising. We have to ask ourselves whether or not we believe enough in our message to be able to communicate it effectively in the world around us. And, if the manner in which we advertise our message is not getting the results we desire, how willing are we to change our approach so that people really, truly, deeply want what we are offering?

I am convinced that we have the best, most relevant message and theology for the world today. I am not convinced that people in the



world realize it. And I'm not convinced that we are doing our best job in marketing the message of what we sell. Could it be that we are turning out just like Macy's, K-Mart, and Sears?

In the fourth chapter of Matthew, the gospel writer used one word in the span of two verses. One word that signaled that the product was needed. One word that demonstrated that the message about that product was convincing.

What was that one word? Immediately.

Jesus offered four people a chance to change the direction of their lives when he said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:19 NRSV). We don't know the specifics of that invitation nor do we know the deep histories of the four fishermen. What we *do* know, however, is that the invitation struck a cord and the product being advertised met a need. What we *do* know is that they believed they could follow that invitation and access the product with one, quick, simple action. We know that because the scriptures say, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." (Matthew 4:20 NRSV)

What would it do to Macy's, K-Mart, and Sears if the news reported, "Immediately they left their cars and entered the store?"

What would it do to us if we could say the same, "Immediately they left their homes and came to the church?"

Market the message. Believe in it enough that people will encounter it whenever they meet you. And find a way to make it the most undeniably needed thing in a person's life.

If you do, the stores will remain open. And so will our churches.

May it be so.

*The Journey Continues, ...*

## UMM to Honor Outstanding Ministries

The United Methodist Men are seeking entrants in its third annual national contest for the most outstanding local church, district and conference ministries to men.

Wall plaques will be presented to the top five local-church ministries, the top district and the top annual conference. The top local church will receive a trophy and a wall plaque.

The deadline for entries is February 1. There is no cost to enter and there is no form to fill out. The only requirement is your group must

be currently chartered.

Simply describe the ministries, the number of people involved, the amount of money raised and to whom it was contributed, along with ways in which the ministries have made a difference in the church and community. Do not confine your report to the activities of the small group of men who engage in Bible study. The ministries encompass all the activities of men in your church, district or annual conference.

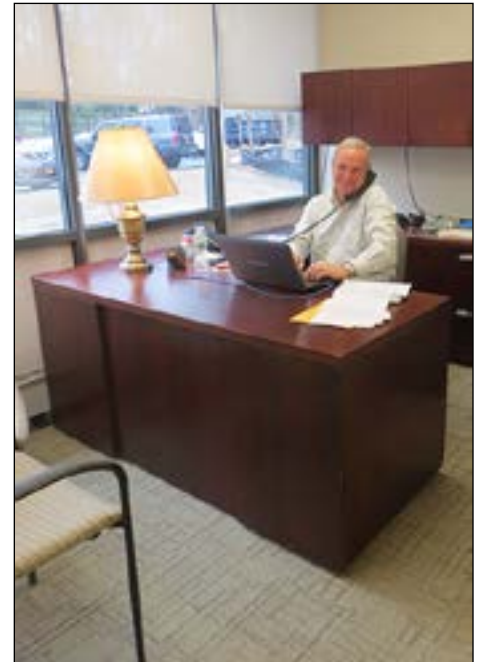
Winning entries will be announced at the

March NACP meeting in Nashville. Winning ministries will be advised in advance of the meeting so representatives may plan to personally receive the awards. Plaques and trophy may also be presented during annual conference sessions.

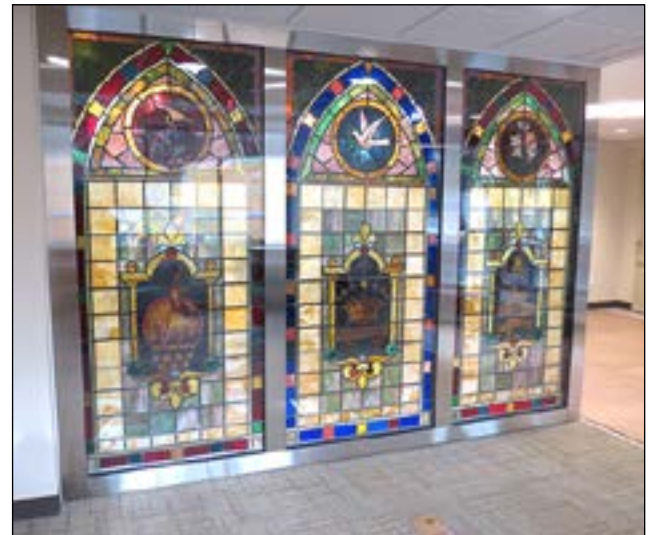
Local church, district and conference winners will be featured in the summer 2017 issue of *UM Men* magazine.

Email information and photos to [RPeck@gcummm.org](mailto:RPeck@gcummm.org).

## RETURN TO WHITE PLAINS CONFERENCE CENTER

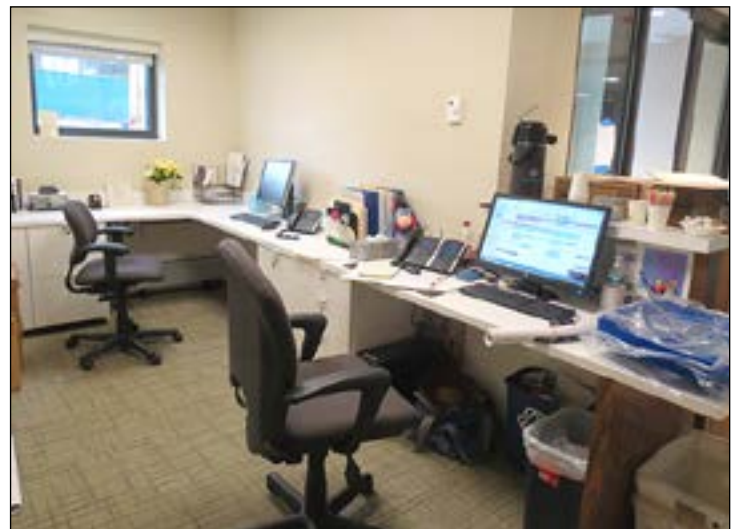


Red doors and etched glass mark the entrance; Rev. Bob Walker moves to a space right outside the bishop's office.



Sam Rosenfeld and Lynda Gomi organize a storage/resource area; reclaimed stained glass windows in the vestibule.

Administrative assistant, Cheryl Fortune, unpacks and organizes files in her new area off the bishop's office. At far right, the new reception desk is tucked into an alcove just to the right of the entrance. The staff moved back from temporary quarters in Greenwich, Conn., the week before Christmas.





Rev. T. Anne Daniel of Wakefield Grace UMC asks a question of Bishop Bickerton, at right. Below, pastors Cathy Schuyler and Dora Odarenko receive communion from Rev. Bob Walker and Pastor Ximena Varas.



## Changes in Appointment Process

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transitioning work will be done with all of the conference staff.

When he arrived to serve New York and Connecticut, “the conference office was in very small temporary space,” he said. “So we’ve all walked into the new office together. We’re all unpacking boxes together—not just me.” (The conference staff moved back into the renovated White Plains office just a few days before Christmas.)

“Our role is to facilitate the ministry of the local church,” he said. “The local church is the chief disciple-making body. Please pray for us as the staff works to accomplish that.

He shared that “my heart has been hurting of late,” in referencing the shooting of five people in the Fort Lauderdale airport. “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. It breaks my heart. The uncertainty . . . the anger and fear is everywhere. It’s in our churches too.

As Christians, “we’re called to be bearers of an alternative rhetoric,” Bickerton said. “But sometimes that rhetoric gets pierced pretty easily” leading to deep spiritual problems. In his book, he suggests that our current spiritual problem as a church might be explored by examining how effectively we deal with five “I” words: Inspiration, integration, isolation, independence and invitation.

In the second session, Bishop Bickerton announced that he would be taking those to be



ordained as elders on a Wesley heritage trip to England in April. He had established this same tradition in the Western Pennsylvania Conference.

He also shared a change to the appointment-making process. Noting that he loves appointment season, he said that clergy would be receiving a weekly list of the clear openings in the conference and could lift their own names to fill any of the positions. The initial list would reflect the churches in which the pastor has decided to retire or move onto another ministry. While the cabinet will prayerfully consider any names lifted, matching the gifts and graces needed in the church would still be the main consideration, the bishop said.

His goal is provide more transparency in this critical process of discernment.

“I understand that I have your life and

that of your family in my hands,” he said. He expressed the desire to be more relational as we yearn to be the “Body of Christ moving together toward God’s preferred future.”

Bickerton also spent some time talking about personal and practical “non-negotiables.”

“We share a covenant together,” he said . . . “we’re in this together. It’s not about you, not about me. It’s about we. How do we model being body of Christ?”

Practical “non-negotiables” for the bishop are paying 100 percent of apportionments; full clergy attendance at annual conference; safe sanctuaries where people feel loved and secure; dismantling racism, gender bias and homophobia in the NYAC; and surrendering one’s self and one’s ministry to God.

In addressing the possibility of schism in the denomination, Bickerton said, “The challenge is to embrace hope when you cannot see the way. I don’t know what the way through is, but I think there is a way through—because I believe in a God of hope.”

The bishop said he believes that there is a glorious story yet to unfold in the NYAC, but “you don’t believe in yourselves as much

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# Bishops Middleton, Dyck Rule on Questions of Law

**UMNS** | What is the role of conference boards of ordained ministry in determining whether clergy candidates meet United Methodist standards related to homosexuality and marriage?

Two bishops ruled on questions of church law stemming from that issue, meeting [the Dec. 31 deadline set by the Judicial Council](#), the denomination's top court.

Specifically, the church court required Bishop Sally Dyck, who leads the Northern Illinois Conference, and retired Bishop Jane Allen Middleton, who just completed leadership of the New York Conference, to answer two questions:

Are conference boards of ordained ministry required to ascertain whether a clergy candidate is a "self-avowed practicing homosexual?"

Can the boards legally recommend clergy candidates they believe to be in violation of denominational standards of celibacy in singleness or fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman?

In each of their rulings, both bishops took issue with the words "ascertain" and "believe."

"Members of the Board of Ordained Ministry are not required to affirmatively initiate an investigation to ascertain the sexuality of candidates for ministry, nor can they base their votes on subjective beliefs and opinions about candidates not based on fact," wrote [Middleton in a decision](#) sent to the Judicial Council on Dec. 20.

Similarly, Dyck wrote in [a decision published Dec. 31](#): "To believe something doesn't necessarily mean that one knows for certain. If someone on the Board of Ordained Ministry or in the clergy session *believes* they know something about a candidate, this is hearsay unless the candidate volunteers the information."

The board's responsibility and authority is "to be satisfied as to the 'highest ideals' of the candidates as they examine and discern their readiness and fitness for ministry," Dyck wrote.

The rulings follow last year's public announcements from the New York and Northern Illinois conference boards of ordained ministry that they would not consider sexual orientation and gender identity in the clergy candidacy process. Both conferences have long advocated for ending the denomination's restrictions related to LGBTQ individuals.

In December, Dyck ruled her conference board's statement out of order. In her order, Middleton said, "if a person being evaluated is known, by extrinsic evidence or self-admission, to be a self-avowed practicing homosexual, they cannot be commissioned or ordained under the rules of the Discipline."

The bishops' rulings are the most recent development in the denomination's intensifying debate, and the decisions are not the final word.

The Judicial Council must review all bishops' rulings of law. The court next meets in April.

## Homosexuality and ordination

[The Book of Discipline](#), The United Methodist Church's governing document, states that all individuals are of sacred worth but the practice of homosexuality "is incompatible with Christian teaching."

The denomination bans the ordination of "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy and defines marriage to be between one man and one woman. It also requires clergy to practice fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.

Under the Discipline, conference boards of ordained ministry examine clergy candidates to see if they will dedicate themselves ["to the highest ideals of the Christian life."](#)



**Bishop Sally Dyck, left, and retired Bishop Jane Allen Middleton each released rulings of law in late December 2016 stemming from questions around homosexuality and ordination requirements.**

To this end, candidates for ordination must agree to "exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to physical health, intentional intellectual development, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, integrity in all personal relationships, social responsibility, and growth in grace and the knowledge and love of God."

Conference boards evaluate candidates' responses to examinations and recommend candidates who satisfy their requirements to the annual conference clergy session. The clergy session then votes on whether the candidates meet the standards for provisional or ordained status.

## Northern Illinois and New York

At the annual meetings of the Northern Illinois and New York conferences in June, both Dyck and Middleton faced questions of law related to their respective boards' statements.

At least four other boards of ordained ministry in the United States have announced that they also will not take candidates' sexual orientation or gender identity into consideration.

In the Northern Illinois Conference, the clergy session defeated a motion that would have directed the board of ordained ministry to "maintain the minimum standard for licensed or ordained ministry" of celibacy in singleness or fidelity in heterosexual marriage.

After the motion's defeat, Dyck ruled the subsequent questions of law "moot and hypothetical."

For her part, Middleton wrote that it would be "improper" for a bishop to make a decision related to the authority "reserved to other organizations, bodies and divisions in the Constitution."

In October, the Judicial Council reversed both of their decisions and said the bishops must address "proper" questions of law.

The New York Conference in June also [approved four openly gay candidates for the ministry](#). Middleton did not address these specific cases.

Under the Discipline, it is a chargeable offense to be a "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy member. There is a complaint process, separate from the ordination process, to adjudicate chargeable offenses.

Dyck noted that in 2016 in Northern Illinois "there were no reports of candidates who by their own self-avowal (or otherwise) did not comply with the *Book of Discipline*."



**Aquatics Campers at Quinipet spend time learning about God's love through by working together as they explore the ocean.**

## Camps Show & Nurture Christian Love

**BY JANE WAKEMAN**  
Camping & Retreat Ministries

This month begins a series of articles related to the seven principles of camping and retreat ministries promoted by [The United Methodist Camp & Retreat Ministries Association](#) (UMCRM). These principles should govern camping and retreat ministries and programs, according to The United Methodist Church Discipleship Ministries. These seven principles are:



- Provide sacred spaces apart
- Nurture Christian Faith and Discipleship
- Teach creation care and appreciation
- Extend Christian hospitality and community

- Partner with United Methodist churches and agencies
- Develop principled spiritual leaders
- Inspire and equip lives for love and justice

The NYAC Board of Camping and Retreat Ministries has recently begun to explore the many ways in which our camping and retreat programming already supports these principles, and which efforts might be made to further each of these tenets of our ministry.

Each of these principles as stated seem fairly obvious, yet each contains several, deeper facets as they are developed on the UMCRM web site. For instance, the first principle, to provide sacred spaces apart includes time for Sabbath rest, to “encourage guests and participants to receive through letting go . . . to hear the Divine Word in silence . . . to act on God’s behalf by resting.” It includes offering times of silence and solitude without fear that

it will become boring, or be intimidating to campers.

We can be intentional about keeping schedules open with opportunities for prayer and community without packing it full of activities. Connecting deeply with God can be encouraged in the out-of-doors through simple living in ways that resorts and other destination vacation locations cannot.

By the way, by visiting the UMCRM web site, visitors will find a host of camp and retreat-related opportunities for those who would like to delve deeper or become more involved. Events are listed, including the national gathering, “Waters of Grace,” on January 30 to February 3, 2017, in Texas. This web site also has information regarding core training and a pathway to para-professional certification in camping and retreat ministries.

Of course, for all things related to the two NYAC camps, please visit the [camps web site](#).



# Church's Homosexuality Debate Tops 2016 News Stories

**UMNS** | With the election of the denomination's first openly lesbian bishop and the creation of a special commission to examine church law on homosexuality, the ongoing debate over sexuality issues in The United Methodist Church was considered the top news story in 2016 by church communicators.

In a United Methodist News Service poll, coverage of the [Commission on a Way Forward](#) came in first place out of 34 ballots cast by communicators in the United States, Africa and Asia, along with News Service staff. Second was the Western Jurisdiction's election of the Rev. Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, as bishop.

The denomination's global response to natural disasters was third, followed by the election of 15 new U.S. bishops and bishop elections in the central conferences. Fifth was the story of a Philippines United Methodist Church compound that gave sanctuary to 4,000 farmers and indigenous people following an outbreak of violence at a protest.

## First: Commission on a Way Forward

In the months before General Conference 2016, the church's stance on human sexuality seemed to lead all discussion, and that played out once the church's top legislative assembly began its session. Delegates on opposite sides [couldn't even agree on a method for discussing the issue](#), much less the issue itself.

Delegates ultimately voted to accept the recommendation of the Council of Bishops to [delay further debate on homosexuality](#) and name a special commission that would completely examine and possibly recommend revisions of every paragraph in the Book of Discipline related to human sexuality.

The [32-member Commission on a Way Forward](#) is made up of a mix of bishops, clergy and laity of diverse views on the subject—although [the group's membership has faced criticism](#).

The Council of Bishops said it [intends to call a special General Conference in 2019](#)—expected after the commission begins looking at the church's teachings on homosexuality and church unity.

## Second: Oliveto election

While General Conference delegates elected to "pause" debate over LGBTQ clergy, the Western Jurisdiction kept moving, [electing and consecrating the first lesbian bishop in the denomination](#). Bishop Karen Oliveto is now serving the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area.

Oliveto, [former pastor of Glide Memorial](#)



PHOTO BY CHARMAINE ROBLEDO, MOUNTAIN SKY EPISCOPAL AREA

**Newly elected Bishop Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian who has become the first openly gay bishop of The United Methodist Church, stands with Big Sky Area Bishop Elaine Stanovsky, left, and Los Angeles Area Bishop Minerva Carcaño.**

[United Methodist Church in San Francisco](#), was elected July 15 at the jurisdiction's quadrennial meeting in Scottsdale, Arizona. She has been legally married to her long-time partner, a commissioned United Methodist deaconess, for more than two years.

On the heels of Oliveto's election, members of the South Central Jurisdiction voted to ask the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision regarding same-sex church leaders. [The church's top court will consider the petition when it next meets, in the spring of 2017.](#)

## Third: Disaster response

The United Methodist Church, through churches, annual conferences, the United Methodist Committee on Relief and individuals, stepped up again and again to help after natural disasters. From [historic flooding in Louisiana](#), South Carolina, [West Virginia](#), Iowa, Texas, Mississippi, North Carolina, to [damage from Hurricane Matthew](#) in Haiti, Cuba and the United States, to drought in sub-Saharan Africa, [typhoons in the Philippines](#) and [tornadoes in Indiana](#), United Methodists were there.

## Fourth: Episcopal elections

United Methodists around the world [elected or re-elected new bishops](#). In the United States, the 15 new bishops included [a record seven women](#) in four jurisdictions, highlighted by the [first African-American woman bishop](#)

[in the Southeastern Jurisdiction](#). Elections in the central conferences began in October with the [re-election of Bishop Christian Alsted](#) of the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference.

Elections were held Nov. 28–Dec. 4 in the Philippines, with the [re-election of all three active bishops](#)—Rodolfo A. Juan, Pedro M. Torio Jr. and Ciriaco Q. Francisco.

The West Africa Central Conference, meeting Dec. 13–16, [elected the Rev. Samuel J. Quire Jr.](#), administrative assistant to the bishop in Liberia, as Liberia's new bishop.

Other episcopal elections still upcoming:

- Congo Central Conference, March 6–10, 2017
- Germany Central Conference, March 15–19, 2017

## Fifth: Church offers sanctuary

A United Methodist Church compound in the Philippines [gave sanctuary to 4,000 farmers and indigenous people](#) after an April 1 protest for food relief turned deadly. Three protesters were killed and more than 100 injured when security forces fired on the crowd blocking a major highway. Protesters poured into the Spottswood Methodist Mission Center for refuge.

Though the action sparked tension with government authorities, church leaders

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# Christmas Aftermath: Mission as Amplifying Rachel's Cry

BY JACOB S. DHARMARAJ, Ph.D.

Two Sundays ago, when I was worshipping in the church, immediately after the reading and hearing of the Gospel of Matthew 2:1–12, I turned to my wife and said the lectionary reading had left out the rest of the Christmas story—Herod's murderous rampage following the birth of the Holy Child. It is indeed important to read from the Gospel that includes narratives about the guiding star, wise men, and their visit with Herod after Christmas celebrations are over. But what is left out is critical to hear in order to maintain a balance between our spiritual life and mission engagements.

For, in Matthew 2:13–18, we are faced with an anti-climactic Gospel lesson—the massacre of the innocents. While there are a number of stories in the Bible that are difficult to read or hear, Herod's murderous rampage to kill innocent toddlers as a potential threat to his throne must be among the top. In documenting this violent tragedy, verses 13–18 say, "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

## Too deep for words

There are too many Rachels in our world today. There are far too many mothers of children who were innocent and have been brutally abused by organized criminals through sex trafficking, brutal militia in the name of religion, and inhuman acts.

The death of a child is one of the most painful tragedies that any parent can face, for it is unnatural, atypical and unpleasant. How much more difficult it must be if one loses a child by violent means. It occurred during Jesus' time and it happens today. How might we, as followers of Christ, have compassion on the Rachels of today?

Perhaps, just perhaps, by journeying with them while they wail and lament; advocating and advancing justice on behalf of the weak and vulnerable; by fostering a covenant among parents everywhere that they should not raise their children to kill someone else's children.

During this season, while our churches are ablaze with light and filled with the laughter of children and families, and while the sanctuaries echo the singing of choir and those from the pews, while the air is still filled with the scent of poinsettia and pine boughs, and people with the special glow of Christmastide, many churches in the global south and east remain dark, empty and silent. Neither liturgy nor chant nor

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choir nor candle is raised in celebration of the foundational event of our Christian faith. We scarcely pay attention to nor take time to listen to the cry of the Rachels who make up the Body of Christ in that part of the world.

## Advocacy, as a missional tool

The church is a body. It is not an enterprise. The church is an organism but not an organization. The church is always alive and constantly active. It is comprised of all those who believe in Jesus Christ. If the church fails to glow, grow, and care, it falters in its missional existence.

The United Methodist Church's mission statement calls for us "to make disciples for the transformation of the world." Often, we've become so rutted in our own mundane daily routines and church activities that we scarcely notice what we're doing or why we're doing it which impairs our ability to see beyond our bounds that which brings clarity to our mission and ministry engagements. There is a vast difference between religious emotion and missional conviction; church communication and Christian proclamation. Whereas religious emotion is concerned with the lived experience of how our faith practices impact our constituents' lives, a missional conviction is primarily enlightening, edifying, and liberating. It has no hidden agenda.

Missional conviction is transparent, respectful, reconciling and redemptive. It emanates from the core Christian belief manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. It reflects a deep desire to enshrine peace and justice and human dignity at the center of public discourse. It is always on speaking terms with the human society in which it is situated. Most importantly, it never hesitates to speak the truth directly to earthly power.

As a worldwide Christian denomination, United Methodists need to articulate effectively and collectively the freedom to practice religion by all people everywhere. This fundamental human right issue affects us all when one part of the world blatantly disregards it. A mere anodyne pastoral statement will not suffice. Many religious adherents around the world live in fear. Fear, after all, is contagious. Hence advocacy, as a missional tool, has to be employed in our daily ecclesial engagement.

Since a universal vaccine against the oppression of religious minorities is unlikely

to be discovered before the 2020 General Conference, we must act now individually and collectively as a denomination. Since most of those persecuted religious minorities are members of the Body of Christ, there is an imperative to act swiftly by taking this concern as a missional mandate and an ecclesial concern everywhere.

## Dearth of response

As president of the National Federation of Asian American United Methodists, I receive regular information about the persecution of religious minorities. Muslims are slaughtered by Buddhists in Myanmar; Christians in India, Hindus in Pakistan, Kurds and Orthodox, Coptic Christians in certain parts of the Middle East. Just before Christmas, Christian churches were bombed in Egypt and the Philippines. The list contains only a part of Asia. The northern part of Africa is another boiling cauldron for Christian minorities. What is disheartening to know is that the religious minority most persecuted in the global south and east is Christians, and the churches in the global north pay no attention. The United Methodist Church is blessed with an abundance of resources to fight this oppression. If only we set our missional heart in it, we can indeed set the transformation of the world in motion.

In his well-known essay, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," Australian philosopher Peter Singer raised a poignant question. After a severe drought that killed thousands in Southern Asia, Singer asked, "If we saw a child drowning in a shallow pond, most of us would rescue her without hesitation. Why should it make a moral difference if that child is right in front of us or halfway across the world?" The same can be asked of our denomination's collective non-response to the plight of those who flee from their birth countries due to their identity as "minority religious communities."

No problem ever gets better by ignoring it. Those of us who work for the transformation of the world must be willing to stand for something that has not yet been tried or proven. We must put fear aside to create our worldwide church's own future. So as game-changing events such as violence against believers and destruction of Christian manifestations come our way, we are called to face them head on by standing in solidarity with the vulnerable members of the Body of Christ. We may be surprised by what we can achieve. We are blessed with plenty of resources as a church and individuals. We only need the resolve and

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# Christmas Aftermath: Mission as Amplifying Rachel's Cry

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determination to go after our goal.

"Things Fall Apart," a novel written by Chinua Achebe, contains the story of a Nigerian warrior named Okonkwo who had been banished from his home. He was planning a feast to thank those who had given him refuge at the most vulnerable time of his life, and overloading the table with food. When asked why, his response was simple and human. Okonkwo said, "I cannot live on the bank of the river and wash my hands with spittle."

There are some events in life that reduce us to silence. And then there are others—like the cry of Rachel—that force us to action. For example, when we stand in the presence of our loved ones and watch their life ebb away until the last breathing is over and the body frame sags into the silence of death, there are only a few words that can be wrapped around that moment. We are simply reduced to silence. It is not as if a million words don't run through

our mind, but if you should ever put air behind them and blow them out of your mouth, they sound empty and hollow and powerless to really say anything meaningful that grasps the mystery of love or death or the incarnation of Christ. St. Thomas, a mystic, calls it *inopia vocabularum*, "the mystery of terms."

One such event that reduced me to silence a few weeks ago when I attended the Middle East Christian Summit sponsored by the Middle East National Caucus of the United Methodists. One of the participants from India showed us a video in which a teenager in India happened to go to a market place where she was identified as a first generation Christian. An angry mob jumped on her; then they beat her and burned her alive. This happened just a few months ago. Those of us who were watching the video, like Rachel, were only weeping and lamenting, as we all knew that teenage victim could be anyone else's daughter or any church's confirmation kid.

The angelic host was reduced to melodic stillness at the incarnation. For what else is our *gloria in excelsis*? Surely it is not a theological tract to be dismembered in abstract Christian theology? It is a paean of praise that erupts from the earth and the heavens themselves. The cruel, violent death of the teenager did not arouse any anger in us but emboldened us to stand steadfast for our faith in Jesus Christ and also to make sure no child (or adult) should be murdered because of their faith in God. Yes, no one can ever repay for a stolen life.

Christian mission on earth is not over yet. Tertullian, the 2nd century theologian who aptly said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," demanded legal toleration and pleaded that the Roman Empire treat Christians as all other sects. Do we think it is too much to ask, even after nearly 20 centuries later, in order to comfort the wailing Rachel around us?

# Church's Homosexuality Debate Tops 2016 News Stories

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[expressed solidarity with the protesters.](#)

Other stories garnering votes:

- Five conferences passed some version of a [non-conformity resolution related to restrictive church law on homosexuality](#). The New York Conference [ordained openly gay clergy](#), in opposition to church law.
- United Methodists in Michigan and throughout the church [came together with zeal to help Flint, Michigan, residents](#) deal with contaminated water. Churches collected and distributed water and the conference [appointed a water crisis coordinator](#).
- About 1,800 people attended the organizing meeting of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, which declared its intention to [lead Methodism in a more evangelical direction](#). Organizers announced their hope is to work within The United Methodist Church, while leaving open the [possibility of moving outside it](#).

- Many United Methodists [supported Native American protests against the Dakotas Access Pipeline](#), including the bishops of the Western Jurisdiction, who sent a letter to President Obama expressing support for the Standing Rock Sioux.
- Hillary Clinton, a lifelong United Methodist, became the first woman to head a major party ticket for U.S. president, later losing the Nov. 8 election to President-elect Donald Trump.
- United Methodists and their relatives were among the dead in a [massacre in Beni in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) on Aug. 13.
- General Conference 2016 voted to [discontinue membership in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice](#), which The United Methodist Church helped found more than 40 years ago. [Five annual conferences later voted to rejoin](#) the organization at either national or state levels.

# Online Course on Worship for Laity, Clergy

A new online course about liturgy and worship is open for enrollment to United Methodist laity and clergy around the country. The course entitled, "Patterned by Grace: How Liturgy Shapes Us," will be taught by Rev. Daniel Benedict, and hosted on [BeADisciple.com](#). Benedict served as worship resources director in the Center for Worship Resourcing for The General Board of Discipleship from 1993 to 2005.

The course runs from April 17 to May 5. In six three-day segments, students will explore liturgy with short assignments around provocative questions, and share in online discussions with each other and the author. The course will help laity, pastors, and church musicians who want to

discover the formational and transformational power of the Spirit at work in the Church's historic worship. It will be especially helpful to Lay Servants, Lay Speakers, Certified Lay Ministers and a strong refresher for pastors

The course costs \$55 per participant, in addition to the text, "*Patterned by Grace*," that is available from the Upper Room bookstore or Amazon.

BeADisciple, an online learning platform for Christian education courses, is a ministry of the Richard and Julia Wilke Institute for Discipleship at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, Calif.

# OBITUARIES

## Cornelia F. Neale

Cornelia F. Neale, 97, died December 29, 2016, at Palm Village in Reedley, Calif. Neale, who was born January 29, 1919, in Washington, Conn., was the widow of the Reverend Latimer Baker Neale.

Rev. Neale served in the New York East and New York conferences for 37 years, leading churches in Centerport, Great Neck, Orient, Southold and East Meadow, all on Long Island; and St. Paul's UMC in Middletown, N.Y. He also served as executive secretary of the board of education in both conferences. Rev. Neale's last appointment was as district superintendent of the Hudson North District from 1974 to 1980. He retired in 1980 and died in 2006.

Mrs. Neale attended Connecticut College for Teachers in New Britain. She taught in elementary schools in Bridgewater, Bethlehem and Cos Cob, Conn., and Lawrence Woodmere Academy in Woodmere, N.Y.

The Neales retired to California to be near family. She enjoyed knitting caps for newborn babies, and also created and led a support group for the spouses of persons with dementia.

She is survived by three sons: Philip W. Neale of Lebanon, Ill.; Latimer Ford (Diane Y.) Neale of Malibu, Calif.; Gordon Lewis (Kathryn Mundy) of Brevard, N.C.; grandchildren, Benjamin, Georgia, Jules, Emma Rose, and Baker Neale; and great-grandchildren Rowan Neale and Houston Borgognoni.

A memorial service was held at the Palm Village chapel in Reedley, Calif., on January 23.

Memorial gifts may be made to the Palm Village Retirement Community, 703 W. Herbert Ave., Reedley, CA 93654. Condolences may be sent to Ford Neale, 3525 Decker Canyon Rd., Malibu, CA 90265.

## Rev. Irving A. Marsland

The Reverend Irving A. Marsland died December 23, 2016, at his home in Portland, Oregon, at age 97. He was born February 4, 1919.

Rev. Marsland served the New York East and New York conferences for 38 years, and led the following churches: Grahamsville and Sundown, N.Y.; Bedford Hills, N.Y.; Cornwall, N.Y.; Aldersgate and Irvington Methodist in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.; Grace Methodist in Newburgh, N.Y.; and Hempstead UMC. Rev. Marsland retired in 1983 after seven years as district superintendent of the Long Island East District. After retirement, he served as an associate pastor at Metropolitan Community UMC in Manhattan for three years, and then at Rockville Center UMC for 10 years.

In 1946, he married wife, Roberta, who died in 2009. He is survived by three children, Lyn Hanke, Melissa Marsland, and Ann Marsland Millett; four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

A memorial service is being planned in Virginia for this summer.

## Rev. Mark J. Richards, Jr.

The Reverend Mark J. Richards, Jr., died December 19, 2016, after battling heart disease. He was 82. A native of Liberia in West Africa, Richards was the son of Mark Richards, Sr. and Mary Heidee Carter, who both predeceased him.

Affectionately known as Papa, Borbor and Bor Mark, Richards was an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church for 56 years, leading congregations in both Liberia and the United States. He became a member of the New York Conference in 1983, serving Epworth UMC and Tremont UMC, both in the Bronx; Yorktown Heights; Asbury UMC in Mt. Vernon, N.Y.; and Church of Our Savior in Yonkers. He retired in 2000, and relocated to Winston-Salem, N.C.

While in Liberia, he owned and operated the Bong County Construction Company, developing and building projects including the Sinoe United Methodist Church, several World Bank projects and schools in Bong, Nimba and Sinoe counties.

Rev. Richards is survived by his wife of 56 years, Josephine M. Richards. Together they raised 11 children (biological and non-biological): Winston (Musu) Davis, Henry Lynakgbe, Miamah "Mama" Moore, Kutu Paye, G. Orlando (Hawa) Richards, Martu J. Richards, Mordred J. Richards, Morie Richards, Miamah "Baby Jo" Richards, Frederick Silikpo, and Emmanuel "EK" Trueh.

He is also survived by grandchildren, Will Davis; Winnie Davis; Mornjay (Tuatoe) Dayunah; Grandville "OJ" Richards, Jr.; Anastasia "NaeNae" Richards; Meshak Massalee; JoJo Momo; and Martu Momo; great-grandchildren, Rhyana and Maikuser; siblings, Nyema "Johnson" Richards and John "Coco" Richards; and many nieces, and nephews.

Richards was preceded in death by siblings Malissa, Lawrence, Elizabeth, Ben, Hannah and Isaiah.

A celebration of life service was held December 31 at the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. Interment was at Parklawn Memorial Park, Winston-Salem.

Online condolences may be made at [www.russellfuneralservice.com](http://www.russellfuneralservice.com). Notes of condolences may be sent to Josephine Richards, 4941 Light-

house Court, Winston-Salem, NC 27127.

## Rev. Dr. David J. Harper

The Reverend Dr. David J. Harper of Trumbull, CT, died December 17, 2016, following a lengthy illness.

Born on June 16, 1936, in Trenton, N.J., Rev. Harper was the son of James E. and Myrtle R. Harper. He was valedictorian of the Trenton Central High School class of 1954. Majoring in philosophy and religion at Western Maryland College, he graduated cum laude and was elected to *Who's Who in American College and Universities*. In 1962, he received a master's of divinity degree cum laude from Drew University Theological Seminary and was ordained an elder in the New York Conference.

Harper began his ministry as student pastor at St. Mark's Methodist in Napanoch, N.Y., and Ulster Heights Methodist. In 1964, he moved to Grace Methodist in Newburgh, N.Y., as associate pastor for two years. He served for 10 years at Summerfield Methodist in Port Chester, N.Y., during which time he trained as a pastoral counselor at the Foundation for Religion and Mental Health. He also enrolled in the first class of the doctor of ministry program at Drew, where he earned that degree in 1975.

Rev. Harper went on to serve Bay Ridge UMC in Brooklyn, N.Y., and Long Hill UMC in Trumbull, Conn. In 1978, he married Linda Katherine Welsh, who died in 2007.

In 1983, he became a full-time pastoral counselor at Temenos Institute in Westport, Conn. He was the treasurer of Temenos Institute and a fellow of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. He retired in 2006, but continued to serve as a pastoral counselor in retirement, most recently at Nichols UMC in Trumbull, Conn.

Rev. Harper was proficient at the piano and pipe organ, and for several years during the 1960s and 1970s, he served as organist at annual conference. He organized the first conference sessions choir, which he directed for several years.

He is survived by his second wife, Josephine Drogaris Harper; sons, Andrew (Michelle) Harper, and Scott (Deborah) Harper; stepchildren, Cathy Ubillus, Peter Drogaris, Karen (Thomas) Schmalig; a sister, Elaine (Harold) Damon; eight granddaughters; and several nieces and nephews.

The funeral service was held December 22 at the Nichols UMC. Interment was private. Memorial gifts may be made to the Nichols UMC, 35 Shelton Road, Trumbull, CT 06611. Expressions of sympathy may be made online at [www.mullinsfh.com](http://www.mullinsfh.com).

# Wespath Joins Climate Change Initiative

Wespath Benefits and Investments joined 13 major global investors representing over \$2.4 trillion in assets under management in launching the Transition Pathway Initiative (TPI) at the opening of the London Stock Exchange on January 11. The TPI will assess how individual companies are positioning themselves for the transition to a low-carbon economy. Through a public, transparent, online tool designed to assess companies' progress on this transition, TPI will enable investors to better understand how this shift could affect

their portfolios.

The TPI has been led by the Church of England's National Investing Bodies and the UK's Environment Agency Pension Fund in partnership with the Grantham Research Institute at the London School of Economics. FTSE Russell has provided data.

Preliminary assessments released January 11 include the oil and gas and electricity utilities sectors. As part of a phased rollout, management quality and carbon performance assessments of additional sectors and

individual companies will follow in the coming months. The assessment tool TPI supports the requirements of the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), comparing future projected emissions to the two-degree Celsius target and other current public policy commitments.

Wespath Benefits and Investments (Wespath) is a not-for-profit administrative agency of the United Methodist Church, with church-authorized responsibility for the benefit plans it administers and the assets it invests.

# 40 United Methodists in Congress

**UMNS** | Forty members of the 115th Congress—just beginning its work in Washington—are United Methodists. That's a decline by three from the 114th Congress.

In the Senate, United Methodists remain at 10. The number of United Methodists in the House has decreased from 33 to 30.

But the number of United Methodists in the Senate could fall by one soon. Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions from Alabama, a member of Ashland Place United Methodist Church in Mobile, is President-elect Donald Trump's pick to be U.S. attorney general.

Sessions' appointment is subject to Senate approval, and the Senate Judiciary Committee

has been holding hearings on the matter this week.

Three newly elected United Methodists will serve in the 115th Congress: Sen. John Kennedy, R-La.; Rep. Charlie Crist, D-Fla.; and Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo. Crist is a former governor of Florida and Cheney is the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Republicans outnumber Democrats 27 to 13 among United Methodists in Congress. The small partisan decline from 72 percent Republican in the previous Congress to 67 percent in the new Congress owes mostly to the retirement of five House Republicans.

Texas provides the largest number of United Methodists in Congress with eight, followed by five from Georgia, and three each from Kansas and Ohio. Both U.S. Senators from Georgia are United Methodists and Republicans.

United Methodists remain in third place in congressional religious affiliations, behind Catholics and Baptists—the same ordering since 1994.

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who attends Mount Horeb United Methodist Church in Lexington, has been named U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, subject to Senate confirmation.

# Embracing, Instilling Joy in Ministry Again

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as you should . . .”

What would it look like to revitalize the NYAC using a picture of leadership that features a posture of collaboration, a bearing of peace making, a mindset of unity, and a rediscovery of love?

“I have a dream that this very diverse annual conference of ethnicity, age and theology has more to offer the church than any other annual conference I know,” Bickerton said. “We need to craft what it means to be a gift to the world . . . to be a model for others to follow. We have the gifts and graces to do just that, but it's dependent upon one thing—joy.

He suggested that by sifting through all the things in our life—habits, feelings, anxieties and behaviors—we find what is truly essential. “We find more commonality in the

essentials . . .” grace, love, joy and hope.

“We can resolve to use our individual gifts and the gifts of others. The God that created you, created the other,” Bickerton said. “As the Moravian motto says, ‘In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.’”

The convocation included preaching by district superintendents Ken Kieffer of Connecticut and Denise Smartt Sears of Metropolitan, and worship music by the Celebration Sanctuary Band of First UMC in Stamford and the “convocation band.” Wednesday afternoon offered free time for indoor and outdoor recreation, conversations, and rest. Several individuals and pairs shared their singing and comedy talents with the group later that night while others gathered for friendly games of dominoes and Scrabble.



**District Superintendent Ken Kieffer preaches during the opening worship service on Tuesday.**