

**Report by the delegation to the 2019 General Conference
March 16, 2019, special session of the NYAC**

Rev. Kristina Hansen

Friends, here we are your New York Annual Conference Delegation. A rainbow of diversity, a thousand stories, a lot of power, a lot of passion, hard working people. Here to tell you a bit of the story of our journey.

Rev. Sheila Beckford

On the day we arrived in St. Louis, most of us were greeted with two local stories of colonialism, racism and injustice.

First, in the lobby of our assigned hotel stood a life-size display of York, Sacagawea, and the racist and violent slave owners Lewis and Clark.

In addition, across the street from our hotel stood the old courthouse. It was on the steps of that courthouse where poor whites were sold into indentured servitude to pay off their debts; it was on the steps of that courthouse that people of African descent were delivered from slave ships and then sold into bondage; and it was within that courthouse that the landmark Dred Scott case was initially heard and decided.

On the cusp of the Civil War, Dred Scott fought unsuccessfully in the courts for his freedom, for his humanity in the face of a world that considered him to be property.

His ultimately losing battle lasted for 12 years. Yet, his resilience and determination were unhindered. It is/was our hope and desire to be as resilient and determinate as a delegation as we faced the work of the 2019 Special General Conference.

Every morning our delegation would gather to prepare for the day. Our faithful delegation chaplains, Rev. Adrienne Brewington and Pastor Dorlimar Lebrón prepared and offered a morning reflection.

One particular reflection, which was entitled “Unhindered,” gave us hope and reminded us of our work and our purpose:

“Unhindered and with complete confidence, Paul continued to preach God’s Kingdom and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Acts 28:31

Unhindered: This, the last word in the Book of Acts, is arguably an overarching theme in the book, as the faith spreads freely across every demographic divide that human beings had cooked up.

In Acts chapter 8, a black man, a non-Jew, and a person with public gender ambiguity (all rolled into the same person) asks Philip, the deacon,

“What hinders me from being baptized?” and Philip baptizes him in a roadside puddle, right then and there.

The story of Acts is about an unhindered gospel integrating all sorts of people into one human family, fully and without exception. As a delegation, we resolved that “whatever hindrances we may encounter, the Gospel is like a river, utterly unhindered and unstoppable.”

Karen Prudente

Our process to get to St. Louis: Prior to attending the Special General Conference most of us gathered on a regular basis. We spent hours discussing, sharing, learning, growing, laughing, crying and engaging in an intentional effort to go beyond being

individual delegates and become a team where the whole would be greater than the sum of the parts.

This enabled us to be a powerful expression of the inclusive values of the New York Annual Conference on the floor of the General Conference. Our interactions included but were not limited to a retreat and many meetings where we intentionally centered queer voices, black voices and those of people of color.

We are also grateful for dialogues we had with leaders outside of the delegation. In particular we give thanks to Erin Hawkins, general secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race; Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, chief connectional ministries officer of the Connectional Table; Rev. Betty Kazadi Musau, a United Methodist clergywoman from the Democratic Republic of Congo and a delegate to the 2019 General Conference; and Rev. Kennedy Mwita, district superintendent of the South Nyanza district of the East Africa Annual Conference.

Last, but not least, we are grateful for the accompaniment of our bishop, Thomas J. Bickerton, who met with us regularly.

We trained as if we were preparing for a trial with Frederick Brewington, Esq., at the helm teaching us correct parliamentary procedures.

Tiffany French Goffe

Our rigorous process as a delegation helped to prepare us for the responsibility of representing the New York Annual Conference at GC2019. Although some of us had different convictions based upon our respective interpretations of scripture, the majority of the New York delegation committed itself to the following goals:

- To help reduce systemic harm inflicted by the UMC on LGBTQIA people
- To envision, articulate, help enable, live into a broad vision of justice in and for the church; meaning racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, climate justice, etc. – justice!
- To use our unique credibility as a queer-led delegation and our deep expertise and experience to play a visible leadership role before and during the General Conference.
- To open the denomination and the universal church to unconditional love
- To develop relationships that will change everyone, including us
- To be the change we want to see in the world and in the UMC.

We were *and are* ambitious, passionate, committed, courageous, determined, feisty, and ultimately unstoppable.

We chose to not focus primarily on advocating and working for one particular plan, but rather on maximizing the possibility of harm reduction by emphasizing self-giving love, particularly among people of privilege, which necessarily requires LGBTQIA representation in the process.

We realized that our work takes place within a church, a country, and a world deeply marred by the sins of racism, sexism, xenophobia and all manner of inequality that is antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our commitment to working toward full inclusivity for the LGBTQIA community is inextricable from our commitment to combat these other, equally heinous, societal and personal evils. In keeping in line with our commitment to an intersectional vision of justice, we find it necessary and imperative to name what was experienced at the Special General Conference 2019 and the work we still have to do.

Rev. Martha Vink

General Conference events: The Special General Conference opened with a day of prayer. The different regions of the global church – Europe, Eurasia, Africa, the US and the Philippines – were represented with a time of prayer dedicated to them.

We know prayer to be a means of Grace. Jesus taught his disciples to pray and engaged in intense prayer as he faced crucial issues in his life, and so we welcomed this time of centering . . . at first . . .

It soon became clear that the notion of Holy Conferencing was in jeopardy. As each region of the world spoke of the gifts and justice issues within their bounds, no one spoke a word about LGBTQIA+ people.

Not . . . one . . . word.

At first, we were confused and perplexed and then we became angry as it appeared there was an intentional silencing of LGBTQIA persons, realities and voices. Jorge Lockward and Jen Ihlo, a queer delegate from the Baltimore Washington Conference seized the lunch break as an opportunity to confront some of the bishops and organize with other delegates and advocates to demand that the erasure of LGBTQIA persons cease and be remedied at the start of the next session.

After lunch an unscheduled prayer by one of the bishops finally acknowledged the presence of, and harm done to, the LGBTQIA community in the United Methodist Church.

After the prayer, the New York Delegation led a public witness on the GC floor. With those on the floor and in the bleachers singing, “I need you to survive,” we were joined by many others who gathered with us in the center of the floor to affirm the presence of LGBTQIA+ persons at this General Conference with its stated mission to find a way forward.

This first day set a tone – not for Holy Conferencing – but for the raising of competing agendas and question which one would win the day. When day two began and the list of work was prioritized by voting of the delegations, the outcome was telling:

The first priority was pensions,

The second, the Traditional Plan,

The third and fourth were exit strategies.

The church had spoken. It’s top priorities for consideration were money and property. To some of us it seemed that the Holy Spirit had left the floor. The good news is that it continued to live up in the stands – where a large witness from NYAC and around the country held the space – sometimes silently and sometimes in protest – and in other places worship and song.

Our physical set up at General Conference created challenges for our work together as a delegation and for the work and unity of the larger body of delegates and observers.

Main delegates were seated on the floor of GC in an arena setting. Reserve delegates were required to sit with visitors in the bleachers when not seated in place of a delegate. This placed reserve delegates far away from their delegation colleagues. It also isolated part of the Body of Christ from itself.

The stands were intentionally isolated from the floor by a 20+ foot wall of closed bleachers. This vast physical separation was unsettling for delegates and observers. It felt unchristian. We had never been so divided from one another. Furthermore, it made it difficult to reach out to and be interactive with the reserve delegates, and made

moving delegates on and off the floor – a time-consuming process which put opportunities to vote in jeopardy.

The separation of the floor and the bleacher stands also became an object lesson in the schism that seemed to be evolving before our very eyes. Some of us felt as if the United Methodist Church we loved was being torn apart one amendment or vote at a time.

Fred Brewington

What happened was illegal: Before the start of the Special General Conference, the Judicial Council Decision 1366 had ruled large portions of the Traditional Plan to be unconstitutional.

Yet, the legislation was presented for consideration and vote to the General Conference in its unconstitutional form. The meager attempts made on the floor of GC to fix these deficiencies were not successful.

In addition, the implementation portion of the Traditional Plan, which had been referred to the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, did not survive that committee's scrutiny.

Notwithstanding these grave deficiencies, a slim majority of the GC delegates voted to adopt the Traditional Plan. However, the deficiencies still remain and will be considered once again by the Judicial Council when it convenes in April.

Much was revealed about the primary interests of the slim majority in the voting chamber when the ranking of the items to be addressed listed matters relating to pension and property as the priority items to be considered.

The One Church Plan was ranked fifth; it was voted down. The Simple Plan was ranked much lower in priority and was only discussed as a “*courtesy*” to avoid total disrespect of our LGBTQIA+ siblings.

The troubling reality of the adoption of the Traditional Plan looms even larger given that just this Thursday the New York Times reported the existence of voting improprieties at 2019 General Conference which call into question the integrity on all those things upon which we voted.

The need for a full and independent investigation of the voting process is obvious and, as elected delegates to the GC 2019, we not only call for such an inquiry, but we call for the immediate determination by all governing committees of the General Conference that the taint caused by voting irregularities has so impacted the legislative activity of the General Conference that allowing any actions to stand would be unjust and immoral.

Rev. Alex da Silva Souto

A call for intersectional commitment: Throughout this special General Conference the many justice-oriented spaces – organizations like Uniting Methodists, Mainstream UMC, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and even the Love Your Neighbor Coalition – all of which are “progressive and centrist, predominantly white moderate and liberal” spaces, failed to uphold the respect and dignity of people of color both in word and deed.

Delegates from our African Central Conferences were used and spoken about as pawns and transactional objects. Voices and bodies of people of color in general were tokenized, silenced and experienced levels of unwelcoming. In some cases, some people

of color were literally not allowed into meeting rooms to which they had been invited, or offered a genuine seat at the table.

Through the leadership of members of our delegation, discourse is being held on multiple levels about the most effective way to address and rectify these sins of exclusion.

In addition, the Good News and the Wesleyan Covenant Association used the genuine convictions of the global church, and even some people of color in the US, to advance their white supremacist agenda through what was essentially masked colonialism.

For example, after hearing a WCA delegate say to delegates from the African Central Conference words like, “we did so much for you, now you owe us,” some of us felt that if we kept silent during this conversation we too were complicit. And so we were not silent, choosing instead to confront the speaker and those to whom he was speaking.

Moreover, we heard a delegate to the General Conference, a well-known and respected pastor and author who serves the Kansas City, Missouri, area, and who identifies as a centrist, speak from the floor of the General Conference offering a poorly veiled threat of withdrawing the mission dollars his well-to-do congregation contributes to the United Methodist witness in Africa.

His words struck many of our delegation as being evidence of the continued colonialism that some of us believe is, and has always been, the *modus operandi* of this Methodist Church.

We believe that silence is complicity, and that, therefore, not naming or calling out these wrongs makes us complicit in the evil that is perpetuated by the church, our church folk, our communities and our wider society.

Beloved community, our living of lives that are faithful beacons of our Christian discipleship depends upon us intentionally and visibly expressing solidarity with one another. Our lives as Christian disciples requires that all of us hear, see, embrace, and respect one another across lines of race, sex, sexual orientation, gender expression, physical ability, and age.

“How does justice for the oppressed and suppressed find its way to this new garden of devoted, abiding love?”

This delegation longs to build a movement and a church that stands up to *all* injustice, for we know, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Jorge Lockward

Who we are – or want to be: A Call to Re-examine Colonial, Racialized Understandings of Christian Unity

Jesus earnestly prays in John 17:20-21, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Core to Jesus’ prayer is the quality and intent of this unity. A quality that reflects the free, grace-filled interaction within the Holy Trinity. An intent that seeks the spread of the gospel that brings abundant life to all.

Much of the conversation about Christian unity before the Special General Conference made the mistake of equating institutional ties and covenants with the unity that Jesus prayed.

Even worse, the Traditional Plan, passed by the General Conference misinterprets and goes against the essence of Jesus' prayer in seeking a forced, grace-less unity, policed and sustained under the threat of punishment. Nothing could be further from the unity that Jesus desires.

The current institutional and constitutional structure of the United Methodist Church was born from the twin evils of colonialism and racism. Our Central Conferences were birthed in missionary endeavors carried by the winds of colonial expansion.

Our jurisdictional structure is the direct product of racial fears. These evils, embedded as they are in the DNA of our Constitution, Organization and practice manifest themselves throughout the fabric of our connection.

The unity Jesus calls for demands the effective dismantling of these twin evils that shackle and often render ineffective our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our time at General Conference has persuaded many of your delegation that we need to find other ways of being together that truly reflect the grace-filled life of the Holy Trinity and that bless and facilitate our witness to the gospel of grace.

Even as it showed us difficult realities from our past and present and the limitations and intractability of our current legislative process and constitutional framework, the Special GC of 2019 gave us the precious gift of a call to dream and create movements, churches and institutions unhinged from the harmful debris of our colonial DNA and the shameful compromises of our racialized birth.

It calls us to dream along with God of a church that does not compromise the values of grace and inclusion so dearly and costly earned by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at the cross, and so brilliantly proclaimed by the risen Christ in the empty tomb.

It calls us to dream and work for a Church where justice and equality are not up for debate; a church that does not confuse the honest scriptural understanding of some with the Word of God, but that rather listens to Spirit constantly speaking through scripture, reason, experience and tradition; a church that recaptures the values of openness and diversity prized by its founders; a church that offers a hospitality for all to be in the journey of being made perfect in love without allowing for the abuse of any of its children; a church that is faithful to its deep Tradition of being open, creative, relevant, courageous and filled with the Holy Spirit; a church where the Gospel, like a river, is utterly unhindered and unstoppable.

Rev. Kristina Hansen

What now - The Gospel will be Unhindered: Your delegation believes that the Gospel calls us to lean into the intersectional vision of justice, peace, love, grace and hope for all of us that is illustrated by Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Our prayer is that, as the NYAC engages in electing a new delegation for the 2020 General Conference, those casting their votes will understand the need to center marginalized voices – particularly persons of color – who possess courageous and prophetic imagination.

What did we learn at General Conference 2019? We learned that we all have a lot of work to do if we are to authentically become the Church which Jesus called into being.

We believe that the New York Annual Conference needs to lead the way in the conversations that will help this work and growth to happen, leveraging the ways we

have been able to live out the inclusive values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even as we repent of the ways in which we, ourselves have failed the Gospel and seek to improve.

We believe we must undertake this work while making room for different approaches that respond to different missional contexts. New York Annual Conference as a micro-universe of the United Methodist Church has much to contribute to the General Church from its experiences trying to become and be God's beloved kin-dom.

Along the way, may this be our driving force, our consolation and our inspiration: that the Gospel is like a river, utterly unhindered and unstoppable!