

NCJ delegates talk anti-racism and future, vote to reduce bishops by 1

By Christa Meland, director of communications, Minnesota Conference

When Rev. Ron Bell was in high school, his father became superintendent of the Eastern District of the Delaware Annual Conference. As their family was moving into the superintendents' big, beautiful parsonage in Eastern Maryland, the entire local police department surrounded the house with guns drawn and told Bell and his father to get on the ground with their hands behind their heads. Why?

"Because a little white girl across the street saw black folk in her neighborhood," said Bell, who serves Camphor Memorial UMC in St. Paul, Minnesota. "That's when I knew race matters."

Bell was among six "truth-tellers" who shared their personal experiences with race at a virtual North Central Jurisdictional (NCJ) gathering that took place Wednesday and Thursday. Approximately 250 delegates and alternates participated in the official Zoom meeting, and others from across the 10-conference jurisdiction watched it live online. Delegates spent the majority of their time on three big topics of conversation—dismantling racism, the future of episcopal leadership, and the future of The United Methodist Church.

Dismantling racism

In the dismantling racism portion of the session, retired Bishop Hope Morgan Ward reminded attendees that the ministry of anti-racism centers in discipleship.

"The arc of history bends toward justice, and we will be forceful in pulling that arc down together, all to the glory of God," she said. She noted that the Council of Bishops has appreciated the work of Brian Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and chief creator of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. He urges four pillars for anti-racism efforts:

1. Hear and share true stories; in particular, give space to and honor stories of people of color.
2. Get "proximate" to the suffering and pain of racism and inequality.
3. Expect resistance.
4. Protect your hopefulness.

After hearing from Ward, the six truth-tellers each issued a challenge to the North Central Jurisdiction and the Church.

"Justice takes more than just words; it requires sacrifice," said Andres De Arco, National Assistant Director to the United Methodist Hispanic Youth Leadership Academy and a member of the West Ohio Conference. "What are you willing to sacrifice for justice?"

The dismantling racism session ended with small group discussions among delegates. They reflected aloud on a question posed by Bishop Tracy Smith Malone, resident bishop of the East Ohio Conference: As you think about your context and your discipleship journey and life in Christ, how might God be calling you to make a difference, to step out more boldly and prophetically...to put your weight on the arc of history, bending toward justice?

“The delegates of the NCJ put their prophetic weight on the arc of history during this conference and have bent our church toward justice,” said Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, a clergy delegate in Michigan who serves as chief connectional ministries officer for the Connectional Table. “We did that by passing a covenant that focuses the jurisdiction on anti-racism work and inclusion as its top two priorities. For my part, I am going to try to live out those commitments in every area of my ministry and life.”

For Beata Ferris, a lay delegate from the Dakotas, education is key in working for justice. “I believe we need to educate all our congregations to the beautiful culture of the people who we live with in the Dakotas,” she said. “When we understand more of their history and current reality, we can better serve with them in building beloved communities in our spaces.”

The future of episcopal leadership

Delegates on Thursday voted 142-13 in favor of a proposal to have eight active bishops in the NCJ as of the next regular session of the jurisdictional conference—representing a decrease from the nine bishops who have led the jurisdiction in recent years.

In a presentation before the vote, Rev. Sara Isbell, chair of the NCJ Committee on the Episcopacy and a member of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, explained that if a jurisdiction falls below a certain threshold in membership, General Conference makes a decision about the number of bishops needed for that smaller number of members. Although the General Conference has not yet met to vote on a reduction, for several years, the NCJ has been below the number needed to secure nine bishops—so such a vote is expected at the postponed 2020 General Conference, now slated for Aug.-Sept. 2022. The NCJ could vote to stay with nine bishops, but then it must figure out how to pay them, apart from the Episcopal Fund that typically covers this cost.

The jurisdiction has had an opportunity over the past year to practice operating with eight bishops. Since Jan. 1, Bishop David Bard has been serving Minnesota on an interim basis in addition to being resident bishop for the Michigan Conference, Bishop Laurie Haller has been serving the Dakotas on an interim basis in addition to being resident bishop for Iowa, and Bishop John Hopkins left retirement to lead the Northern Illinois Conference.

“On the one hand, we tremendously value our episcopal leadership, and yet on the other hand, we have to be thoughtful stewards of the resources we have,” said Rev. Carol Zaagsma, a clergy delegate from Minnesota. “If the mathematics of the Episcopal Fund suggests we’re at a

junction where we can't sustain and support nine bishops anymore, we need to adapt to that. For me, it's the prudent thing to do."

The future of The United Methodist Church

Drawing on John 6: 1-14, Bishop Laurie Haller told the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 to close the day on Wednesday. She pointed out that after the meal, Jesus told his disciples to gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.

"My dear friends, I know that you are tired," said Haller. "We often think somebody else will gather the fragments of our beloved UMC and transform the world. But now it's time for us to do something in the North Central Jurisdiction. The future of The United Methodist Church is in our hands."

Jesus sends you and me out to gather up the fragments, Haller noted, which are our mixed loyalties, our stubbornness to forgive, our reluctance to accept those who are different, and our fondness for judging. But the fragments are also the loving words we say, the songs we sing, the money we give, the food we share, and the care we offer to the discarded and battered of this world.

"No matter how many fragments we gather up or give away, the basket will always be filled with God's love, for the circle is wide, and no one should ever have to stand alone," she said. "That my friends, is beloved community. That, my friends, is our vision. That, my friends, is the future of our church. It's time for us to do something right now."