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2020 North Central Jurisdictional Conference
of The United Methodist Church



**2020 North Central Jurisdictional Conference
Episcopal Nominee Information
for
Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai**



Website: www.bighamtsai.org

Name: Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai

Conference: Michigan

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Current Appointment: Chief Connectional Ministries Officer of the Connectional Table

Family: Kee Tsai, spouse; Keeton and Kamden Bigham-Tsai, children; Poet, our beloved poodle

Background and Experience:

Formal Education (please also include significant Continuing Education):

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, MDiv, 2003
Harvard University, BA Sociology, 1982

Continuing Education

- Training in Adaptive Leadership
 - o Public training program with Eric Martin of Adaptive Change Advisors
 - o Ongoing coaching with Adaptive Change Advisors
 - o Adaptive Leadership Training with Susan Beaumont (formerly of the Alban Institute)

- Training in Congregational Vitality and Development
 - o Schools for Congregational Development
 - o REACH Summits (annual Michigan-area initiative on congregational vitality and leadership development)
 - o Multi-Siting—Michigan-area conference on church multiplication
 - o Schools for Pastoral Ministry
- Training events on cross-racial/cross-cultural appointments and ministry (GCORR, Michigan Conference Religion and Race)
- Conflict Resolution/Family Systems Training (with Richard Blackburn of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center)
- Training in Congregational Systems (Dr. Peter Steinke, Health Congregations)
- Many years of participation in Calvin Institutes of Christian Worship and Festival of Homiletics
- Training and certification in Healthy Boundaries and Sacred Sanctuaries

Ordination Dates and Conference of Which You Were a Member:

Ordained elder in 2009 in the former West Michigan Annual Conference

Previous Work Experiences and Pastoral Appointments:

Connectional Table – Chicago, IL 2018 – Present

Chief Connectional Ministries Officer: Provide leadership for the Connectional Table (CT) as it seeks to discern and articulate the vision for the worldwide church and steward the mission, ministries and resources of the denomination in consultation with the Council of Bishops. Work with staff and board members to plan and execute meetings, oversee CT finances, facilitate internal and external communications, and help to shepherd the process of evaluation of the missional effectiveness of the World Service-funded agencies.

- ❖ Facilitated the CT's work to shape legislation for General Conference; traveled the connection, listening to concerns about the future of the worldwide United Methodist Church.
- ❖ Built and nurtured collaborative relationships across the worldwide church, including with the COB, GCFA, general agencies, Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters and Annual Conference bodies.
- ❖ Instrumental in designing an innovative process to reallocate the denomination's \$358.6 million budget by mobilizing people to engage a challenge that had no clear or simple

solution. Helped shepherd process, building coalitions and brokering relationships that facilitated change

Lansing District/Michigan Conference Cabinet – Okemos, MI 2013 – 2018

Superintendent: Provided leadership and supervision for 70+ churches and their pastors, serving as chief missional strategist and as conference superintendent in the appointment-making process, working collaboratively with the resident bishop, superintendents and other conference leaders to help realize annual conference goals. Developed a process for assessing the viability of local churches, with more than 40 district churches participating, resulting in creation of a cooperative ministry, a new-church start, the discontinuance of several local churches, eight churches involved in the conference’s “Vital Church Initiative,” and development of an urban ministry strategy.

Milwood United Methodist Church – Kalamazoo, MI 2011 – 2013

Pastor: Provided pastoral leadership for a congregation in a diverse urban neighborhood, guiding parishioners in faithfulness to the ministries of evangelism, outreach and witness. Restructured the congregation for vitality, creating a vision leadership team that provided focus for ministry efforts and an operations team that streamlined administrative work. Helped equip the congregation to carry out its vision of bringing people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and greater connection to each other.

During tenure at Millwood, the church paid 100% of its ministry shares and had an average of 10 professions of faith each year.

University United Methodist Church – East Lansing, MI 2006 – 2011

Pastor: Provided leadership for a large university congregation. Functioned as sole pastor for the last six months of the appointment. Led the congregation to re-envision its relationship with a Wesley Foundation associated with the church, bringing reconciliation in the relationship and positioning both ministries for greater collaboration. Started a mid-week Christian education and fellowship program and helped lead the congregation in efforts at visioning and revitalization. During tenure at University, the church paid 100% of its ministry shares, saw an increase in Christian education attendance and had an average of 14 professions of faith each year.

District Peace with Justice Community – Grand Rapids, MI 2002 – 2006

Director: Planned and coordinated educational events; served as an invited speaker at district churches and community events. Served as a liaison with churches, church agencies, community groups and national and local media to provide advocacy around justice issues. Responsible for fundraising and budgeting.

Connectional and Ecumenical Church Experiences:

1. Current:

General and Jurisdictional Conferences – 2020 Co-Chair of the Michigan Delegation (1st Elected Clergy).

2. Previous:

Connectional Table Board Member (2012-2018)

Executive Committee, Chair Leadership Discernment and Community Life (LDCL), Vice-Chair Missional Administration Group on the General Conference, Human Sexuality Task Force, Legislative Writing Team.

❖ Led LDCL team to evaluate and support CT staff and shepherd processes for recruiting, deploying and supervising volunteers. Worked with CT members and staff to plan CT meetings and design worship and discernment experiences that were rooted in United Methodist theology and honored the global context of the CT's work.

❖ Worked with the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, the Commission on the General Conference, United Methodist Communications and other general church bodies to facilitate CT goals.

❖ Designed and facilitated a process that sought to unite highly divergent viewpoints to create a compromise on human sexuality and maintain the unity of The United Methodist Church. The process provided a system of reconciliation and broke down divisions by using worship as a vehicle for grace.

General and Jurisdictional Conferences

2019 Special Session of the General Conference Delegate

2016 Jurisdictional Delegate/General Conference Alternate (2nd Elected). Candidate for the Episcopacy endorsed by West Michigan Annual Conference and the Detroit and West Michigan delegations.

2012 General and Jurisdictional Conference Delegate (2nd Elected): Chair, General Conference Subcommittee of Church & Society II Legislative Committee. Dealt with reproductive rights, brought people from highly conflicting viewpoints together to listen deeply to one another and develop legislation via consensus.

Other Connectional Church Experience:

Frequent preacher and teacher at area churches and at annual conference, jurisdictional, and general church events including:

- 2019 Michigan-area School for Pastoral Ministry: Streams of Healing Waters (preacher and presenter)
- 2019 Ethnic Young Adult's Gathering (preacher and presenter)
- 2019 NEXUS Convocation, "Love Resurrected" (preacher and workshop leader)
- 2019 Speaker Michigan MFSA, "Just, Compassionate, Inclusive: Future of Michigan Methodism" event
- 2019 and 2016 Pre-General Conference Briefings (panelist and presenter)
- 2018 East Ohio Annual Conference RMN/MFSA Gathering (preacher and workshop leader)
- 2018 School for Congregational Development (preacher and workshop leader)

- Presenter at GBCS and COSROW board meetings, Black Clergy Women’s annual meeting, and BMCR
- United Methodist Women’s district and annual conference meetings, including School for Christian Mission (presenter, preacher)
- Annual Conference and jurisdictional Commission on Religion and Race events/Beyond the Divide (presenter, preacher)

Ecumenical Church Experience:

- 2019 presenter for ELCA Church Council
- Presenter and preacher for 2019 British Methodist Church Council
- Served as a speaker for ecumenical and interfaith events in my community, including as a presenter at the *Beyond Co-existence 8th Interfaith Dialogue Series: Women of Faith, the Evolution of Women’s Roles Within Religious Communities*.

My background is ecumenical. I grew up Baptist, engaged in urban ministry in the AME church where I worked with young girls as part of the *Ten Point Coalition*, an ecumenical anti-violence ministry. I helped develop a ministry called “Do the Write Thing,” in which I used my love for poetry and writing to minister to teenage girls involved in gangs or at risk for gang involvement.

Community Service Activity:

1. Current:

- For the past 25 years I have worked with people in recovery from addictions.
- Alumni Board of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

2. Previous:

- Speaker at 2018 East Lansing High School interfaith baccalaureate service
- Regularly advocated for issues of justice in our community, including the Snyder administration’s initiative on violence and policing in urban areas and efforts to address the water crisis in Flint, MI
- Volunteered at my children’s schools
- Community Advisory Board, WGBH Boston
- Boston-area literacy program for homeless children

Publications, Awards, Honors:

Awards/Honors:

- 2019 keynote speaker for Anna Howard Shaw Lecture Series at Boston University
- 2018 Michigan Annual Conference Preacher
- West Michigan Annual Conference Peace Sermon of the Year Award

Publications:

- “Reflections on Leadership” with Eric Martin, five-part series on adaptive leadership, published by Connectional Table, Emerging Methodism website, 2019.
- “Women of Word Poetry and Power” blog, published by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, March 31, 2014.

- “Why I Choose to Be United Methodist Today,” blog post for *About the Connection*, published by the Connectional Table, March, 11, 2013.
- “No Excuses,” *Circuit Rider* (Call to Action Issue, 2012)

Special Interests and/or Hobbies:

I like working out and taking long walks. I enjoy reading and writing (poetry, children’s books, short fiction, and creative nonfiction). I read the New York Times every day. I enjoy hanging out with family and friends, and enjoy deep and engaging conversation. I love dance, music and theater and can spend hours in an art museum. I also love to travel and like to explore cities. I love dogs. We have a standard poodle named Poet, and I enjoy making my specialty for him, which is homemade dog treats. I also love attending my children's sporting events (soccer, basketball, track), and I love going to a pro-basketball game every now and then.

Faith and Leadership

Describe Your Understanding of the Nature and Mission of the Church:

The church is the body of Christ sent into the world to be the hands and heart of Christ. It is the sacramental representation of Christ present in the world through mission--seeking the transformation of lives and of communities. In and through the church, Christ is in the world as one who serves.

In a sacramental and mystical sense, the church is the broken body of Christ. We re-member and re-present this every time we commune together. In the same way that Christ's body was broken, we can be broken as individuals and as a community. Through the sacrament, we become whole.

The church, as Christ’s sacramental body, has as its mission addressing the world’s brokenness. The church is called to seek the healing of the world and to bring wholeness to individuals and communities. The church does this by bringing individuals into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and into loving community with each other—then teaching the love of God and of neighbor as self.

In this sense, the church is called to be beloved community. The church is its truest and best self when it reaches across boundaries and breaks down dividing walls to bring about beloved community. This means bringing about reconciliation and healing by bringing people to God in Christ, to the restoration of their best selves, and into community with others.

Share Your Vision for The United Methodist Church:

I envision a United Methodist Church that fully claims its identity as a church that centers grace. This is a church that is open and inclusive of all people. It is a church that addresses racism in the church and in society, and actively seeks reconciliation, healing and justice for its LGBTQIA+ children. Such a church approaches ministry with an outward-facing and invitational love.

I also envision a worldwide United Methodist Church that is autonomous in governance, contextual in ministry, and connected in mission. Such a church would expand regional governance as a way of moving away from relationship structures born of colonialism. Such a church would recognize and respect contextual realities while shaping equitable structures for decision making. Such a church would increase regional autonomy while remaining connected through ministry partnerships and through the continued sharing of resources in ways that are equitable and that recognize historic oppressions.

My vision is of such a church, seeking to live out more fully its commitment to its worldwide covenant, “Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, [seeking] to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining a vital web of interactive relationships,” The Book of Discipline, ¶125.

This also is a church that is thriving and innovating, while at the same time offering stability, grounded in community, human decency, and the maintenance of norms. This is a church that is on the cutting edge of innovation, especially at the annual conference and local church level, while at the same time honoring the value of its institutional witness. Indeed, the institutional witness of a denomination grounded in Social Principles is vital at a time when societies are moving toward authoritarianism, and the normalizing of division and rhetorical violence.

I often think of our concerns about shrinking resources and the loss of churches. I have thought much about the narratives of scarcity and decline that we often rehearse among ourselves. And what I come to time and again is that the needs of the world and the power of who and whose we are have never changed. The world is still in need of Christ’s redeeming love. The world is still in need of the transformative and healing work of God’s Spirit. And God still calls us to God’s mission of redemption, healing, and transformation in the world, despite our size.

Despite our narratives of decline, Christ still redeems us and claims and calls us as his disciples. God still sends the Holy Spirit to equip and empower us for God’s mission, despite our shrinking balance sheets. None of our supposed limitations now or in the future can limit what God can and is doing, in and through The United Methodist Church. I envision a church that grabs hold of that vision and gets busy.

Describe Your Concept and Style of Leadership:

We are in a time of remarkable anxiety, uncertainty and flux. To thrive, we must build our capacity to adapt to a constantly changing environment and be willing to experiment our way to innovation.

This requires leaders who are theologically reflective, spiritually open, creative and collaborative, and unafraid to try new things. This requires leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity and tension and can effectively invite others into the messiness of the creative process.

Such leaders must have a high degree of spiritual and emotional intelligence, and be able to self-regulate and connect with others in ways that keep the tension of change within tolerable limits. These leaders must communicate urgency and, at the same time, project a non-anxious presence.

I believe this kind of leadership begins with self. To lead in ways that are spiritually grounded and healthy, we must manage ourselves, care for ourselves and deal with our own issues. From healthy and spiritually grounded selves comes healthy relationships, the very foundation of effective leadership.

I am a relational, collaborative and innovative leader who makes my own physical, emotional and spiritual health a priority. I am a visionary who is mission-directed and willing to experiment. I believe in surrounding myself with strong leaders, then equipping and allowing them to lead. I enjoy leading with people who are open to the creative movement of the Spirit, and I enjoy mentoring and developing new leaders.

I believe one can lead from the center or from the margins, and that leadership does not require position or authority. Leadership is an action and a way of life that only needs the power of the Holy Spirit, a vision of the coming “Kingdom” of God, and the willingness of the leader to risk.

Describe Your Gifts and Graces:

- I have a consistent prayer life that has been developed over decades as my bedrock.
- I am disciplined in my spiritual practices, including study, fasting, prayer, worship, giving, fellowship, and sabbath.
- I have disciplined and consistent practices of self-care.
- I am a strategic thinker and visionary with a passion for the health and vitality of The United Methodist Church.
- I bring creativity, passion, and an openness to the Spirit’s leading to my work. I enjoy experimenting on the way to innovation.
- I have been, and am, a consistent and passionate voice for justice and inclusion for all people. I take seriously the call of the Gospel to care for the “least of these” as we would for Christ himself.
- I am teachable. Throughout my ministry, I have actively sought out mentors amongst fellow clergy and the laity with whom I have served.
- I have made theological reflection on my ministry and life a regular practice.
- I am a reconciler. I hold strong convictions but am able to listen respectfully to others and bring people with divergent viewpoints together.
- I am relational and collaborative. Other leaders want to join me in leadership.
- I know how to help people grieve, and I believe that one of the key challenges to helping facilitate change is knowing how to walk people through the grief involved with change.
- I communicate effectively through my speaking and writing. I can inspire.
- I love deeply and am deeply loved by family and friends. I have a strong support network.
- I am resilient but don’t shy away from asking for help.

Describe How You Have Experienced the Call to the Episcopacy and How God Has Prepared You for the Episcopacy:

I have always experienced my call as a summons to pour myself out for Christ, to surrender my life to the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to completely reorient my life and

work toward bringing about God's "kingdom." My response to that call is the surrender described in Wesley's covenant prayer:

*"I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee...
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal."*

This has been my stance before God as I have sought to discern a call to the episcopacy. I have spent months in prayer and discernment and have sought the counsel of family and trusted friends. Throughout, I have experienced an inner sense that God is calling me to offer myself for the episcopacy. That sense of call has been affirmed by trusted confidants and by the Michigan delegation, through their endorsement. Formally offering myself to this process means opening myself to the even-wider discernment of the church.

I believe that God has prepared me to lead in a worldwide church in the midst of massive change. I have been given a worldwide perspective on the church and its ministry through eight years of work at the Connectional Table. I also have worked on every level of our church, from the local church, to the district and annual conference, to the general church level. Over the course of time, God has helped me understand the complexities of our worldwide connection and has given me the ability to deal with complexity and project calm in the midst of change.

God also has prepared me to lead change by giving me opportunities to develop skills in adaptive leadership. As a local church pastor, superintendent, and in my CT role, I have had many opportunities to lead innovation and build the capacity to adapt to change. I also have learned how to help people grapple with the grief associated with change.

I believe that what is required of an episcopal leader is the ability to inspire other leaders to lead. Throughout my ministry, I have inspired others to lead with me and have actively nurtured the leadership of both laity and clergy. As a former lay leader of one of my churches said,

"...leaders ask [Kennetha] to lead...She motivates and inspires people, and she articulates Christian values as a reconciler. For these and other reasons people like to work with her on difficult tasks." Don Jost, East Lansing University UMC

What has become clear from our struggles around the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the life and ministry of the church is that The United Methodist Church is being challenged to more clearly define itself. Who are we as United Methodists and what shall be our prophetic witness to the world?

God has prepared me to provide episcopal leadership in the midst of such questions by giving me opportunities to offer a consistent witness to a prophetic Gospel. I have a clear vision of a church that is inclusive. And I understand, from family and organizational systems work, the importance of clear self-definition. Over the years I have developed the ability to communicate clearly where

I stand, while still reaching across divides and staying connected with those whose opinions differ from my own.

A call to the episcopacy is a call to the spiritual leadership of the whole church and contextual leadership within an annual conference. It is, as our discipline notes, "...to facilitate the initiation of structures and strategies for the equipping of Christian people for service in the Church and in the world in the name of Jesus Christ and to help extend the service in mission," The Book of Discipline, ¶401.

Ultimately, I believe that episcopal leadership in The United Methodist Church requires a pastor's heart and a visionary's spirit. It requires being able to bring a message of hope, a clear vision for the church that is emerging and of the mission to which God is calling that church. It requires the ability to inspire.

I believe that I have been called to this role for this time in the life of The United Methodist Church. I look forward to the opportunity to offer myself fully to the discernment of my lay and clergy colleagues in the North Central Jurisdiction. My prayer is that we would allow the full reign of God's Spirit in that process, "...*freely and heartily yield[ing] all things to [God's] pleasure and disposal.*

Endorsements:

- Michigan Conference Delegation to General and Jurisdictional Conference
- BMCR of Michigan
- Black Clergy Women of The United Methodist Church

Episcopal Election Covenant has been signed and received by 2020 NCJ Secretary, Rev. Paul R. White.

Episcopal Candidate Forum:

The Rev. Bigham-Tsai will be participating in the North Central Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy (NCJCOE) video forum. This forum will consist of a fifteen-minute interview with each episcopal candidate who elects to participate. All interviews will be posted on the North Central Jurisdictional (NCJ) website on or around April 1, 2020.

