

“A Place for You at the Table” was the theme of the 156th Session of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, and those of us who could participate in the actions of “holy conferencing” were privileged to be enveloped by the love and care that such a statement represents. The sermons, music, displays, various worship services, and the fellowship of an in-person conference were centered on the love of God that welcomes all to the table—no exceptions, no boundaries. Hallelujah!

As one of your lay delegates to the North Georgia Annual Conference, it is my duty and honor to report to the congregation facts about the conference procedures and my observations of the same. Because the three days of meetings were so full and rich, I will direct you to the conference web pages for details on some subjects and encourage you to look at the Conference Handbook for detailed reports from the various committees of the Conference, including those that deal with financial matters. The Handbook is available at ngumc.org/handbook-2022.

The Conference was called to order after an inspiring worship service in which Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson preached a powerful sermon. As is tradition, the Charles Wesley hymn “And Are We Yet Alive?” was sung, and the meeting officially began. After some preliminary housekeeping, the Conference was made familiar with the work of the thirty persons who took part in the Common Table to discuss the focus of the North Georgia Conference (NGAC). The presentation consisted of how the group identified the Core Values of the NGAC (Integrity, Courage, Connection, Inclusion, and Transformation) and how these values led to establishing the five areas of focus for the work of the NGAC. During the meeting, each of the five areas was given space in the program. They are 1) Community Engagement; 2) Scriptural Literacy and Imagination; 3) New Faith Opportunities; 4) Racial Justice and Healing; 5) Health and Wellness. (See pages 141-43 and 191-92 of the Handbook for more information on the Common Table and the exciting goals for United Methodists in North Georgia).

On Thursday, the Conference voted to accept the disaffiliation requests of seventy churches in the NGAC. These churches went through a process starting in January/February of 2022 to sever their ties with the UMC. The process culminated with the votes in favor of leaving the UMC of 2/3 of each Church’s membership present at a church conference. It was a sad moment at Annual Conference and in the life of the Church, compounded by what seemed to be misunderstandings by some of the congregations as to what disaffiliation meant for them. The churches disaffiliating will no longer have pastors appointed to them; they have to remove the Cross and Flame logo and the name “United Methodist Church” from everything in and around their churches, and monies have to be paid to fulfill their financial obligations to the Conference, the Church assumes expenses for health insurance and pension payments for staff, as well as other items that are specified in the Disaffiliation Process, found in the Conference Handbook, pages 77-81. Any UMC member considering a vote on disaffiliation should become well informed about what disaffiliation means for their Church.

Please pay special attention to the report on the Barnes Fund (www.ngumc.org/BEAT). Money is pooled from the sale of church properties and other conference accounts into the Barnes Fund to be used as a grant funding mechanism that administers investments for the maximization of strategic missions across our Annual Conference. This is not a “slush fund.” The spending policies of the Barnes Fund team have been established to protect the corpus of the fund in perpetuity, ensuring that there will be grant money available equitably for the ministries of all eight districts of the Annual Conference.

The Service of Remembrance, held at each Annual Conference, honors clergy, clergy spouses, and laity who have passed since the last Conference. This year was significant as the Conference honored the life of Travis Woodward. He served the NGAC faithfully for many years, including an appointment to TFUMC, and continued his service to God in his retirement here at Tucker First. It was an honor to stand with Travis's daughters during his remembrance, especially since Travis has been a part of the life of the Andersen family since 1980. Well done, good and faithful servant!

On Saturday, a special service of licensing, ordination, and commissioning was held, and it was with great pleasure that the TFUMC delegation, friends, and family could stand in support of Rev. Anne Cumings as she was ordained as an Elder in Full Connection in the UMC. In addition to Anne's class of thirteen full connectional elders, there were eleven local pastors licensed, eleven provisional elders commissioned, and five connectional deacons ordained. Even in these turbulent times in the Church, people from various age groups and races are pledging their lives to God through work in the United Methodist Church. Through their Kingdom work, they will be making sure that, in the words of our Bishop, "at Jesus's table, no one dines alone."

It is also a joy to note that our District Superintendent, Rev. Dr. Byron Thomas, was affirmed as the Conference nominee for the episcopacy. The election of Bishops will take place during the Jurisdictional Conferences in November due to a particular ruling by the Judicial Council allowing for the election of Bishops even though the General Conference has not met. These called conferences will allow episcopal seats to be filled that have been vacant due to retirements and other circumstances. We ask God's blessings on Rev. Dr. Thomas.

In spite of the disaffiliations and the differences of opinions that came to light during parts of the business sessions of the Conference, the 156th Session of the North Georgia Conference of the UMC was powerful and uplifting. Celebrations through music, preaching, ordinations, sharing the Lord's Supper, and prayer were in the spirit of love and hopefulness. There are so many good things that we people called United Methodists can do together, in unity with one another, that could not be accomplished apart from our connectional Church. I celebrate the vision of the table—the Church--where everyone has a place, and all are welcome. I pray for God to be with our Church as we strive to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace."

Respectfully submitted,
Leigh Andersen