

# Love Is Making Room



## **Changing Times in the United Methodist Church**

A report from the North Georgia Annual Conference

By Joe W. Kilpatrick, Sr., Lay Delegate, Tucker First UMC

What is happening about the Protocol of Grace and Reconciliation through Separation? This Protocol is a set of “laws” changing our Book of Discipline and starting a process that will separate our annual conferences and local churches into different denominations.

By a 64.7% majority, The North Georgia Annual Conference, the largest by membership in the USA, voted to support this Protocol. There were 759 votes for and 414 against. 84 people abstained.

It is the responsibility of The General Conference, the worldwide legislative body of the UMC, to adopt or reject or amend our “laws.” That Conference is scheduled to meet in late August 2022. So, we are in a period of prayer and discussion and education until they meet.

In the meantime, the financial statements of our Annual Conference, presided over by Bishop Sue, tell us that the Fund Balance grew by \$26 million in the year ended 12/31/2020, with \$74.6 million unrestricted. The increase is mostly due to sales of churches. As of March 1, 2021, 49 properties have been sold with a value of \$21 million. Three other properties are under contract for \$2.2 million and 6 others are listed for \$1.6 million. This illustrates that local church property is owned by the Annual Conference, and simply held in trust by the members here at Tucker first.

Our Annual Conference holds investments of \$111 million and enjoyed a gain on its invested balances of 18.6% in 2020. \$70 million is earmarked for health and pension programs.

Also, in the meantime, the Annual Conference accepted a report from the trustees that codifies a process for North Georgia along with a model agreement that will allow its congregations to disaffiliate before the Protocol is adopted.

Bishop Sue challenged the delegates to consider the findings in a book entitled, “*The Autopsy of a Deceased Church.*” Indeed, the times are changing.

## **Annual Conference Report** **Leigh Andersen, Lay Delegate, Tucker First UMC**

The 155<sup>th</sup> meeting of the North Georgia Annual Conference was called to order for “holy conferencing” by Bishop Sue Halpert-Johnson and, as with the 154<sup>th</sup>, the meeting was held online. The business sessions on Friday, June 4, were condensed to accommodate the online format.

In calling for the church to practice “radical obedience” to the Holy Spirit, Bishop Sue talked about the need for “fresh expressions” –new ways to be the church. Referencing a church growth book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, the Bishop listed several ways to diagnose a dying church. The point, of course, was to help the conference understand what to look for and correct so that we make our churches vibrant and fresh rather than allowing them to die. It was a powerful call for faithful Methodists to be willing to be aware of and in touch with the communities in which we exist, to return to being willing to share our faith, and to be open to doing things differently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You can hear all of Bishop Sue’s opening remarks here:

<https://vimeo.com/559166333>.

Much of the business session was devoted to financial reports, which you may find on the Conference website should you choose to read them for yourself ([ngumc.org/handbook-2021](http://ngumc.org/handbook-2021)). Of particular interest in the Trustees report was the process of disaffiliation of a congregation from the UMC as presented in the Book of Discipline based on the vote at General Conference 2019; you may read the steps for the separation process as stated in the Book of Discipline on pages 48-53 of the Conference handbook. Later in the meeting, a resolution was presented regarding the proposed Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation (See <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/>). This is the legislation that will be proposed when General Conference meets in 2022 or in a special called session should there be such. The purpose of the North Ga Annual Conference vote on the Resolution presented to the conference was to determine if the majority of the voting members of the Conference support the Protocol; the Annual Conference cannot and does not make rules for the General Conference, but the vote in favor of this Resolution by North Georgia does represent support for passage of the Protocol by the Annual Conference when it is voted on at a General Conference meeting.

Two other resolutions that were not from standing committees were proposed (see pages 149 and 150, Conference Handbook) and passed by the Conference. One is recognition of the part the Annual Conference played in segregation, and it calls for apology to the Black community in North Georgia. The second is recognition of the need for support in the American Indian/Alaska Native communities for their youth. This is a group that is at high risk for suicide, and the Conference voted in favor of establishing strategies to help reduce the incidents of suicide in these populations.

It was interesting to hear and understand the steps that the Bishop and Cabinet have taken to help streamline processes in the Conference, and in so doing, help to make reductions in expenditures. As you know, we now have eight districts instead of ten, which reduces Conference financial obligations. The 2022 Annual Conference budget is conservative, due to consideration for the pandemic and the uncertainty in the church. Surplus funds are being used to reduce stress on the local churches that have suffered financially during the pandemic. Apportionments will also be reduced.

Regarding our district, Central South, our new District Superintendent is Byron Thomas who has served as Pastor-in-Charge at Ben Hill UMC. Quincy Brown, our outgoing DS, will be the senior pastor at Snellville First.

Other items of special note for Tucker First: For the first time, our church has been recognized as a Church of Excellence in Mission. Only six churches out of 1,000 churches in North Georgia were recognized for this

accomplishment, which gives folks at Tucker First even more reason for pride. There is a long list of criteria for receiving this award and Tucker First, through the work of the Mission Team and continued congregational giving, met all the requirements. Throughout the Conference, persons who retired from ministry in 2020 and 2021 were recognized. It was a joy to see a video of Mike Cash as he spoke about his years in ministry (ten of those years at Tucker First), and he gave a lovely commendation to his wife Connie, who has been his partner in ministry throughout his career.

The in-person gatherings of the Annual Conference bring many opportunities for making friends and renewing old friendships, celebrating through music and prayer, and hearing good preaching, which everyone misses. However, in this time of global pandemic my takeaway from the online meeting is that the Conference is filled with disciples who are doing their best to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in the lives of their churches. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to be the Church! And thank you, Tucker First, for the opportunity to represent you at Annual Conference.