



## As we gather for holy conferencing

Written: 5/7/2007

*"Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church..." -Acts 15:2-3*

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Baltimore-Washington Conference:

This May 24-26 the BWC clergy and lay members will follow the example of Paul and Barnabas and participate in holy conferencing at our annual conference session in Washington, DC.

Holy Conferencing is biblical and it is also Wesleyan. Methodists have used Holy Conferencing as a time set apart to testify, raise questions, discuss, consult, discern, set direction and account for the ministry of God among us. Conference gatherings were inspirational as members experienced worship, spirited singing and prophetic and instructional preaching.

Since the inception of Methodism at the Baltimore Christmas Conference 223 years ago, we have counseled together, putting personal agendas aside to listen to one another in order to hear the will of God.

Today, United Methodists gather in four types of holy conferences:

1. General Conference - We gather every four years to set the direction, policies, agenda, and budget for The United Methodist Church. It includes 1,000 clergy and lay delegates representing annual conferences from around the world.
2. Jurisdictional and Central Conferences - We meet every four years following General Conference in regions throughout the United States and around the globe to elect new bishops to serve the church.
3. Annual Conference - Smaller regional annual gatherings representing a group of local churches (in the Baltimore-Washington Conference we have nearly 700 congregations) to account for the ministry of the conference and its congregations and to discern and set the direction, policies, budget and agenda for the regional ministries.

4. Charge or Church Conferences - We gather in each of our congregations to account for the congregation's ministry and discern the direction and agenda for the congregation.

Conferencing in The United Methodist Church has been drifting away from holy conferencing -- inspiration, testimony, conversation, discernment, direction setting and accountability -- and drifted into reporting and the debate of differences.

However, the Baltimore-Washington Conference, to its credit over the past number of years, has been moving more intentionally toward holy conferencing. Some of the things we have done include:

- Increasing worship and Bible study time.
- Shortening the reports to a half hour on each day and providing more time for conference members to raise questions and be in conversation with one another.
- Celebrating aspects of our history and life together. This year we will celebrate the Washington Conference, the three hundredth anniversary of Charles Wesley and his hymns, the ministry of Sunday school teachers and small group leaders, retirees, and the servants of Christ who have received their eternal reward.
- Placing all legislative petitions in one section of our gathering so that the items that are most often dealt with in debate format are surrounded by celebration and worship. In the future I hope we can find methods to be in conversation and discernment during legislative time.
- Becoming more and more focused as we ask each entity of the conference to account for:
  - How will this help us become more like Christ?
  - How will this help us to call, equip, send and support spiritual leaders to make and engage disciples of Jesus Christ for the *Adventure*?
  - How will this help us to grow Acts 2 congregations?
  - How will this make our congregations the major focus of our mission to receive new believers, grow worship, engage in justice and mercy ministry and share in God's signs and wonders?
- Entering into annual conference through prayer and fasting and keeping prayer primary during annual conference. This year again, the planners for conference had their last meeting in early April with almost all of the details for annual conference completed by April 30. This leaves the rest of May for prayer and fasting.

I am inviting you to take two to four days between now and the annual conference session to fast. I also ask you to pray each morning for the annual conference and its participants. During annual conference there will be groups praying each morning for the day's ministry. I invite you to encourage your congregation to pray in worship on Sunday, May 20, and throughout the rest of the week in their homes for the annual conference session.

Your prayers will be a blessing to me and to all of the members of conference and our three days of holy conferencing.

For details about annual conference, view the Pre-Conference booklet, which includes the agenda, reports, budget and legislation. It can be found in the Web highlights section of the conference Web site at [www.bwcumc.org](http://www.bwcumc.org).

Keep the faith!

Your bishop and brother in Christ,

John