

Proceedings

Morning 2 Proceedings for April 24

(applause)

BISHOP CARLO A. RAPANUT: My pronouns are he/him. I am a male. I am a Filipino immigrant, born and raised in the mountains of Northern Philippines. I was raised up in ministry and ordained in the North West Philippines Annual Conference of the Philippines Central Conference. And I come to you by way of the Alaska Missionary Conference, where I served for fifteen years. And now I am the Episcopal Leader of the Desert Southwest Conference in the Western Jurisdiction.

I make those connections friends, this morning, because we don't do our work in a vacuum. Amen? We don't do our work in a vacuum, and we don't do this alone. And so, with that I want to introduce my team with me. I have Bishop John Schol of the Greater New Jersey, and, who is serving the Greater New Jersey Conference and the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. And Bishop Lanette Plambeck who is serving the Dakotas and the Minnesota conferences. And the embodiment of a guardian angel, Mr. Maurice Henderson, our parliamentarian, is here with us today.

We've got work to do, friends, but we are not doing this alone. They got my back; we've got your back. Turn to your seat mate and say, "I've got your back."

(crowd participation)

All right. In the Book of Acts, the disciple Peter, quoting the prophet Joel said, "In the last days God says I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young will see visions." Now I don't know about you, friends, but I'm excited. I'm ready to hear a vision today. I'm ready to hear a prophecy today. So the chair at this time recognizes the presenters of the Young People's Address. The chair recognizes Alejandra Salemi, who is joining us in person, and, by video, Senesie T. Rogers.

(pause)

ALEJANDRA SALEMI (Florida): Hello? There we go. I think that's my cue. Hello, everybody. Hi! Good morning! My name is Alejandra, and I am really grateful to be here this morning with you all. It feels really surreal to be here on the stage after years of anticipation for this General Conference. As I mentioned, my name is Alejandra, and I am one of the young people chosen to give this year's Young People's Address. My friend Senesie T. Rogers of Sierra Leone was not successful in receiving his visa to join us in person today, but he will be joining us afterwards in a video.

Funny thing is that Senesie and I were actually two of the three people chosen to give this address back in 2020. And, in preparation for this year's gathering, I went back and reviewed what we had originally written. Our initial biographies, our draft speeches from four years ago. And I'm sure you all feel similarly, but it's kinda crazy to think about how much things have changed from 2020 until now. For myself and I'm sure for most of us in the crowd. The beautiful joys in life, perhaps new life transitions, new partners, new opportunity, new life, all blended together with a massive amount of sadness and despair that seems to have emerged from four years ago.

Some estimates say that we have lost over seven million lives to COVID-19 since it started four years ago. We've also lost thirty thousand Palestinian siblings in the last six months alone to war and to genocide. There's ongoing gun violence in the U.S. and across the world, displacements due to armed conflicts and climate collapse. We've also lost church leaders, as well. It's been a long couple of years. And I wish I could say that in this bubble, in this moment right now, we're in a bubble of safety where none of those things can happen here, but I don't think our denomination is immune from all those difficult conflicts. And as we gather here at this General conflict...

(laughter)

Freudian slip, but maybe not! At this General Conference that will hopefully not be a conflict in the midst of what feels—

(applause)

In the midst of what feels like an emotional whirlpool, there's a lot of things that get stirred up for sure. We've tried to call what our church is going through, perhaps a general conflict, or a past season of schisms and separations and splits and disaffiliation. But no matter what we call it, to me, it feels like a divorce.

I remember sitting in my campus ministry at the University of Florida in 2019 at Gator Wesley, and I was watching the incredible J.J. Warren get up to the microphone at the special called General Conference that year. Do you all remember that?

(applause)

It was the first time that I ever remember feeling exceptionally proud of my fellow young people in The UMC. And I think for the first time I felt empowered to reclaim this church space as my own, even while she gets dismembered through a painful divorce.

The affiliation or disaffiliation process we have endured shares so many parallels to a divorce proceeding. And young people like myself and even younger—cause I have aged four years since I was supposed to give this speech—are feeling the weight of the emotional and the mental and the spiritual trauma that comes with it. Like many people in the audience, perhaps, I have watched the elders of my faith community that I grew up in preach one way on Sunday, dropping words like “love” and “grace” and “forgiveness” casually in their sermons, and then Monday through Saturday, pull together secret meetings, having police stand guard, smearing each other's names, and playing with once-cherished relationship like board games.

They said, “Don't worry, children. This is what's best. You will be ok. Not much will change for you.” All while they ripped up our homes brick by brick and continue throwing daggers at each other, parent to parent. I wonder if those leading divisive battle cries know that the children are watching. The young people are watching, and we internalize more than they even express or know. Do you know that as figurative, and sometimes physical, wrecking balls and sledge hammers get taken to our spiritual homes, there are children who remain inside counting on this to be a safe and transformative space, counting on churches to provide community services, public health services, respite?

As campus ministries get shut down, and summer camps and domestic/international aid efforts get slashed, I just wonder if the strategic moves to walk away with the bigger piece of the pie was worth it.

(applause)

When time and money and energy go towards a divorce, it has to be subtracted from somewhere else. And I believe that our young people and our local congregations are paying that price while resources go towards settlement disagreements.

(applause)

And I know, I'm not naïve. You might think I'm young, but I'm not naïve. I know that what's happening in The UMC is not an outlier compared to what's happening in the world. It is a scary time to be any age, and it's a scary time to be coming into your adulthood.

Polarization and isolation seems to be the norm in many places. And in this beautiful international gathering here, I know that what is happening in the US is not an exception to what's happening across the globe. A movement away from collective knowledge, away from science, away from public health best practices, from education, but also a movement away from compromising and listening to one another. And I just cannot figure out how we create a beloved community, a community that sees the humanity in each other, if that community is based only in political and theological echo chambers with thick and hate-filled walls that keep people separate.

I, like many of you, keep hearing all these fearful statements that the world is becoming corrupt and moving away from the church, and that the other side is the boogeyman coming to erase us all; that the necessary next step is a split. But I believe that creating a church or a community or any collective group of people that is based on conformity and uniformity and submission just so that we can have objective, correct ideas—it's a mistake. And I really can't imagine anything more antithetical to the work that Jesus did during his young adult life on earth.

The most difficult thing to hear in an echo chamber is the quiet knowing voice of the truth. God's loving whisper that reminds us to be still and to know.

When people find out that I'm involved with The UMC, which, sometimes, I'm like, you kinda bury the hatchet a little bit, they often ask me about how I feel about everything that's been unfolding over the last couple of years of the church. And perhaps you feel differently, but to me, sometimes I have a hard time differentiating between church negotiations and what is unfolding on the Congress floor. As I planned my speech, it became clear that there was two main audiences I needed to speak to. One audience is primarily seated in this room. It's you church leaders, delegates from across the globe who sit on cabinets and committees and lead churches and in the coming week and a half will be voting to represent your region in our global church.

You may not thought about it this way, but generations younger than you, and even younger than me see you as parental figures, as mentors during a divorce who are tasked with making decisions about the future of our church, where the energy and the money and the faithful support will best reinforce the fraying fabric of our connection. No pressure on the job that you guys have for the next week and a half.

I just got back from a quick trip to Portland to be with indigenous thought leaders, and they said something to me that feels really important in this room right now. They said, "Make decisions that will impact the next seven generations ahead." So, as you vote in this next week and a half, you're not just

voting for the churches and spaces you're going back to, but you're voting for the next seven generations to come.

The next audience for my speech are the actual children, are the young people—many of whom are not represented here because one day we will figure out how to make our church diverse among age as well. So maybe the young people who are listening on livestream; the upcoming generation who have heard the quiet whispers and sometimes even the loud fights during our church's division; the young people who are trying to support the church with their prayers and their presence and their gifts and services and witness, only to see their church camps get closed and their campus ministries closed and budgets slashed. Even those who were encouraged to explore [their] calling and go to divinity school and get a bunch of student debt, only to then be left with not knowing if they'll even have a job after they finish.

I know many people feel that what is about to unfold with this body during the General Conference is inevitable. But, be still and know. However the cards, fall we will figure out a way forward. We are a resilient people; we always have, and we always will. But just because we have found a way and can trust in the resilience of the Holy Spirit and our collective spirit, doesn't mean we don't have choices to make now and potential pitfalls to trip on. We have to own and name why we want to build a church together, what type of church we want to be, and how we're going to live into who we say we want to be together.

I don't think we have to have the exact same values. We don't all have to believe in the same thing. But we do have to have the same mission and the same direction. Maybe we'll take different paths to get there, but are we working towards liberation? Are we working towards health? Are we working towards unity of some sort that makes this earth look less like hell and more like heaven?

I know that one singular theological debate or position drove the disaffiliation and splits. And I also know that agreeing on one singular theological debate or position will not save our church or heal our relationships, but we do have to start somewhere. And no matter where we go from here, whether we continue to stay or others continue to go, I need you to hear this: The conversations around queer affirmation are not the last frontier for reaching justice and liberation, or peace, or whatever our UMC goals are.

(applause)

There's still a lot of work to be done.

We can be the people that stops choosing and finally considers the full humanity of church; choosing to not make an enemy of the other side, but recognizing that we are called to unite and not divide. We can be an inflection point. We can be the point where the tide started turning and we finally became the church we were meant to be: one that heals, one that unites, one that liberates.

We are not here simply to formalize backroom deals beforehand. We are here to be a Holy Conference and make conversations, form a beloved community with one another, to listen and to repent.

You are decision makers, and I want you to be change makers out in the world, too. Because once this General Conference is finished and we are done writing the specific rules of what the next couple of years will look like, the work is just starting not beginning because the church is out there, and I just

keep wanting to bring that up. The things that you are doing here are important, but once you leave and go back to your homes, that's where we really have to begin the church, and have to begin building the church that we need to, or that we have envision in creating.

We have many, many barriers to break together before the church is free from its sins of diminishing personhood and worth due to whatever social identity is on trial in the moment.

As I mentioned, our time together reflecting on where we were four years ago was how I started this talk. And I have to be honest now, I actually left out a really important thing that has changed for me personally since 2020: My struggle with anxiety. And depression, but anxiety specifically.

My struggle with anxiety has grown from this quiet lingering whisper of my teens and early twenties to a crushingly booming voice that it is today. You might not know this about me but my background is actually in public health. I consider myself to be a scientist by day, and theologian by night—it's confusing. So, I'm going to give you a little bit of public health background knowledge on anxiety for a second.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that about a third of people struggle with some sort of anxiety, making it one of the most common mental health illnesses worldwide. So, if you look around you, it's very likely that one in three of us in this room will deal with some sort of anxiety at some point in our lives; and might even be dealing with that right now, as my palms are very sweaty.

I remember my anxiety spiking the most at the height of the pandemic. I was working at the Florida Department of Health as a contact tracer, and I was helping tally up the daily death counts in the county where I was working at. At the same time, I was worried about the well-being of my family, whether I would lose a loved one. I was also dealing with political unrest. It was a crazy time. And my anxiety has continued to intensify during the last couple of years as we saw this consistent stream of hate crimes and extremism and political uncertainty and climate disaster.

I'm often left pretty frozen in fear and hopelessness; panic attacks just spirals. And I know that the sentiment shared with many about anxiety is not one that I hold alone, and I know there's probably many who understand what I'm talking about. And it just so happened that this year's General Conference theme was "Be still and know". Upon hearing it, it quickly connected in my mind with the phrase, "Fear Not". Right? We all know it's said 365 times in the Bible so we can say it every day to remind ourselves to not be afraid. But, in the process of writing this it also was really interesting to find other translations of the phrase that is sprawled all over the walls of the conference, and you've probably seen it said a billion times in your time being here. There's a translation a little more forceful. A translation that says, "Shut up and know that I am God."

(laughter)

Doesn't it land a little bit better? Doesn't it just you feel— it's appropriate, I think. And perhaps a little jarring, so, no offence to anybody who may be offended. It's a divine reminder, I would call it, to shut up. But one that I think, as you all saw, makes me chuckle. And perhaps it's less endearing, but this more potent translation embodies to me what anxiety feels like. In a moment when I am experiencing a panic attack, sometimes there's this deep wisdom within, this *imago Dei* within, that kicks in and tells me to "be still"—to know, to feel, to trust, to be patient; and tells my anxiety to "Shut up". It allows this divine

feeling in without judgement, and it allows my anxiety to turn from my enemy to my friend and it takes the backseat.

I want to make sure that my message to my fellow youth and young adults in the great Methodist diaspora is clear. The brokenness that is in the world, that sometimes leaches into our souls and into our bones, and distances us from hope, that is not divine truth; that is not, to me, the spirit of the creator and of the divine. I do believe that even in the darkest of days that there is so much beauty and goodness in the world. There's so much worth in humanity. We can be the worst, but we can also truly, truly be the best, and it's a choice that we get to make every day.

I do believe that we can still turn this ship around and prevent worse climate collapse; that we can broker peace; that we can have safety with our neighbors both locally and internationally. And I do believe that there's still time. So if you don't have hope right now, whether you're a young person or not, just know that I have enough hope for the both of us right now. And then maybe when those grey storm clouds that sweep over my soul, will you have enough hope for me when I don't have enough hope?

There's this great beautiful, flourishing church that will be rebuilt, I don't have a doubt of that. A new age of divinity embodied that will allow for heaven on earth with a bounty of nourishment and safety and love and belonging and liberation. I just can't image a God that would put those emotions on our hearts without helping orchestrate them into reality. I just don't believe in a God cruel enough to help us imagine a heaven on earth and then not find a pathway to do so.

(applause)

So I conclude with the acceptance that I just simply don't know that much. But I am reminded to be still, to hush my fears, to shut up sometimes, and to trust in the tug deep in my soul to continue to dream and hope for a heaven on earth. Despite our own infighting and the cannibalistic nature that has dismembered us all over in the past couple of years, to cancel the other side, to place blame, to paint the other as evil and force a fight and force a divorce, I know that this is not the true purpose of our humanity. Re-remembering, sowing the pieces back together, rebuilding. Re-remembering. Because Jesus is and always has been out there in the world, dreaming and hoping and trusting, and he continues to be out there in the world.

I remember there was a point in the pandemic where I was living a life in a box. I was taking classes online, working online, I was doing Zoom happy hours online. I'm sure you all remember it, too. I was living a life of complete disconnect from reality. And so as I mentioned, while The UMC continues to divide up its assets in here, I urge us not to live in the boxes of these conference halls and the Zoom meetings and the contracts and the documents and the plans. Because I think you already know this, but the magic of the Spirit, it's not in the stack of books in front of you. It's not in the Zoom rooms. It's out there, when we look at each other eye to eye. It will be found out there in the real world with our feet in the grass, with dirt under our nails, interacting with one another, shaking hands eye to eye, being in human connection together. So while we continue to inhabit these halls for the next two weeks, and then as you return to your respective homes, I urge you to live in a world beyond the parameters that we have created and allow for the Spirit to bring back that spirit into your local spaces. And I don't want to minimize the work that you all have for the next couple of weeks. There's big work to be done still in here. But it's just a fragment, and I hope you will remember the beautiful things that lay ahead for us

collectively. Because the kingdom of God, the heaven on earth that I always envision, it's waiting for us out there, and I am so excited to both meet you here but I'm also excited to bump into you out in the world. Thank you for giving me time this morning. I appreciate you all and the work that you're doing. I want to turn it over to my dear friend Senesie, who has a video message for us.

(The following portion of the address was delivered via video.)

SENESIE ROGERS (Sierra Leone): *(via video)* Greetings, everyone.

(applause)

I'm Senesie Timothy Arunah Rogers from Sierra Leone, West Africa. I currently serve as the chairman of the West Africa Central Conference Youth and Young Adults Organization. I'm a barrister at law and a solicitor of the High Court of Sierra Leone. Nothing gives me pleasure than joining God's people to chart a way forward for our beloved church. May God's name be forever praised.

Fellow United Methodists, we are once again assembled to share in gifts which God has blessed us with since 1784. We are here united in our capabilities to make decisions for our beloved denomination. May it please you that I introduce myself through a story from my home church, Trebes Memorial United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone. More often than not, my home church's culture is that of an objective church rather than a subjective church. By that I mean, the culture of our church focuses on facts and how we value the idea of impartiality when we share facts with each other. We become prepared to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, and opinions by first agreeing on the facts in front of us. The objectivity of Trebes can mostly be observed in the debates that arise during our leadership council meetings. Because we value each other and build a culture of respect, our council meetings always have what I will call "beautifully dissenting views" or rather, I should say, almost always.

One resounding exception to the objectivity of Trebes United Methodist Church occurred during a council meeting sometime in my late boyhood. At this meeting, subjectivity reigned supreme. Personal feelings, tastes, and opinions took the place of fact. And I still vividly remember this meeting because it was quite unusual. I was not a council member, but I could watch the quorum from my seat. Watching council meetings at the time was like watching movies. I was expected to be quiet, with no voice and no vote, observe the interactions carefully and perhaps even sneak in some popcorn or another treat, in case there was drama or comedy to enjoy. It was considered quite an opportunity to attend, as long as one conducted oneself in an appropriate manner.

During the said meeting, an agenda item was announced by the chairperson in the normal course of the business. This agenda item required a decision by the council, and it had to do with whether or not to dispose of the only casket trolley we had for use in our church. For those of you who live in parts of the world where your church does not require a casket trolley, a casket trolley is used to handle and transport coffins. They often have four wheels and are made of metal and can withstand heavy weights. The best of these can be folded or collapsed so that they can be hidden away in storage when they are not in use. Our church's casket trolley was certainly not considered to be among the best. Everyone in the council meeting burst into laughter upon hearing the announcement of this agenda item. Why? The entire council already knew this casket trolley was not the best. It was a motion on which every council member voted in the affirmative with nearly no discussion. There was not a single member that dissented. And to this day, I think the decision was among the fastest that our council ever made, and in

part, I believe, it was because many in our church considered the casket trolley to be what you might call an eyesore. This casket trolley was welded locally. It had four wheels and was painted a bright sky blue color. Very durable, very stable, and easy to use, but it could not be folded or collapsed for storage. It did not fit in the vestry, so instead of being hidden in storage, it was kept in the middle aisle of the sanctuary outside church services or outside in a public view when service was ongoing. Imagine walking or driving by our church as a stranger or as a visitor and wondering why this church was always so ready to help with a burial.

Suffice it to say, there were many reasons that council was ready to dispose of this particular casket trolley. The sight of it became so irritating that this poor trolley seemed destined for disposal from its very first appearance as an item agenda. The ruling for its disposal was overwhelming. The council definitely knew the need for a casket trolley could arise without notice. After all, life is beautiful and fragile. But at the same time, the leadership definitely preferred to be free of its sight. All at once, we preferred makeshift tables for caskets as funeral services. We considered carrying caskets on our shoulders for processions and recessions. We preferred enduring the pain that accompanies the carrying of a casket on our shoulders rather than enduring the sight of a casket trolley. In our own way, the trolley continually reminded us of death. As a child, if I had to be asked, "Child, has our Christian faith and spiritual practice helped us not to fear death?" With wide eyes I would have answered, "Absolutely not. We even seem to be terrified by a casket trolley." Looking back with more mature eyes and a better understanding of the scriptures, didn't Christ, in comforting Martha in the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 25 assure us all that he is the resurrection and the life and that anyone who believes in him will live even though they die? And that whoever lives believing in him will never die? Yes indeed. Christ left us with that assurance.

Again, looking backwards from my current point of view, how then did the church council, presided over by a lead pastor and his associate, together with the lay representatives, seem so forgetful of God's promise of abundant life? Perhaps they were each overburdened and forgetful of the teaching that in death, in freedom, Christ has set us free, and that in our freedom we are blessed with opportunities to stand firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery. This therefore simply means that the fear of death, of dying, either personally or corporately, can make us slaves to the ways of this world and make us forget the freedom God gives us to not conform to the patterns of this world. Embracing that freedom may not be the easiest thing to do as Christians, and there is no arguing that. But we at the same time should be reminded that whenever we tend to elevate or idolize earthly things, our level of faith and passion for the process of salvation dissipates, and there is no arguing that, either. Ultimately we become slaves to subjectivity, judging situations, opinions, and even people, based solely on their experiences in this world, when we ought rather to be engaged in loving and caring for others because God had first loved us. Habitually we have found that various cultures making idols out of ambition, success at all costs, generating personal happiness at the expense of others, military or political acquisition, sex and human sexuality, patriotism, and money. Sadly, these traits blur our visions to the realities of life. Instead of allowing Christ to take the lead in our hearts in making decisions, we have rather fallen for the bait of allowing idols to lead us down the paths that might result in choices inconsistent with experience of God.

I suppose it is little wonder that my home church could be terrified at the sight of a casket trolley that could not be hidden away. The trolley was of course useful and purposeful to ease the burden of carrying caskets, but it seemed that our wavering faith and idolatrous influences have trapped us into

misinterpreting its presence as a reminder of death and dying. Such misinterpretations exist not because we cannot free ourselves from them; rather, they exist because we find ourselves repeating the patterns of this world as opposed to the patterns of God's ways demonstrated through the life of Jesus and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Looking around this room today, it is my ardent prayer that we do not see others as if they were casket trolleys nor symbols of an inevitable death or eyesores that you must try and cast off so that we are not reminded of the realities of our making decisions. Though we may from time to time be drawn to these frailties, let us all be reminded that hidden in the pages of the Bible are God's revelation of freedom and love, which can transform and change and make us whole.

Fellow United Methodists, another worrisome moment is once again upon us. Though we may not be visibly shaken, moments like these can inspire in us feelings of anxiety and worry. At the commencement of each plenary session, we are invited to holy conferencing where we open our institution up for introspection. And at such points, we know not what may become of our church until all votes on motions are cast and the next adjourned dates announced. Gathered here today, we may all be concerned about the effects of disaffiliations on ourselves personally and also on the church. An inconvenient truth in our tradition is that the seeds needed to explore dividing the church were planted in the first General Conference in 1792, which was attended only by clergy. We have thereafter felt its effect on nine splits and one major schism in first hundred years or so of The United Methodist Church. For those unfamiliar with that early history, we could make the case that splits define some of our traditions as Methodists. We may still feel unease at this tradition whenever it cycles into our gatherings, but that feeling doesn't change the fact that division is an inherent part of our tradition.

After that bleak assessment, allow me to offer some hope. I believe it is pointless to worry about splits and the effects when we already know that splits and Methodism are intertwined. Do you know that there is something else a part of our tradition? Indeed. Reconciliation and coming together is part of our tradition. We must be more about uniting than dividing at this point. Splits often take the form of disagreements, predicated on tense desire for change. Early on, John Wesley yielded permission for the Methodist Episcopal Church to split off from his movement in Britain. John Wesley and his brother in Christ, George Whitfield, found their disagreements eventually lead to two different paths for their movements. The desire for change is a deep-seated tradition for us. And it is OK for us to own that tradition and that was exactly what the 1792 conference established. It did set the precedent to meet every four years for the sake of considering changes to and for the body. Therefore, in seasons where splits shake our organization, I believe we ought to be genuinely mindful of the consequences that the split may give birth to.

My home church bore the consequences of carrying caskets on our shoulders, a process which of course the casket trolley could have made less burdensome. It is fair enough that my beloved home church chose to bear an excess burden; however, I worry that my church sidestepped dealing with our inner fears as Christians and missed an opportunity for deepening our discipleship. Grounding ourselves in scripture while making decisions often produces safer consequences and, by extension, safer tradition. My meaning of this is that being open to change is not an evil in itself; rather, the factors that motivate us to make a change must be examined. Being wrongly motivated in the changes we seek could indeed be considered an evil. John Wesley was himself open to change. He was also bold enough to engage in constructive discussions in which he examined, challenged, reexamined his own views. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, admonished the church and its members in their criticism of each other because every Christian regardless of his particular conviction is a member of God's household. According to the author

of Romans, if God has welcomed a person into God's family, no other family member has the right to criticize God's acceptance of that person. Paul's admonition was not meant to open floodgates in order for us to engage in all the behaviors that can cause ills in the world. Rather, the value of a person as a beloved member of God's family should always be remembered, even when the behavior and the motivations behind the behavior of that family member may cause tension. This cautions us to guard against being blinded by self-interests, distrust, or even violence whenever we dive headfirst into corporate decision making. We should exemplify our duty to care for each other, practice self-restraint, and pursue the general good as opposed to seeking institutional freedom by any means necessary, obtaining rights at all cost.

Friends, we are growing into an era of a young and more diverse leadership. That is, as long as we continue to open doors and help upcoming generations learn about opportunities in front of them and the process we agree to use to create positive change, we must continue to adopt more capacity for rationality and reason in our decision making. Young people growing up now are surrounded by misinformation, disinformation, endless spin, alternative facts, and faulty logic that leads to flawed decision making. What a better example could you be to the generations who are younger than you are by being someone who can be trusted source that embraces facts over fiction and someone who helps to filter out the noise of this world so faith can grow?

Our interpretation of the scripture and how this applies to our individual situations ought to be logical in theory. Every cultural heritage, due to the unique combinations of different peoples, cultures, effects of colonization, and even the evolution of religious expressions creates different experiences where we grow and discover our identity in Christ. The combinations that form are endless, and this can create superstitions and assumed best practices for nearly every aspect of life, including birth, eating, sleeping, marriage, work, and yes, even death. What we may not realize about these superstitions is that despite the acceptance of Christ as our lord and personal savior, they continue to influence us in our everyday lives, often without us realizing it. In some ways, our superstitions can antagonize our intentional efforts to model ourselves after Christ.

You have probably noticed by now that my talk is moving around the Quadrilateral Doctrine, or what has been called the Wesley Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This doctrine, as an applicable art, can help us fully understand our inclinations towards our various cultural heritage. It can also help us better understand why we might cling to them when we encounter other people whose life experiences challenge our own. It is this core value that makes it stand out from the other Christian traditions. It proposes that scripture does not stand alone; rather, it stands alongside reason, tradition, and experience as we seek the truth and the next best step. Our Wesleyan tradition holds that while scripture is the foundation of our faith, it is not the only leg that our faith has to stand on. Rather, our faith is steadied by additional forces, meaning scripture is to be interpreted. John Wesley would certainly agree that knowing scripture must mean more than simply memorizing the letters we read on the page or hear repeated to us. He admonished that scripture be best interpreted using tradition, reason, and experience. Our personal experiences of the grace of God vary, and on no account should one experience be considered inferior to the other. God is generous with grace, after all. Gaining this awareness can admonish this truth that our experiences in living out of faith can vary to the point that holding others to account based solely on our personal experiences or our personal feelings can be dangerous.

In conclusion, if I were to use the Quadrilateral to look back on my church's decision about the casket trolley, one would want to rethink the terror the sight of the trolley caused. Our cultural heritage and traditions regarding that could have strongly influenced our decision without our awareness. To some extent, we believe the presence of certain items around us can influence the utmost fear and by extension the things that happen to us. Some young people might now refer to this phenomenon as when *the vibe is off* or *the energy doesn't seem right*. Perhaps some of our church leaders believed that casket trolley invited death into our midst. In another cultural setting, perhaps a phrase like *it just doesn't project who we want to be* or *it is bad optics to have that be the first thing someone sees* could be the case. In another cultural reality, perhaps the trolley would have been lifted up to a venerated status, demonstrating the workmanship of a local crafter and serving as a symbol of what we as a church can be no matter what life or death holds for us. Our responses to an object or a situation may be different, and we can still find unity as long as we share our faith in the redeeming grace obtained from the death and resurrection of our lord and savior Jesus Christ.

Finally, I must, as a matter of importance, give voice to the fact that enjoying the fruits of faith and utilizing the Quadrilateral does not go without persecution nor does it easily solve every disagreement. Nonetheless, I do believe our faith guarantees that in the midst of every persecution and every decision we are tasked to make that our hearts shall find comfort and encouragement in Psalm 46, verse 10, which instructs us to "be still and know that I am God." Engraving these words on our hearts this week will help us in difficult moments. When we return home to report and share stories about our experiences here, demonstrating how we learned to be still and listen and know that God is indeed God can be a powerful witness about our ability to connect with each other. In a world full of competing interests, it is easy to forget to acknowledge God. It is only when we are still and quiet that we are privileged to hear God's still, small voice. God himself spoke to Elijah in a whisper. One might always expect God to be as loud and as obvious as the burning bush that Moses encountered, but many more prophets report the God experiences in the quiet, in the still, as a whisper. When Elijah was waiting on the mountain for God to pass by, God did not appear in the great and powerful wind that tore and shattered the rocks, nor was God in the earthquake nor the blazing fire. Rather, our lord chose to speak in a gentle whisper. It was in that whisper that Elijah got the proper instructions.

Dear friends, here you are seated at the top of the highest legislative mountain that you could possibly climb in The United Methodist Church. Those seats serve as an apt metaphor for the high mountain on which God instructed Elijah to patiently wait for God to pass by, and the question is, do we intend to be quiet enough? Are we ready to be still in order to figure out in what areas we can distinctly hear God's still, small voice? I pray that we can. Once again, I am Senesie Timothy Arunah Rogers from Sierra Leone, West Africa. May God's name be forever praised.

BISHOP RAPANUT: Amen.

(applause)

We want to thank Alejandra and Senesie for—

(applause)

bringing the word.

Friends, we do not do this work in a vacuum. Our children, the young people, are watching. And if you are a young person who is watching this, if you are a page or an observer because you're not here on the floor, we ask for your forgiveness. Forgive us for setting you aside or tokenizing you. We commit, I commit, to doing things better.

(applause)

Friends, the next three items of business for us are overviews of legislative items that are coming before you in your legislative committees, and so this next item of business is the *General Book of Discipline* report. The chair now recognizes Bishop Harald Rückert, Bishop Ciriaco Francisco, Khuliswa Masiso, and Dee Stickley-Miner to provide their report. Let's welcome them, please.

(applause)

DEE STICKLEY-MINER (West Ohio): Go ahead. Go ahead, Artur. Start.

ARTUR MANUEL (Western Angola): *(indecipherable)* *(simultaneous interpretation from Portuguese)* God because the God created and gave us an opportunity. Let's talk in the language that I have, Portuguese, and thank you, I invite everybody to stand up. Let's put everybody. Stand up and let's praise God, and thank you, Lord.

(music)

BISHOP HARALD RÜCKERT: Thank you, thank you. What a wonderful introduction into our report. What could be better than starting a report in the presentation with singing. Thank you, Artur. *Obrigado*, Artur.

(laughter)

We want briefly to introduce ourselves to you. We, the presenters. Dee, will you start, please?

STICKLEY-MINER: Sure. My name is Dee Stickley-Miner, and I have been serving as the secretary of the Standing Committee, and I'm from the United States.

BISHOP CIRIACO FRANCISCO: I'm Ciriaco Francisco from the Philippines, chair of the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters.

KHULISWA MASISO (South Africa): I am Khuliswa Masiso *(indecipherable)* from South Africa. I am the member of Standing Committee.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: I am Harald Rückert, coming from Germany. I'm a bishop there, and I'm the vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters.

Friends, I am proud to belong to a connectional church. The connectional perspective was core to Methodist movement from its beginning. All started with a conviction that we do better in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ together than alone. So "connectional" meant to support each other to witness Jesus Christ to the people in our communities around us in the best possible way. Connectionalism, it was all about mission. We cannot be in mission with each other outside of relationship. So connectionalism also meant being in covenant with each other, not only in the good days but in the bad days as well. This is important so we can live within God's mission and within the community that God wants to create as part of God's mission for us humans. A covenant is related to

trust, but trust is built through relationship, not through legislative text. Living within a covenant of trust and mission invites us to ask the tough questions with each other while remaining in relationship with one another.

MASISO: We the people of The United Methodist Church in more than 130 countries worldwide live in quite different contexts in terms of legal, financial, and political systems, history, culture, perception of life, geography, and so on. We witness to the one gospel of Jesus Christ in these different settings. What works in the U.S. is not necessarily needed in Africa. What reaches the hearts of people in the Philippines might completely miss the needs of Europeans.

STICKLEY-MINER: Africans know best what the people on the continent of Africa need and how missions should look like there. Not we in the United States, not you in Europe, and not you in the Philippines. We must refrain from telling them. Do we trust that Africans are the experts?

BISHOP RÜCKERT: We the Europeans know best what the people in Europe need and how mission should look like in our various countries. Not you in the U.S., not you in Africa, and not you in the Philippines. Please trust us and refrain from telling us.

MASISO: And the mission experts for the Philippines are you, sisters and brothers in the Philippines. The mission experts from the U.S. are you, the sisters and brothers here in the U.S. We trust you and will refrain from telling you.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: The key question for a connectional church is, How can we support each other to witness Jesus Christ in the best possible way to the people and communities around us?

BISHOP RÜCKERT: Look around you.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: Listen to each other.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: Those different voices. Those different images.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: We come from distinct cultures with different languages, rhythms, and customs. It is beautiful, and it's just the way God created it. The creation story clearly shows us that God values diversity.

MASISO: When God created trees, God created many diverse kinds of trees. The birds are different in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Americas, and they sing different songs.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: This is God's world, one with diversity is claimed as good, and it thrives. We The United Methodist Church are at the place where we can truly see and value diverse contexts in which we live and give each other the freedom to witness to the neighbors God has given us in ways that honors both the context and the gospel.

STICKLEY-MINER: To do this, we must move away from a church that intentionally centers the United States. Friends, this is not a judgment. We must remember that our beloved United Methodist Church was a U.S. church that invested in spreading the gospel around the world. The structure we currently have worked for a U.S. church that had mission posts around the world. But God blessed our mission work, and the church grew and thrived in all parts of the world. The U.S. should no longer be at the center of the church, and we in the U.S. do not want to be at the center of the church. We know that our colonial past is not the way to go. Regionalization allows us to be on an intentional journey of

repentance, repentance from the legacy of colonization that continues to shape the way we see ourselves and each other. It allows us to let each part of the body of Christ grow and thrive without trying to control it from our own vantage point.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: When the Methodist movement became more like a Methodist organization, we started to produce paragraphs, regulations, clarifying regulations, new regulations, and other clarifying regulations. Our printed book of law, *The Book of Discipline*, grew thicker and thicker by the time. Whenever there was a problem somewhere in the world, a new regulation was created for everyone. This prompted the deep misunderstanding that connectionalism would be about legal work and church law. We lost the clear understanding of the beginning that connectionalism is all about mission. We lost the clear sense that the sisters and brothers in other parts of the world are the mission experts for their regions. We started to dominate and control each other, but no region can claim to be the center and declare those others to be the periphery. We lost the spirit and focused on the letter, and now we are about to experience what the apostle Paul has already told us in 2 Corinthians 3:6, where he said, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life."

MASISO: The concept of worldwide regionalization is not new at all, but it must be reaffirmed and intentionally further developed. To do this, good legislation that has emerged from a collaboration between the STC, the Connectional Table, and representatives of the Christmas Covenant has been submitted to you.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: But even more important than the legislation is the attitude which we embrace: worldwide regionalization. And what a *General Book of Discipline* could provide to the whole church in addition to the key question no. 1, how can we support each other? Our attitude towards each other is crucial for the future of our church.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: So the second key question for us all is, are we willing to trust each other? Are we willing to invest in trust rather than controlling each other or imposing our limited views on each other? Besides, beyond and underneath all the current challenges, tensions, fears, and hopes, it is ultimately all about trust. Trust is our most valuable currency as United Methodists. It starts with trust in God, who invested in us. Do I trust his love with respect to my personal life, the bright sides and the dark, my dreams and my fears? Do I trust his love with respect to disruption of our United Methodist Church? Do I trust in God who has called me into this United Methodist Church?

Friends, do you trust in God?

STICKLEY-MINER: Trusting in God makes us able to invest trust in one another. The poison of mistrust and suspicion is at work among us for too long. Friends, let's invest trust in one another. I will trust you to love the neighbors God has given you. I will trust you to share the life-transforming gospel with your neighbors in ways that invite them to follow Jesus and spread his healing and redemptive love. Let's invest trust. It might seem risky and the United Methodist movement will flourish when we no longer bow to fear and suspicion.

Dear fellow United Methodists, trust in God and trust in each other. This investment cannot fail. This investment will pay out eventually, so let's invest trust.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: To be more relevant to people and society in our various contexts, we need freedom to shape our churches accordingly. To stay together as connectional church, we need to trust

rather than detail regulations. We can support each other to better witness Jesus Christ. The concept of worldwide regionalization promotes the mission of The United Methodist Church through relevance, equity, and trust.

MASISO: As we develop and deepen our ability to trust God and each other, a more focused *General Book of Discipline* will be important. Intentional or not, our current *BoD* reflects a colonial model that makes the United States the focus of General Conference. Jurisdictional conferences can only elect bishops and do some programming. They are not, however, given authority to make decisions about the church in the United States.

Friends, this way of functioning is not helpful to anyone. We from central conferences must prepare and vote on things that only matter to the United States and not us, and it is not fair to the U.S. church that everyone must vote on matters related only to them. We do not need the rest of the denomination to vote on matters specific to our central conferences. Why would we require that for the U.S.? If we want to be the body of Christ, we need a *BoD* that unites us missionally and is freed from any narrow culture understanding.

STICKLEY-MINER: So the members of the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters were elected by the previous General Conference. Lay and clergy members must be General Conference delegates when elected and come from each Central and Jurisdictional Conference, along with a bishop from each. It is the only committee with the majority of Central Conference matters. Its mandate is to review *The Book of Discipline* and to draft a new *General Book of Discipline*. We partner with the Commission on Faith and Order, Connectional Table, and the Study of Ministry Committee to move from a *Book of Discipline*, which was written when we were a U.S. denomination with a missional outpost, to a *General Book of Discipline*, which recognizes the culture, context, and legal systems of each country where we are in ministry.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: A *General Book of Discipline* allows us to focus on our connectional identity. Our doctrinal standards remain unchanged and valid for every region of the worldwide United Methodist Church. It will also determine what can be adapted by each region in part 6 of *The Book of Discipline*, on organization and administration. Our hope is more a more succinct and truly worldwide *General Book of Discipline* that both connects us as United Methodists and allows us more freedom to engage in mission and ministry within our diverse contexts. We've learned some critical things as we worked over last quadrennium.

MASISO: Feedback requested after the 2016 General Conference was helpful in developing the current draft. Receiving input from leaders across our diverse contexts is essential to create equity.

BISHOP FRANCISCO: Because the United Methodists was started as a U.S. denomination, the core of our *Book of Discipline* is shaped by its culture and context. As such, we found it challenging, if not impossible, to create a *General Book of Discipline* that was not a reflection of the U.S. context without changing or adding words. The task of just dividing the current *Book of Discipline* into adaptable and unadaptable sections required new words to create coherent narrative. The Committee on Faith and Order has been assigned Petition No. 20157, asking the mandate to work on the *General Book of Discipline*, includes the ability to add and delete words and concepts and have it still included in the *General Book of Discipline* instead of being separated into separate petition. We ask for your support on this.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: Because the voice of each region matters, as we determined what should be included in a non-adaptable *General Book of Discipline*, we are inviting each annual conference to organize the conversation to share your insights on first, what in the first five sections of the *Book of Discipline* should remain non-adaptable, such as the Constitution, and whether there are portions which should be adaptable. And second, as you review the draft of the *General Book of Discipline* found in the ADCA, look at section 6 on general organization and administration. Are there parts that could be adaptable? Are there parts that are in there in the section which are not adaptable but you think they can become adaptable, they can be changed and moved? Please, let us know. And also let us know if there are inaccuracies in the written draft. Let us know. Please organize yourself and entrust us with your thoughts. We are better when all voices participate in this process.

STICKLEY-MINER: We would now like to invite you to be in conversation with members of your delegation for just a couple of moments around the following two questions. They are also on the screen in French, Portuguese, and English.

The first one, How will your delegation enable your annual conference leadership to review the draft and provide feedback to the Standing Committee by December 31, 2024?

BISHOP RÜCKERT: And the second, Who from your delegation will take the responsibility to lead and organize a conversation around the present draft of the *General Book of Discipline* in your annual conference?

Please ask the person with the neatest handwriting to print the name of the person and their email or address or phone number and the annual conference, and provide us this information. The pages will collect these sheets of paper to share with the Standing Committee leadership so we can stay and remain in conversation with you.

Start your conversation at the table around the two questions that have been asked. We will see them on the slide?

Stickley Miner: Yes, should see them on the slides. The questions. There they are. And so we will give you a couple of moments and when you start hearing the singing again, that's when we're going to come forward.

BISHOP RÜCKERT: And have good conversations!

Stickley Miner: Wait, we'll wait a couple of moments.

(table conversations)

(music)

BISHOP RÜCKERT: Friends, this is your cue to wrap up your conversations.

(music)

STICKLEY-MINER: Thank you, Artur. And so don't forget to provide the name, your annual conference, and contact information for the person who will help lead and organize a conversation around the present draft of the *General Book of Discipline*. Our pages and marshals will collect. There's also a basket

at mic. 5 and mic. 1. And just as a reminder, all your all's voices matter. So thank you and thank you to our pages.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKERS: Thank you. Thank you. *Obrigado. Obrigado, senhor.*

BISHOP RAPANUT: Let us give our appreciation and applause to the team that just presented to us please.

(applause)

Before we move on to the next report, the chair acknowledges that there is a speaker in the pool with a request to speak in favor. Friends, there is no motion pending and so out of transparency the chair would like to acknowledge the delegate so they do not feel ignored. But at this time I would like to request the tech team to please clear the recognition pool. We will proceed with the next item of business. And that is the Pathway to Our Next Expression. The chair recognizes Judi Kenaston, Bishop Mande Muyombo, Bishop Tom Bickerton, and Bishop Tracy Smith Malone to provide their report.

JUDITH Kenaston (West Virginia): Good morning, I am Judi Kenaston, a White lay adult woman from West Virginia Annual Conference. I also have the privilege of serving as the Chief Connectional Ministries Officer for the Connectional Table.

BISHOP MANDE MUYOMBO: Good morning, I am Mande Muyombo. I'm the Bishop of the North Katanga, Tanganyika, Tanzania Episcopal area. I am Black African and I have the grace of serving as the Chair of the Connectional Table.

BISHOP THOMAS J. BICKERTON: And I am Tom Bickerton, White male and the current president of the Council of Bishops.

BISHOP TRACY S. MALONE: And I am Tracy Smith Malone, Black female clergy, adult, and I am honored to serve as the resident bishop of the East Ohio Conference, and I'm very honored to also serve as the incoming president to the Council of Bishops.

BISHOP BICKERTON: Well, maybe I ought to say that I am the resident bishop of the New York Annual Conference.

BISHOP MALONE: Our presentation this morning is a collaborative effort to help create a pathway towards the next expression of The United Methodist Church.

Kenaston: Over the years there has always been a sense of curiosity and anticipation associated with the sessions of the General Conference. The quadrennial gathering of United Methodists from around the world is always met with hopes and dreams for a church that will take the faithful steps to become a true reflection of Christ in all we do. Yet there has probably not been a General Conference that is more highly anticipated than this one. The quadrennium that never wanted to end has been long and filled with events that influenced and it shaped everything we will do this week. The United Methodist Church that many of us have known for a lifetime suddenly looks far different than what we have ever seen. We stand before you today to bear witness to the fact that the Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops have a shared responsibility for the discernment and articulation of the vision for the church and the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church. We take that responsibility seriously.

BISHOP MALONE: Worldwide mission and ministry has taken on a new expression with a heightened importance being placed on regional context, cultural influences, and indigenous leadership. Sustainability has been a challenge that existed long before 2019 as well as the onset of COVID-19 and the after-effects of post COVID. Sustainability has been a challenge for us, and we recognize that we need to significantly readjust the manner in which we engage in mission and ministry on a general church level. The struggles within our local congregations coupled with the separation of over 25 percent of our churches have confronted us with a clear reality. No matter how many new or altered apportionment formulas are created, no matter how many funds are established, there are only so many resources, there is only so much funds that is available that is at the church's disposal. This is a General Conference that must send clear signals to the local church. We remember that the local church is the primary arena where discipleship happens. We must send clear signals to the local church that we are keenly aware that the loss of membership and the decline of sustainability has a direct influence on the amount of funds available to support ministry the way it has historically been undertaken for the last fifty years.

BISHOP BICKERTON: This is a General Conference that's being called to act strategically in the short term so that we can act relevantly in the long term. All of the challenges that have converged upon us have simultaneously placed us in a position where a pivot, a restart, is absolutely necessary for us at this point in our life. We're hearing the desire for a compelling and relevant vision that will energize and motivate United Methodists worldwide. Decisions that are made these next two weeks must keep in mind the short-term need to adjust ourselves to this new reality on all levels while setting in motion a long-term process of redefining who we are and how we go about our work. Now is the time to mobilize this denomination on all levels and in all regions around an exciting vision of who we are and who we aim to be as a disciple-making and disciple-nurturing church.

BISHOP MUYOMBO: We know that this work cannot be completed during these weeks here in Charlotte. However, we do believe that this work can be set in motion. In that measure, it will not be done with debate or legislations as much as it will be accomplished with deeper discernment and conversations with lay and clergy from across our worldwide connection.

The Connectional Table has conducted conversations around the church on our identity, vision, mission, and connectionalism. Our hope is that this General Conference will set in motion opportunities for us all to further discern where God is leading The United Methodist Church.

BISHOP MALONE: The Connectional Table and the Bishops of our beloved church are not only committed to continuing their work on your behalf, but we are also committed to re-visioning the best way for ministry to unfold on this level. We are extremely grateful. Let me say that again. We are extremely grateful for the work of our general boards and agencies. Since 2016, they were proactive and they anticipated adjustments necessary to maintain core ministries, and they have made additional sacrifices this year. We continue to believe that the agencies, our boards, they offer the church the opportunity to extend its ministry in ways that cannot be produced within a local church or through an annual conference. Beloved of God, we celebrate our connectionalism.

KENASTON: We are all living into a new reality. The Council of Bishop and the members of the Connectional Table are fully aware of the need to re-fashion the church for its next expression. Adapting to the reductions in the number of bishops and articulating the priorities for how the general agencies' functions are essential. We will need a renewed commitment to working collaboratively over the next

four years and beyond to discern the role and function of both the Episcopacy and the work of the Connectional Table. How do we best oversee and carry out the mission and ministry of the church throughout the globe in the midst of a rapidly changing world? This is both our challenge and our opportunity.

BISHOP MUYOMBO: We know that the dust is not yet settled from all that has been seen over the past few years. As a result, the next four years present the opportunity to structure and position this denomination to become as effective and relevant as it can be.

If this work of discernment and collaboration to be accomplished, it will require much from us while we are here in Charlotte. But, it will also require us to set in motion an authentic (*indecipherable*) conversations, commissions, and accountability structures that will help us, once again, discover who we are and what we are called to be. It cannot all happen at once. We need a little bit of time to discern, collaborate, convene and determine how ministry on all of these levels need to function.

BISHOP MALONE: The real questions before us are: Why does this matter?

KENASTON: What difference will it make in the way you meet, discuss, and vote during General Conference?

BISHOP MUYOMBO: How can we send signals to the annual conferences, to the central conferences, the local churches, and laity and clergy who serve those local churches that we have listened to them, and we are willing to listen to them?

BISHOP BICKERTON: How might we begin to intentionally set in motion a change in the narrative, a pivot from disaffiliation to mission in ministry; from reaction to revitalization; from what was to what, by the grace of God, will be?

BISHOP MALONE: We believe that we can begin this work this week by each of us embracing the clear realities that are in front of us, while intentionally opening ourselves to the Spirit's guidance to the power of the Holy Spirit, as we discern what is God's will for the church that we all love.

BISHOP BICKERTON: In his sermon on "Catholic Spirit," John Wesley wrote these words: "But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein, all the children of God may unite; notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works."

Friends, this is the essence of the work that's before us. The time is now, the opportunity is rich with possibility. But the result—the result will depend upon us all.

ALL SPEAKERS: May it be so. Amen.

(*applause*)

BISHOP RAPANUT: Amen. Thank you for that report.

We now move to the next item of business, which is the financial state of the church. The chair now recognizes Moses Kumar, the General Secretary of the General Council on Finance and Administration, to provide their report.

MOSES KUMAR (Tennessee, General Secretary and Treasurer for the General Council on Finance and Administration): Greetings! I'm honored to be here in the role as your General Secretary and Treasurer. And I want to thank you for your being here. I think everybody started telling who they are. I am an Indian—for Homeland Security purposes, I am an American citizen, in case they have some doubts.

Close your eyes for a minute. Take a deep breath. Think about what brings you joy. Is it your grandchildren? Maybe, like me, it is ice cream. We are not supposed to eat that. Oops! My wife is listening... is she in the room? I meant apples. Apples bring joy. There is a time for everything and every purpose under heaven. Including joy. What brings me joy at this moment is that we have more than thirty thousand churches worldwide. This is after disaffiliation! Thirty thousand churches worldwide who are committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ. What a joy it is. This includes lighthouse churches that are communities welcoming United Methodists whose churches have closed, including for disaffiliations. In this season, God invited us into a way of doing ministry differently, and our leaders said, "Yes!" New faith communities are being born. There's a time to be born; there's a time to die. Now is our time to do things differently. That is joy. How is God calling us to do things differently? Worship attendance is declining in the U.S. for all major religions. 2020 gave our churches a push into holding churches online. Praise be to God! The Lord challenges us to find new ways to do our work. Many United Methodist churches now have the opportunity to engage in online worship and online giving.

There is a time to plant, a time to uproot. There can be joy in the harvest. You can find our financial reports throughout the quadrennium at our website: gcfa.org/reports. The current giving rate, sometimes it is called the collection rate is 86 percent in the jurisdictions and 59 percent in the central conferences. Due to church closures and attendance and using giving rates as a guide, the proposed budget for the next quadrennium is \$353 million, which is \$250 million reduction from 2016, and 42 percent reduction overall. The jurisdictional conferences' budget is \$347 million, a 43-percent reduction from 2016.

The central conferences' budget would stand at \$6 million, a 10-percent reduction. How can we turn this challenge of reduced budget into an opportunity? I believe God is telling us it is time to do things differently. This overall budget, the work of the Connectional Table and GCFA, has been recommended for a significant reduction, and it's going to make us do things differently. But first, we find joy that by the grace of God, we continue to have financial support.

We thank you. We want to thank you. Thank you delegates and the people you represent who faithfully and joyfully give. Your financial support, your time, your energy, and your prayers. Our annual conferences and local churches also joyfully give, despite increasing fixed costs like capital outlay, staffing, and insurance. So due to the fixed or increasing costs facing churches and annual conferences, the General Council of Finance and Administration is recommending a base percentage rate in the jurisdiction that has been reduced from 3.29 percent in 2016 to 2.59 percent, which is almost 32-percent decrease. The base rate was decreased in order to leave more funding with local churches and annual conferences who are our front line in making disciples.

There is a time to kill and a time to heal. Jesus heals all our wounds so we must have faith to move forward. So how are we allocating this proposed budget to our seven apportioned funds? The General Administration Fund overall receives about a 28-percent reduction. This is due to a 15-percent increase in the General Conference budget. The increase is mainly because \$7 million was added to the Commission on General Conference for a possible 2026 special session. If you remove the increase for the General Conference, the General Administration Fund would be at 47-percent reduction. These allocations can be found in Report No. 6. Three of the major funds, the Ministry of Education Fund, the Black College Fund, and Africa University, are proposed for a 47-percent decrease. Some of you may be alarmed to see a 72-percent decrease for the Interdenominational Cooperation Fund. The fund has a large amount of reserves and a capacity to continue their work.

There is a time to tear down and a time to build up. Although it may look different, we will continue to build with joy. We know that God is calling us to reimagine our Episcopal Fund, which receives between 13- and 15-percent reduction in the proposed budget. General Council of Finance and Administration remains concerned about the long-term sustainability of the Episcopal Fund. Please note, GCFA is required by the General Conference to fund seventy-one bishops, which we have done. But fully funding all of them will create a deficit beginning in 2026. The total deficit at the end of 2028 will be between \$14 to \$20 million if all the episcopal areas are filled. Given the funding we have, we could sustain only fifty-four bishops worldwide for the upcoming quadrennium. But resources will be significantly depleted. And remember, GCFA cannot move dollars between apportion funds after the approval of the quad funds.

Therefore, if there is a deficit, the General Council of Finance and Administration won the obligation to make cuts mid-quadrennium to salaries, housing, or office allowance in the Episcopal budget.

Another way to aid the long-term sustainability of the Episcopal Fund is to increase giving by the central conferences as funding from the jurisdictional conferences is decreasing, the church closures, and declining attendance rates. Currently, currently, the central conferences provide 40 percent of funding for the Central Conference Episcopacy. To fund twenty-five bishops in the central conferences, as approved by the General Conference in 2016, the Central Conferences will need to increase their giving to the Episcopal Fund by 255 percent. This increase will mean that the central conference giving will support 41 percent share of the total cost of the Episcopacy serving in the central conferences. To replace funding currently provided by the jurisdictions, which is no longer available due to reasons I've mentioned, the central conferences will need a 9-percent increase in giving to support what had been, which is twenty bishops.

I want to emphasize—GCFA has no authority to control the number of bishops elected. And we don't tell anybody to do what they want. But it is our role to communicate what we can and cannot afford. Budgeting is a delegate dance. We know that any increase in base rate in order to fund the Episcopal Fund or increase any of the funds or programs will negatively local churches and annual conferences. Local churches and annual conferences are financially struggling to meet their own ministry needs.

Another option will be to decrease other funds like our MEF Fund, Africa University, or the Black College Fund. Or we need to reallocate World Service Funds from agencies, who are already facing budget cuts of up to 53 percent, which affects their mission and ministries. Delegates, these are not easy decisions. But we are praying for each of you that there is a time to mourn, a time to dance.

Overall, World Service Fund is subject to a 49-percent reduction. You can find all allocations in Report No. 1. How do we continue doing more with less? Our agencies have been answering that question for many years, already. The agencies are now working together in shared spaces to reduce cost. And since 2017, the agencies had a 39-percent reduction in staff.

There is a time to cast away stones; a time to gather them together. Going through the allocation to the World Service Fund, the Young Clergy Initiative is complete; it's no longer budgeted. During the allocation process, the Connectional Table prioritized several agencies in this budget. The Connectional Table, the Committee on Status and Role of Women, Religion and Race, and the National Ethnic Plans, are prioritized in this budget. Each of these groups I just mentioned are recommended for the 1-percent reduction. United Methodist Men is slated for the 41-percent decrease. Interpretation Resources of the United Methodist Communication is slated for a 47-percent decrease. The Theological Education Fund will be reduced by 50 percent.

The largest of our agencies receiving World Service Funds are Church and Society, Global Ministries, United Methodist Communications, Discipleship Ministries, and Higher Education. Each one is recommended to receive 53-percent reduction. Still, these entities are answering God's call on how to turn these challenges into opportunities. There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. Thank you agencies for continuing to embrace your ministry and mission with joy!

The General Council of Finance and Administration is facing a 59-percent reduction in funding from the General Administration fund. How is God calling us to do things differently at General Council of Finance and Administration? We are trying something new, innovative, and different in two ways. First, through UMC support, our ministry brand, and secondly, our ministry partners. You can learn about both UMC support and our ministry partner program at gcfa.org, or you can visit our booth here in the convention center.

We listened to you. We listened to you and the churches to find out where you need administrative help and developed UMC support. More than one hundred churches, one hundred ministries have used our human resources, technology, financial services, and more. We saved the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference \$100,000 on their technology services—Praise be to God! This is really important. UMC support, by offering quality administrative services at a low cost, also helped General Council of Finance to reduce our lines on apportionment. There is a search; a time to give up. GCFA continues to search for new ways to do things with joy and a servant's heart.

Second, the ministry partner. General Council of Finance and Administration has built relationships with business outside of the connection. We are so grateful to these partners who have been vetted with Church and Society, according to our Social Principles, who provide valuable services to ministries like special discounts worldwide and alternate revenue streams to fund local churches. In addition to offering discounts to individual United Methodist churches, ministry partner the Home Depot has given more than \$50,000 this quadrennium to UMCOR. How joyful is that? This is the time to tear; a time to mend. We mend with joy!

In short, agencies including General Council on Finance and Administration are doing more with less. Less budget, less staff. My friend and colleague General Secretary Roland Fernandez shared a reality earlier this year with this incredible insight: "We're shifting from agencies dictating to churches and annual conferences to agencies listening, inviting, and collaborating with local churches and annual

conference.” Thank you, General Secretary Roland, for this important message that we should all remember. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

Delegates, you are in our prayers. God tells us there is a time for everything. There is a time to love, a time to hate, a time for war, and a time for peace. May we go in peace with joyful hearts and obedience, knowing that the Lord is giving us opportunities disguised as challenges. It is time to trust God. It is time to trust in God. Amen. Thank you.

(applause)

BISHOP RAPANUT: This morning friends, this is the time to receive the introductory remarks on these bodies of work. It is not the time to legislatively engage them yet. You will have the time to do that, but that is not now. The chair now recognizes the Secretary of the General Conference, Gary Graves, to provide any announcements.

GARY GRAVES (Kentucky, Secretary of the Commission on General Conference): Thank you, Bishop. If you are a chair of delegation who has arrived since we held the chair of delegation orientation, I don't know—it feels like six weeks ago but it was only Monday night. If you have arrived since Monday night, please stop by room 103, one hundred and three, to pick up your attendance forms. If you have your attendance forms and you filled them out yesterday as you should have (you remember yesterday, the day I forgot to remind you about them?), yesterday was your homework test day to see if you would do it without being reminded, and about forty or fifty of you did. So, congratulations! Excellent. Whoever is pointing back there, great job! Everybody else, we have to catch up. So you have homework of yesterday and today to make sure that you remember to take attendance in the morning session and the afternoon session and then turn those forms in at the end of each day. Those forms go to room 103.

For those of you who are seated further into the A section or the D section or the side sections that are adjacent to those: the tech team has let us know that they are aware of the needs for a few more screens so that you will be able to see a bit better.

(applause)

However...

(laughter)

We have to get the equipment here to make it possible and we also have to figure out how that fits into the electrical grid that has been approved. All of that will occur over the weekend, and when you arrive back after our Sabbath, they anticipate having that completed for us on Monday. We ask for your patience, and we apologize for the inconvenience in the meantime.

For number three we have bishops who will be convening legislative committees and bishops who will be serving as volunteer parliamentarians. If you are a non-bishop who is also serving as a volunteer parliamentarian and you are in the space, we ask that you meet Sara Hotchkiss over to this side of the stage—I can say my right because of you are right behind me and we are all facing the same way. So to your right, just off the stage, please see Sara as soon as adjourn, and she will take care of getting your meals available to you for lunch and dinner today in the Crown Ballroom.

The reality of working with a multi-language body is that we all have to be aware of some reminders of how we need to speak to make it easier for our interpreters to do their work. One specific way is to remember how we talk about numbers. That is going to be important as you begin referring to pages in the *DCA*. If you refer to pages in the *DCA*, please say—this is an example, you don't have to pick up your book and look at it, but just hear what I say about the numbers. "One thousand nine hundred ninety-nine" is very different from "nineteen ninety-nine," which is a shorthand way of saying the number for many people. However, that means the number *nineteen* and the number *ninety-nine*. And that is not the same as "one thousand nine hundred ninety-nine." Please be sure to remember to use that way of saying the numbers.

Also, speaking for an interpreter does not mean that you stop and start in ways that are unnatural. Please speak steadily, but don't go too fast and remember to breathe. That last one I keep getting over and over again. I don't know why they say, "Remember to breathe." So it is very easy for us to get moving very quickly. Just remember to slow it down, but keep a steady pace and breathe.

Each day as we are breaking for our lunch, we will be hearing about the Upper Room Prayer Room Holy Communion services. Our prayer room is in the E section of the meeting rooms at room E222, and just outside that room today, Communion service will be led by Bishop John Schol and Bishop John Wesley Yohanna. E222.

And a reminder as we leave, please take your voting card, you will need it in legislative committee. Leave your voting device. You will not need it, they will have one for you. Take your interpretation device. So take your interpretation device and voting card, but leave your voting device on the table. Thank you, Bishop. That concludes our announcements for this session.

BISHOP RAPANUT: Thank you, Secretary of the General Conference. Friends, we have completed our business for this morning. The delegate raising a green card, would you go to the nearest microphone please?

L. OLANDER BOYCE (Liberia): Yes, Bishop. I am L. Olandor Boyce, lay delegate from the Liberia Annual Conference, and I rise to the parliamentary inquiry.

BISHOP RAPANUT: I am sorry, but the speakers here didn't turn on immediately. Could you restate your name and where you are from, please.

BOYCE: I am L. Olandor Boyce from Liberia Annual Conference. I am lay delegate, and I rise to a point of parliamentary inquiry.

BISHOP RAPANUT: All right, that is in order. Please state your parliamentary inquiry.

BOYCE: My parliamentary inquiry is in the *ADCA*, volume 3, p. 1129 with respect to Rule No. 34, line 1077. 1077. In that rule it reads any twenty delegates may have an item in (1)(b) or (1)(c), but when you look at Rule 34, there is no (1)(c).

(long pause)

BISHOP RAPANUT: All right, the chair recognizes the Secretary of the General Conference to respond to this question.

GRAVES: Thank you. That is an editorial correction that we will refer to Rules. It came into play when there was a change in the *Discipline* that added paragraph 507.10-11. The addition of that information into the *Discipline* requires that all petitions that are assigned to a legislative committee must receive a vote, and anything that is supported by the legislative committee must receive a vote by the plenary. The old (1)(c) was a consent calendar for items that were not considered at a time when items could have been left and not considered, and they simply died in committee. With the addition of the new paragraph in the *Discipline*, that rule became in conflict and so (1)(c) was deleted. But the reference here is still there, and we take your point and we will hand that to Rules as they will do an editorial correction.

BISHOP RAPANUT: Thank you for raising that up, Brother Delegate. If there is no objection, we will amend the rules to strike out that line, those words, or (1)(c) of Rule 34. Is there any objection to striking that language out? Since there is no objection, those rules are amended. All right, I think that concludes all our business, friends. Thank you for your work and the spirit in which you have approached this work today. I would like to close our time in prayer, and following the prayer, the second plenary session is adjourned and the conference will reconvene at tomorrow's plenary session at 8:45 A.M.

Allow me to pray in one of my native languages. I believe there is Tagalog interpretation for those who would like to listen to it, or if you would just like the Spirit to interpret for you. Let us pray.

(simultaneous interpretation from Tagalog) Great God of all times, in each of our victories, you are there. You flow through our hopes, and your love will be given to us from then and now. You are great, O God. You accompany us in our *(indecipherable)* and our continuance of our work today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Friends, we are adjourned. And remember that even though we don't convene here until tomorrow morning, you convene in legislative committees at 2 P.M.