

Western Jurisdiction Bishops share message after historic General Conference

Transcript

A reading from the prophet Ezra, chapter 3, verses 10-13.

When the workers laid the foundation of the Lord's Temple, the priests in their robes stood up with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise GOD in the tradition of King David. They sang responsively in praise and thanksgiving to GOD:

Yes! GOD is good!

Oh yes— GOD never quit loving Israel!

All the people boomed out hurrahs, praising GOD as the foundation of The Temple was laid. As many were noisily shouting with joy, many of the older priests, Levites, and family heads who had seen the first Temple, when they saw the foundations of this Temple laid, wept loudly for joy. People couldn't distinguish the shouting from the weeping. The sound of their voices reverberated for miles around.

Beloved siblings in Christ within the Western Jurisdiction and beyond,

With joy we speak to you, knowing that this is truly a new day for our United Methodist Church!

After eight years since our last formal General Conference - and five years since a devastating special session where we declared the Western Jurisdiction would indeed be a home for all - we arrived here in Charlotte already changed people.

We've seen how a pandemic has transformed our globe, how misinformation has divided us as people of faith and science. We've watched as politics have polarized us, disaffiliations have limited our resources, and the sin of racism continues to cause such harm.

We came to this space changed, already, as United Methodists in our individual ministry contexts. We came with heavy hearts and our own personal burdens and fears. We came knowing this is a church that must repent for its part in causing harm to marginalized communities, even as we've eagerly claimed Christ in our midst over the course of our history.

Today, we can celebrate with the whole Church, and especially with our LGBTQIA+ siblings for whom many barriers have finally been removed. After years of struggle, rules and restrictions that have limited how they could respond to God's call upon their lives - that labeled them incompatible - have finally been lifted. Loving couples who couldn't have their marriages celebrated or recognized by their Church, can now be seen and fully embraced.

We celebrate with pastors across our connection who can officiate marriages for couples without fear of retribution, and local churches that can now embrace and care for all of God's children without discriminatory Church law undermining their actions.

The prophet Ezra tells us of the return of God's people after decades living in the Babylonian diaspora, dispersed in an attempt to rob them of their identity. As they laid the foundation stones for the second Temple, there were shouts for joy and much praise for God.

Ezra pauses in his telling to share how the older priests wept for joy; their deep sorrow released in a moment of exultation. Their restoration as a people was finally at hand.

Many among us have been waiting for this day for so long, as they have held onto their memory of the Church that loved and nurtured them, until it didn't.

We give thanks for their resiliency and praise for God's faithfulness.

And we'd be amiss not to mention the trailblazers who led us to this place, who have passed into that great cloud of witnesses. So many dear colleagues on the WJ College of Bishops who risked their reputations and even their credentials by taking acts of courageous leadership on behalf of justice.

And we lament the harm done to all those called into ministry by God to whom the Church said no, or worse. The witness they made, by refusing to be anyone other than the child of God they are, is why we can rejoice today.

Even as we celebrate this progress, we still have much work to do. Racism and the vestiges of colonialism continue to separate us from one another. The regionalization petitions delegates approved will require the ratification of annual conference members next year.

If ratified, regionalization will move our global church toward equal standing, allowing different regions more agency to respond to their ministry contexts. With its passage, we will have the opportunity to begin and renew ministries and relationships that have been strained by years of conflict and strife.

We are so grateful for our Western Jurisdiction delegations, and for all of the delegates across the connection who debated, listened, amended, and approved legislation with a spirit of collaboration and grace. They are a testament to our resilience, our adaptability, and our unwavering faith in the promise of a brighter future together.

Like the ancient Israelites, we have only begun our work toward building the Church the world needs today. The legislative accomplishments of this General Conference have been good, but they are just an invitation. It is nothing if we don't change our behavior.

What we do when we go home will tell the world what we have learned from years of trying to legislate hearts and minds. United Methodists in the Western Jurisdiction and beyond, seize this moment!

Love your neighbors deeply, especially those who are different from you.
Let curiosity arrive long before you rush to judgment.
Build and renew relationships and connections that circle the globe.
Work for peace wherever there is conflict.
Care for the Earth and all that is on it, for it is a gift from God.
Love without limits because that is what Jesus did!

This is a day of new beginnings! Let our work begin. Thanks be to God!