

## *Reflections on the Shared Journey*–

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church is coming to Fort Worth!

General Conference is the top legislative body of The UMC. This Conference - held every four years – is made up of 1000 delegates from all over the world. The Central Texas Conference (our Conference) will be represented by 12 delegates – 6 clergy and 6 lay – assisted by 12 alternates.

The Central Texas Conference has the rare opportunity (and responsibility) to be the host conference for this quadrennial meeting. The last time General Conference was this close to home was in 1968 when it met in Dallas. In that historic meeting, The United Methodist Church was formed through the merger of the United Evangelical Brethren Church and The Methodist Church. It will likely be another 40 + years before General Conference will meet in Texas again. Thus, we have a rare opportunity as this legislative body of The United Methodist Church meets April 23- May 2 at the Fort Worth Convention Center.

What is General Conference? What is involved in it?

General Conference will be marked by lively, Spirit-filled *worship* as United Methodist Christians of multiple nationalities join hearts and voices together in worship. From the opening worship service on Wednesday evening, April 23 (6:00 p.m.) to the closing worship service on Friday, May 2 (3:15 p.m.) to the daily morning worship services ((8:00 a.m.), worship will set the tone of this gathering. We at SJA will have the uncommon opportunity to have Bishop Jonathan Keeton, resident bishop of the Michigan area, preaching for us on Sunday, April 20.

Opening day of General Conference will be dominated by the Episcopal address, the Young People's address and the Laity address. The remaining days will involve *reports* from the various agencies and boards of the General Church.

A large portion of every day will be spent in *legislative work* – decision making. This Conference will approve plans and set the budget for the General Church programs for the next 4 years. It will also revise *the Book of Discipline* (church law that governs the functioning of The UMC) and the Social Principles. In doing so, the delegates – meeting in assigned legislative committees each day – will address the issues and petitions raised by individuals and groups and Annual Conferences from across The Church. Through this legislative work, the General Conference determines the official position of The United Methodist Church on any issue. The General Conference and the General Conference alone speaks for The United Methodist Church.

Because General Conference determines the official position of The United Methodist Church on any given issue, this gathering will bring *conflict*. United Methodists “lack a common mind” on many issues. It is at General Conference that these issues are raised and addressed in an attempt to come to common ground. The issues that will consume the most time and attention (and the most media coverage) will be those related to homosexuality: how homosexuality is viewed, the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, the inclusion of homosexual persons in our churches, same-sex marriage. The polarization over these issues in past General Conference meetings has raised the issue of the division of The Church. That issue will likely surface in Fort Worth, as well. Sadly, the polarization around these issues has in the past overshadowed the work and ministry of The UMC that is reported and celebrated during General Conference.

Because we are a part of the host Conference and the host district, there are many ways for us to be involved in General Conference.

We can participate in any of the worship services.

We can observe any of the legislative sessions – room permitting.

We can help host in a multitude of ways – greeting, registration, transportation, information center, prayer room. Thursday, April 24, is the day assigned specifically to our district but help is needed every day. To volunteer, go to the Central Texas Conference website – [ctcumc.org](http://ctcumc.org) – and click on the icon for *Host Volunteer Registration Form*.

We can bake cookies. During the 10 days of General Conference, the Central Texas Conference will provide 12,000 dozen cookies to the delegates. Cheryl Turkett is coordinating SJA's share of 60 dozen. Contact her if you or your group would like to help.

We can pray.

We can practice grace, allowing God's grace to shape how we view and treat one another, how we respond to the issues that surface, how we react to what is said and done.

I am grateful to be an elder in The United Methodist Church and a part of God's good work at SJA.

Grace and peace, Steve