

Annual Conference Report, DJ Antlitz, July 2, 2023

So as many of you know, I am the lay delegate to the conference. Today I have the honor and privilege of sharing that experience with you.

The 2023 Pacific Northwest Annual Conference Session gathered online and in person this June to worship together and prayerfully conduct its business.

It is tempting to simply share about what we did, but I would rather share with you what I feel like I learned about the Methodist church, about God, and about myself. To do that I need to take you back to the beginning of my faith journey. I have always been a spiritual person, in fact as a child I was more spiritually inclined than most of my peers, but I was not raised religious. So I simply wasn't religious. When I was 14, two close family friends started attending Fremont UMC. I had recently started reading the Bible to find comfort and learn more about myself amidst family drama surrounding my parents divorce. This seemed to me like God putting a chance to explore that deeper in my path. We attended for about 6 months and then they stopped going so I did as well.

Then that February my grandma died. We were close. Although she lived in California, I would talk with her on the phone almost daily. We would just discuss silly little things like what my cats were doing and what I was doing. Losing her mixed with the fact that I was still reeling from drama regarding my parents divorce (it was a very messy divorce trust me) sent me spiraling. I knew I needed something. I had definitely felt the presence of the Divine at Fremont UMC so my response was to Google where the nearest Methodist Church was. This path led me to St Paul's United Methodist and, perhaps more importantly for my faith journey, Reverend Becca Forrester. I can still remember the first day I attended Saint Paul's, I sat in the back with my dad (who was only attending to support me) I wore a red flannel button down and black denim jeans, (my best attempt at looking like a respectable churchgoer) and was fairly uncomfortable. Then Becca started preaching. Much like Pastor Heather, Becca never shied away from talking about issues of social justice from the pulpit. I instantly relaxed and was captivated by her preaching. I knew this would be a place where my beliefs would be respected and valued and I felt safe. We attended for about half a year and then I suggested we invite Becca to dinner at our house. She declined stating that she was hard to cook for but invited us to dinner at her house instead. We played board games and talked and I felt like I could truly unmask and just be myself around her. From that point a family friendship quickly developed.

As about a year went by and we became closer I invited Becca to join me and my dad in handing out sandwiches and water to the homeless on the springwater corridor.

Although she admitted that it was out of her comfort zone at the time, she accepted and has told me that that experience is a major part of what ignited her passion for helping her unhoused neighbors.

About another half year later she and I made up a lead team in trying to get a homeless shelter put in place at St Paul's. We met with members of the city council and nonprofit organizations such as Do Good Multnomah. And although we never did get the homeless shelter in place, we did get a warming shelter put in. I felt this experience truly lit a flame in me by the Holy Spirit. I was living the life that I felt Jesus wanted me to live and truly being the hands and feet of Christ.

I still look back at those times as one of the happiest in my life, and probably the time I felt the most connected to the divine. In 2020 Becca was appointed here at Montavilla and I chose to follow her here. At Monte Villa for the first time I felt a connection to the church and the congregation, not just the pastor. I was 18 and a senior in high school when I became a member here and I am 21 and entering my senior year of college now. You all have remained a constant through some of the most formative years of my life. Though global pandemic, my first love, my first break up, becoming more confident in my identity, all of the questions and crisis of faith that we go through in college, I have known that on top of the world or barely holding it together, feeling moved by the holy Spirit or questioning if God is even real, I have been able to turn up here and be accepted exactly where I am. Thank you for taking that long side quest with me, now that you're up to speed on the perspective I am coming from, let me tell you about the 2023 Pacific Northwest Annual Conference!

My four highlights would be getting to be a part of two of the "go and do likewise" activities, getting to hear the bishop speak at the laity session, and finally for my absolute highlight of this trip getting to drive home with Joanne Buck of Tabor heights. I have chosen to share about these things in this order.

The theme of this year's annual conference was "go and do likewise." This really resonated with me, as I mentioned earlier, the time I felt most spiritually connected with when I was doing work with the homeless. In fact, the reason I call myself a Christian and attend a Christian Church is that I want to follow the example that Jesus set and "go and do likewise". The first go and do likewise event I was a part of was a trip to Planned Parenthood where we got to hear about what reproductive rights are like in Idaho. (Let me tell you it's scary) We discussed several different ideas as to what the church could do to help protect reproductive rights. My favorite of the ideas discussed was that the simplest and perhaps most important first step we can take is to open that dialogue. Take the shame out of discussion about abortion and reproductive health. Let people know that this is a place they can talk openly about their experiences and that we

believe in a woman's right to choose whatever option is best for her! I would love to see our church have a sign even if it's just taped in the window showing this support. I think a lot of people assume that because we're religious we're much more closed-minded than we are.

The next "go and do likewise" event was a social justice focused tour of Boise. We started at the Black History museum which was wonderful and exciting to see. It also forced us to confront some hard truths. One thing that came up is that although in Idaho people of color were allowed to buy property, Oregon was started as a whites only state. Meaning that in the 1800s we were basically one giant sundown town. If you were a person of color you could not live here. Although it was not discussed in the museum, when we examined that history it is also worth noticing that we as a city practiced redlining well into the 80s. The neighborhood I live in is almost entirely white and that is because people of color simply could not purchase here. I would challenge all of you to do a Google search and find out what the redlining history is for your neighborhoods. From there we went to The Basque museum. I know virtually nothing about the Basque people and it was fascinating to learn about their heritage in Spain, and how they fled to Argentina to avoid persecution and eventually a large number of them immigrated to the Boise area due to it being "good sheep country".

From there we had a picnic in a park in front of the state capitol building of delicious Basque food and got to hear an amazing trans activist (whose name I'm sadly blinking out on) talk about women's reproductive rights and trans rights in Idaho. As a member of the lgbtq+ community, hearing how the rights of my trans brothers and sisters are under attack in so many states in our nation right now is truly disheartening and terrifying. We discussed what the church can do to help stand up for these rights and I urge you all to show up, protest, contact your legislators, and most importantly be vocal. I have done some anti-bias training and the best way to change people's opinions is to have one-on-one conversations explaining where you're coming from. If you hear someone saying something homophobic, especially if they are using our loving Creator to justify it, I urge you to invite them to sit down with you and to explain to them that God is love. You will have another chance to show up for this issue on the 16th when our church joins First UMC in marching in Portland's pride parade. From there the tour continued in a whirlwind, we heard speakers about affordable housing, and we attended a museum focusing on anti bias work.

New stuff

Another one of my highlights was getting to hear the Bishop speak at the laity session. Bishop Bridgeforth spoke eloquently on the problems facing the modern church.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this session was sparked by a question posed by Joanne Buck of Tabor Heights who said she worries for young people not having God in their life. Bishop Bridgeforth assured her that young people and those of all ages not going to church do in fact have God in their lives; they just don't worship in the same way we do. This led me to really think about the different ways that we worship, The different places that my friends find God, the different places that I find God, and how to offer those alternative spiritual experiences within the church.

I had the blessing of Joanne riding with me on the drive home, we managed to talk for the entire six and a half hour drive plus an hour lunch and never tired of each other's company (although I was a bit hoarse the next day). Although our discussion covered many topics from social justice to philosophy to art, how to bridge the gaps between generations and between the church and the rest of the world is one thing we kept coming back to. We discussed many ideas, everything from a midweek medication service to fire spinning. Did we come up with all the answers? No. If you want to send us on another road trip together we might.

But I do think we came up with where to start. In fact, I think that car ride from Boise to Portland can serve as a metaphor for where to start. Although we were coming from different places in life, different generations, and different lived experiences, Joanne and I were able to agree on most things we talked about. And value each other's opinions on everything we talked about. We were able to recognize that there is a lot we could learn from each other and we were able to dive head first with enthusiasm into that learning, and dare I say experience the Holy Spirit together.

You may have noticed most weeks I am the one gen z here. Being that I am often asked "what can we do to bring more young people into the church?" Maybe instead of asking that we can approach it like Joanne and I approached our car ride. Maybe instead of worrying about what we can do to get people to be like us, we can dive head first into learning what we can learn from other people and sharing what we have to teach. In my 3 years here at Montavilla I have learned so much. And I can say honestly there is so much love and beauty here that we can share with the world. I can also say honestly that there is so much beauty in the world that gets shut out because of how we as the church isolate ourselves in this building. I don't have the answer but maybe a good place to start is to "go and do likewise" to live how Jesus lived and treat Christianity as a movement not as a religion and to take every opportunity to learn more than we teach.