



THE MOUNTAIN CIRCUIT

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Members of the Conference Cabinet lay hands and pray for Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball in Wesley Chapel Wednesday afternoon. The bishop and cabinet pray each year on the day before Conference begins throughout the chapel, and conclude by praying together. Photo: Whitney Cherry

Finding our Way in Grace

by Laura Allen

Christian tradition teaches us that listening to one another is key to being a good follower of Jesus. "My dear brothers and sisters," writes James, the half brother of Jesus, in his letter to persecuted Christians: "take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

How do we listen, even when we disagree?

That was top of mind for Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball after last year's annual conference. She believed that West Virginia Conference members would benefit from a small-group process that emphasized listening and relationship building in covenant together.

Her vision was prescient, particularly after last month's General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

Conference lay leader Rich Shaffer noted the "lack of Holy Conferencing," present at the denomination's quadrennial meeting

last month at the Oregon Convention Center. The gathering was marked by demonstrations and rancorous floor debate, sparked by the church's long-standing debate on human sexuality.

But there were glimmers of hope. In one subcommittee meeting, Erin Sears who was also a member of the West Virginia delegation, said that she and her fellow delegates shared stories about their particular ministry contexts before they debated legislation. "We built relationships with one another," said Sears. We began to realize that we were brothers and sisters in Christ, first, even though we might have very different opinions."

Bishop Steiner Ball's small group process, Circles of Grace, seeks to create more of the hope and unity Sears found in her subcommittee experience.

"I envision a time of small group discussions for listening and

cont. next page

“As a leader... I have always endeavored to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion.”

— Nelson Mandela



Finding Our Way in Grace

by Laura Allen

cont. from front page

learning," said the the bishop. "So that we can model a way to have healthy productive discussions about topics and ministry where we hold different perspectives, opinions, and beliefs."

The bishop is also quick to point out that Circles of Grace are not part of a legislative process. "This is not a time of decision-making, nor a time to convince or persuade. It is a time to listen and learn from one another about the conference's mutual life and ministry," said Steiner Ball.

Nothing discussed in the Circles of Grace will be brought back to the floor for a vote.

All conference members have been assigned to a circle of grace. Members will meet in small groups on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning to discuss two questions, which Bishop Steiner Ball will outline in more detail during the Friday morning business session.



Sacred sage burns in sea shell bowl. Smudging is an American Indian practice that is traditionally done to purify or bless people and places, according to Wikipedia. There will be a Worship Service of Repentance and Reconciliation Friday evening during Conference, part of a year long denominational focus on healing relationships with American Indians.

Photo: Laura Allen

Today's Schedule

10:00 Noon Ministry Fair, Rockefeller Gym

1:30 Call to Order of the WV Annual Conference

Opening Worship with Communion

4:00 Laity gathering - Wesley Chapel with Yvette Richards, UMW National President, speaking

4:00 Clergy Executive Session

5:30 Dinner break

7:30 Evening Worship: Historic Questions and Retirement

We will stream Annual Conference online at <http://wvumc.org> beginning at 1:30 this afternoon.

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