

# Meeting of United Methodist Association of Ministers with Disabilities

By Rev. Leo Yates, Jr., Consultant for Global Ministries' Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries

The United Methodist Association of Ministers with Disabilities (UMAMD), a national caucus that is recognized by The United Methodist Church, met from August 1-3, 2018 on the historic campus of Gallaudet University at the Kellogg Conference Hotel. Gallaudet University is the first university dedicated to the higher education of Deaf and hard of hearing students. At the meeting, the co-chairpersons, Rev. Russell Ewell, a deacon in full connection, and Rev. Janine Delaunay, an elder in full connection, both of which are blind, worked with support persons to facilitate sessions during the three day conference. Part of the challenge in planning an in-person meeting is identifying a location that not only is accessible for meeting space, but also had lodging that is accessible," said Bishop Peggy Johnson. Conference participants came from as far away as England, though most of the participants were from the U.S. It was a welcoming sight to see persons with all sorts of disAbilities arrive at the hotel that included: persons on crutches, persons with canes (used by blind persons), persons in wheel chairs, persons with assisted devices like a pocket talker for hard of hearing persons, persons with Cerebral Palsy, persons with invisible disAbilities such as mental health issues, addictions, and Multiple Sclerosis, along with allies and personal care attendants to assist with the trip. The conference participants were both laity and clergy. It was shared at the start of the meeting that the General Board of Global Ministries financially supported the conference.

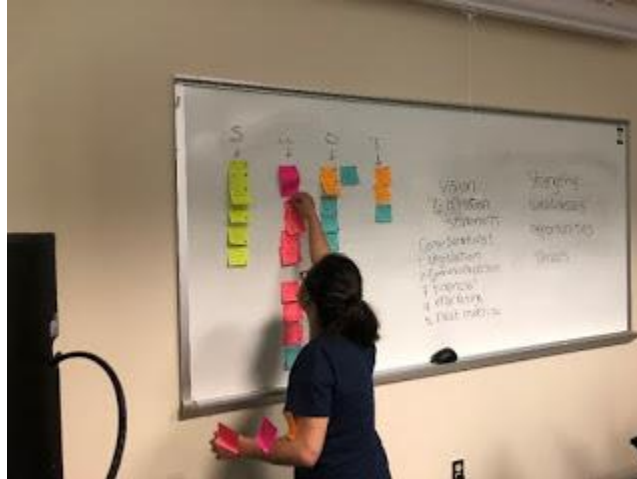
The theme of the conference was "Taking Our Place at the Table: Disability Leadership Academy." The Rev. Stephanie Remington from the Lewis Leadership Center of Wesley Theological Seminary led the leadership seminar that provided insights to good leadership. The Rev. Nancy Webb, a blind retired clergy person from the Baltimore-Washington Conference and a past co-chairperson of the UMAMD, shared, "These insights are helpful across the board. What a wonderful presentation." The afternoon session had a panel discussion that had representatives from the General Commission on Religion and Race, the General Board of Church and Society, and a representative from the Board of Ordained Ministry from the Baltimore-Washington Conference, all of which was to be improve collaboration and networking between general boards, agencies, commissions, and people with disabilities. The Rev. Dr. C. Anthony Hunt, the chairperson of the Baltimore-Washington Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, shared how the board had worked with candidates with disAbilities in the past and offered accessible meeting spaces. One current provisional deacon from another annual conference shared the challenges of her board examination and how the location would not be changed to make it fully accessible since she had to use crutches and did not drive. The gasps were heard throughout the room while sympathy filled the air. An appropriate response by Dr. Hunt was the encouragement to work with the conference disability commission; however, one of the participants stated that not all annual conferences have disability commissions despite the mandate in The Book of Discipline. As the other challenges were shared, Bishop Johnson, who was appointed by the Council of Bishops to be the bishop assigned to the disability ministries for consultation and awareness for the denomination, said she will continue to work with her colleagues to be certain that every annual conference in the denomination has a working

commission on disability concerns. The evening session concluded with small groups doing some reflection for how God used them and their disability to share grace with others after the Rev. Leo Yates first opened the session with a personal story. To top off the evening session was the awarding of “The Unsung Hero Award” to Rev. Nancy Webb for all of her years of service and advocacy work. Bishop Johnson was provided with a book, *Disability, Faith, and the Church*, which was signed by all the conference participants as a reminder they were depending on her and her leadership. All of the participants, rolled up, walked up, or struggled to make it up to the front of the room to lay hands on her and prayed for her ministry. Bishop Johnson held back tears and said she will be faithful to the work. The Rev. Janine Delaunay said, "We are grateful for your leadership, Bishop Peggy, and we as a caucus will continue to support you as well."

In small group discussions, the Rev. Caroline Bass shared from personal experience that she did not find terms like disability and disabled as negative words, but it was society that put on negative connotations, and these words should be claimed openly and proudly. Adding, the euphuisms for disabilities, such as “differing abilities” or "differently-abled" are not necessary as disability does not need to be cloaked with euphuisms to be accepted. The Rev. Hank Jenkins observed, almost every person with a disability at the conference had an adverse reaction to “differently-abled.” These observations pushed the caucus to publish a statement about wording and how language is often individualized (by personal preference) and first person (e.g. she has bipolar disorder instead of she is bipolar). It was clear that the disAbility community is not of one mind when it comes to terms.

The Rev. Greg Edwards, the UMAMD treasurer, led the final session, which was building on the work of Rev. Remington from the day before. New subcommittees were established from the reflection and group work to advance the future work of the caucus. Published statements were drafted that support the inclusion, accessibility, and empowerment of persons with disAbilities. All in all, participants found the conference to be mutually supportive, educational, and empowering for doing the leadership work in The United Methodist Church. The Rev. Russell Ewell thanked the participants for attending and looked forward to working with them to continue the work of the caucus.





The UMAMD group also issued the following statement as part of the meeting.

**Purpose Statement from the United Methodist Association of Ministers with Disabilities**

We the people of the United Methodist Association of Ministers with Disabilities (UMAMD) affirm the sacred worth of persons with disabilities as whole persons made in the image of God. For years, people

with disabilities have been discouraged, excluded, and denied as we have sought places at the table as equals with full participation in all that the life of the church offers.

Therefore, we now claim our right to take our places at the many tables at all levels of the UMC. To prepare the table that all may be fully included, the UMAMD will provide leadership to:

1 Educate the church about the many and diverse gifts of people with disabilities for ordained and lay ministries that will strengthen the church.

2 Advocate for people with disabilities, both lay and clergy, as we seek places at the table in seminaries, the local church, annual conferences, jurisdictions, and the general boards and agencies of the church.

3 Support and provide connections and links between the church and people with disabilities, coming alongside conference disability ministries committees and the DisAbility Ministries Committee of the UMC as we work together toward full inclusion. To that end we also support clergy and candidates for ministry who have disabilities in facing the persisting barriers to living out God's call.

We call on the church to engage with us in this effort to achieve full equality. We further call upon the church, its annual conferences, and the general boards and agencies to identify funding to support this important work.