

Annual Conference Reflections by Brian Hardin

When I was asked to be a laity member for the 2019 Holston Annual Conference, I was understandably a little hesitant. Although I have spent my whole life at FCUMC, I wasn't very involved in the inner workings of this church or the entire conference. I had no experience doing anything of this sort, and I wasn't sure what to expect. However, after taking time to reflect and pray, I came to realize how exciting of an opportunity this truly was. I took the responsibility of representing our church with the highest respect and prayed for God to help me keep an open mind. Throughout my time at Annual Conference, I had many great experiences that opened my eyes to how God is working through not only our church, but the entire United Methodist denomination. I want to take this time to talk about the three main aspect of the conference: worship, business, and downtime.

Worship at Annual Conference was a pleasant surprise, with many different musical choices ranging from large choirs to an African drumming group. Although the musical selections were all very different, they were all incredibly talented. One thing that surprised me about Annual Conference was how much music there was. I imagined it as being mostly business, but the worship was a wonderful bonus. The infusion of music into this conference helped remind me personally to take my mind off strictly the "business" part of this conference and to focus my heart on God and his desires for us as a church. When we were in discussion of rules and regulations throughout the entire day, it was easy for me to lose track of the entire reason we were doing this, which is to bring glory to God. The music offered a humbling reminder to stop and praise God for all he has allowed us to do.

From what I was told leading up to Annual Conference, this year was not like most others when it came to business. Because of the upcoming General Conference, it was an election year to send delegates. Additionally, it was anticipated that the decisions made at the previous General Conference would be brought up again in discussions. All of this did indeed come true, and it was fascinating to hear firsthand the passionate speeches about such a sensitive subject in our church. This was, for me, one of the most captivating parts of the conference. I really enjoyed coming in with an open mind, and really listening to everyone's viewpoints and rationale. Although things had the potential to escalate at times, I thought the entire group of laity and clergy did a great job of listening to each other, and not resorting to simply shouting matches.

Downtime was very sparse during this conference because of all the business that had to be taken care of. However, in the moments that I did get to explore the scenery, it served as a great reminder of the natural beauty that God shared with us. Being in an area removed from the everyday busy life provides an opportunity to reflect and to spend more quality time out in the open. I also very much enjoyed how friendly all the people were at Lake Junaluska. One of my favorite things about this experience was being able to talk to other members of the conference and get to hear the same love and desire for conference. It was truly fulfilling to be able to share this experience with so many people who share the same love and passion for God.