

Yogi Berra once said, “Never make predictions, especially about the future.” The best we can hope for is to be resolved to do better in the future, to hope that the difficulties of the past will not consume or impede us. As this new year is upon us with all of its promise and possibilities, it is good to pause and give thanks to God who has been faithfully present with us in the Southern Conference through a challenging time. With all of the conflict and contentious conversations we have endured in the Southern Conference, God has remained our pathway and light in the year past. Who could have predicted that many of the churches that disaffiliated with our conference, twenty since last July, would leave over a significant yet non-essential vote at General Synod rather than continue with us? All of this especially difficult since the Southern Conference has not taken a stand or position in any formal or public way?

Despite all of the conflict and controversy that we have weathered, the Southern Conference ended the year with all of our bills paid and our obligations met. Many of our churches have made significant gifts to under gird our common effort. Thanks go out to each church and individual, staff and Board member who made that financial feat possible in these times of challenge and change.

The year ahead begins with the notice by many churches that they will continue to or start withholding dollars, vital for ministry and mission in the Southern Conference. The total amount is not entirely clear at this point, but the amount will be significant. My question asks why this hurtful withholding effort continues. Two years have now passed and still autonomy but little covenant. My suspicion is that these churches want to predict a future for the Southern Conference, beyond what we together decide to do in our annual meetings and open forums. They want to draw the conference back to a simpler time or “a time when things were simpler and fair,” but fair or simpler for whom? Withholding dollars indicates posturing for takeover, not protest. The direction the conference and association meetings have decided to take, decisions made in a fair democratic process, consistent with our polity, should be subverted, even ignored; so some rationalize. To withhold mission dollars suggests that the level of trust in the leadership of the conference and those elected by the people of the Southern Conference seems to mean little to them. Staff persons, their families and their livelihood seem of no importance to those who withhold dollars. What appears important, at any cost, is to make their point. To withhold is an act that suggests these withholding churches have answers that are absolute and good for every one to adhere too, without any compromise or room for continued conversation.

While I agree with the comment of Yogi Berra, I also believe it is clear that the future of the Southern Conference is bright and we can be optimistic. While I don’t know what the future will bring, I do know who holds the future. I also am encouraged because I know that many, who are members in the churches that are withholding funds, holding resources from our common ministry, feel and see the gravity of these decisions. There are growing numbers of people who regret the way it diminishes the whole Southern Conference’s ability to do higher levels of essential ministry among the poor and disenfranchised, stifles our ability to start and revitalize churches in our Southern Conference communities, and reduces our opportunity to offer a greater presence of Christ in the local and global community. In the year ahead, please encourage those churches that are withholding to reverse these decisions. The ability to be a greater witness of God’s love and care for others and our communities, near and far away, is at stake. Giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) remains vital.

The Southern Conference will continue to act faithfully, whatever the decision these churches or often their leaders might make. We will go forward in 2006, even though some would take out full page advertising, change the name of their churches to create separation and bombard the local and national newspapers with unhelpful, hurtful rhetoric. Support the Southern Conference in 2006, as we do common ministry together. Anything less is simply sowing the seeds of division among us.

Last year your generosity provided about \$100,000 toward relief efforts for *Katrina* and you were just as generous as the disaster in the Far East struck late in the year before. You gave \$10,000 to help *Neighbors in Need* last year, several thousand to the *Friends of the Conference Appeal*, *Christmas Fund*, and *One Great Hour of Sharing* and were very generous with our *Southern Conference institutions*. You gave more than \$50,000 to help with the ministry of the national setting of the church through *Our Church's Wider Mission* and your giving enabled several Southern Conference clergy to receive financial help for counseling services, retreats, special events and tending to emergency needs for a variety of situations. Every dollar you have given has been carefully expended on your behalf. Our capital campaign effort now underway has already received pledges for nearly \$200,000. Your commitment is needed in 2006. In the year ahead we, the staff, pledge continued careful stewardship of the dollars entrusted to the conference for our common mission and ministry use.

In the year ahead, many exciting initiatives will commence. We will start with a visit in January from our *General Minister and President John Thomas*. Each local church has been invited to various parts of this important time of worship and conversation. We hope your church will be represented. In February, we will host Ron Buford, who has been the architect of the highly successful initiative in the United Church of Christ called the "*God is Still Speaking Initiative*." Plans are now being developed, with strengthening local churches in the marketing/identity needed for church growth, the central aim. Call the Southern Conference Center for details on these or any of our other program offerings.

In the year ahead we will have our Southern Conference Annual Gathering in Western NC Association at Catawba College (June 8-10). In our time together we will feature a variety of learning moments to enhance your local church's ministry in these challenging times. This summer we will host the Regional Youth Event at Elon University (June 22-25) and a national gathering of UCC Musicians will meet in Chapel Hill, hosted jointly by the Southern Conference and national church (August). In the year ahead there will be Christian education events, evangelism, stewardship events, another face to face with the Conference Minister and clergy retreats that promises to be special in the life of Southern Conference. The year ahead is exciting.

While I offer no predictions as to what will be... The level of success we will enjoy in the months ahead is up to us, and our faithful work in Jesus Christ. John Wesley said it this way, this ministry before us too:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.