

**East Michigan Annual Conference
State Of The Work
June 20, 2025
Superintendent Jeff Ford**

Bishop Kolde, Pastors and Lay Delegates, brothers and sisters in the Free Methodist church, it is my privilege – on behalf of the entire Superintendent Team – to bring you the State Of The Work for the East Michigan Conference.

This marks the third annual conference for our Superintendent Team. We're moving into the last year of our elected term. What a ride it has been! The Lord has moved, prompted, and led in ways we could not have imagined! Our first Annual Conference was right here in this very location at Tricon 2022. Depending on the outcome of our deliberations today, this 142nd Session could potentially be the final regular sitting of the East Michigan Annual Conference.

The vote we just took?! WOW! Never saw that one coming back in 2022! That's because:

God ***is able to do infinitely more than we dare to ask or even begin to imagine, according to His power that is at work within us.*** That brings Him ***glory in the church and Christ Jesus*** for generations to come! [Either that, or He just LOVES messing with my preconceived notions of how I think I have things all figured out!]

As it stands, right now, Supt Dale intends to return to full-time with Impact Middle East at the end of December. Superintendent Joanna plans to conclude her term at that time, as well, and continue leading Lansing Central. Both will be available to assist with the conference on a volunteer basis in the new year. I will stay in office and retire at Annual Conference next summer, when my Superintendent term ends.

So, what is the ***State Of The Work*** for East Michigan Conference? I would summarize it in one word: ***EXPECTANT***. That's what I've seen interacting with Leaders on our Boards and Teams. I've heard it in conversations with Pastors and delegates. It has erupted in meetings with leaders in Local Churches. ***Great expectancy***. The Holy Spirit is at work preparing for greater things God wants to do in and through us. Jesus is inviting us to re-engage, following Him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and with all our strength.

Expectant Conference Initiatives

You will hear about some massive missional/administrative moves our conference has made this past year. They were all in expectancy that we need to clear some things out of the way to make room and

focus more clearly on the call God has given us. Those structural/administrative things are important because structure supports and helps carry Missional initiatives.

➤ **Conference Leadership Investments**

This past year, we have challenged our pastors to lead congregations into three targeted outcomes: 1-100-500. (1) New Leader. (100) New Decisions for Christ. (500) new attendance connections. So, how did we do?

- Nearly EVERY pastor took the challenge to identify, call out, equip, and engage a **New Leader!**

[Thanks for those kingdom investments, Pastors!]

Most reported multiple new leaders they are working with. The greatest challenge is for “older leaders” to move over and make room for them at the Leadership Table.

- 192 baptisms across EMC in 2024 and more in 2025. I think that covers *100 decisions!*
- Measuring connections by **attendance** can be a tricky thing.

We do our best counting on Sunday Morning. Yet, people are connecting with their attendance throughout the week.

Our **Sunday Attendance** grew by nearly 100 in 2024 (even more in 2025). That falls short of our target of 500. But Youth and Children may or may not be included in that count. They often meet outside of Sunday morning. Get this: in 2024, we had an increase of **225 Youth** and **200 Children** over the previous year! I assume more were added in 2025. This is significant as we sow to “grow younger” as a movement!

- EMC Investing in Pastor’s Resourcing Days

To lift our church leadership levels, we scheduled three Pastors' Resourcing Days. Each time, we began together at the table with breakfast. Then, we had two learning sessions which included table-talk for processing and sharing best practices.

October = *Stewardship & Worship*

January = *Assimilation & Volunteers,*

April = *Small Groups & Leadership*

- **EMC Funding for Equipping** Events and Experiences

--Pastors received assistance for the Exponential Multiplication event.

--I received training certification to help churches with Vision Framing & Vision Planning

- Every Church has an **appointed pastor in the pulpit** every Sunday. [No “under the Supt.”]

➤ **Conference Relational Investments**

- **Fun, Food, Fellowship** for Pastors

Regularly scheduled evenings for Pastors to play, eat, and share together.

- Problem-solving with **local church boards**.
- Orchestrating **Church Partnerships**

We invested a huge amount of time initiating partnerships so churches could help each other in moving the mission of Jesus forward. It turns out, following the Holy Spirit and trusting each other means these relationships often go **differently than we initially imagined**.

Blue Water FMC agreed to partner with our **Croswell Affiliate** to help them find their footing as a Free Methodist Church. It resulted in Blue Water releasing Pastor Joel Webb to become the *first* Free Methodist Pastor appointed to this **new Free Methodist Society**.

Gaylord FMC was struggling with viability, due to decline. They were unable to afford a full-time pastor and could not find a way forward. **Grayling FMC** began an official partnership with them in January. Pastor Josh and the Grayling Team are worshiping with them on Sundays and leading them into missional reengagement to reach Gaylord.

Gladwin & Ogemaw Hills churches partnered with **Standish** with resources and work teams to update facilities and add needed technology. They brought energy and encouragement to fan the flames of revival that God is bringing to that church and community.

What a story Standish has! We were on the verge of closing the church when Pastor Burt and Jauneta Kincaid asked if they could go for a few months and try to get them back on their feet. Now it's been a few years. The results? Wow! An example of "the little church that could!"

2021 = 12 people, 2022 = 29; 2024 = 40; 2025 – many Sundays at 60. That's 400% growth!

- **LRG Partnerships** *[According to Executive Director, Brad Button]*

Here are a few. . .

Central FMC. *They have established a growing influence with young adults of numerous nationalities. A large area was remodeled and named "The Central Space." They are realizing the dream of a gathering place where young adults hear about Jesus, engage in the Bible and take steps in discipleship. Next Gen leaders are being identified, trained, and formed.*

Gladwin FMC. *Partnership with LRG has helped them take steps to expand their vision. They're engaging members of the congregation in prayer and calling people to new levels of family discipleship. The results? A shift in morale, new young families, new discipleship leaders, multiple baptism services, new members, and a priority of prayer. They recently sent 20 people on a regional cross-cultural mission trip with their partners at the Detroit FMC. They are learning to live and love like Jesus!*

I would add that Gladwin has been slaying it in attendance!

2023 = 68; 2024 = 76; 2025 = string of 100+ weeks.

New Covenant. *LRG Impact has helped them target an unreached people group in most communities: families with special needs children. A sensory room called “The Hideout” was developed with special lighting and equipment, textured walls, flexible seating, and a teaching space. New families are attending, and more than 20 volunteers are engaged in embodying the love of Jesus for them.*

Thank you, LRG Impact, for your partnership with EMC.

- **New Multiplication Investment!**

East Michigan Conference is partnering with Ogemaw Hills FMC to launch a **New Church Plant in Rose City, MI!** In the next 6 months, **Pastor Brad Older** will be released and sent from Ogemaw Hills to pastor this new expression.

Expectancy Includes Conflict

With expectancy comes conflict. We become conflicted when we know something big is about to happen – especially if we do not know what it is. If we are unclear on *what* it is and uncertain *when* it might happen, we become conflicted. *Will it be good? Will it require changes? Will it require more (or less) of me? Do I have a choice in the matter? Should I be celebrating or suspicious?*

Those conflicting thoughts are magnified in groups. The truth is, if you put more than one person together for any length of time, there will eventually be conflict. In the season of expectancy this past year, some of our churches have faced significant conflicts.

Conflicts in a church are not a new thing. A quick read of the New Testament reveals that. We find that conflict is not always a bad thing. In the end, it can be a good thing. It clarifies perspective and ought to purify our intentions.

Fears can cause conflict. Fear of the **unknown**. Or fear of **repeating** something painful. **Hurt feelings** cause conflict. Feelings of being **ignored** or **attacked**.

Different perspectives can bring conflict. Not being understood or being dismissed.

Competing values – disagreeing on what’s important – causes conflict.

Unclear or outdated vision. Breeds conflict.

“Clarity is kindness.” But **confusion is controlling, ambiguity – abusive, and chaos – cruelty.**

Or maybe it is a simple matter of “**say-so.**” Who has the say-so in all this? **Wow! There’s plenty of room for conflict, isn’t there?**

Lately, I've been wondering how much conflict in church leadership is from **lack of missional progress**. Or at least a *perceived lack* in progress. Fatigue, frustration, boredom, impatience, or disappointment from the feeling of not getting anywhere. Just spinning our wheels with no traction.

Here's a mental image to illustrate it. Think: **Family Vacation ROAD TRIP!** Pastors, Church Leaders, Superintendents, haven't you felt like Mom and Dad driving the car on a ROAD TRIP Vacation?

You've been creeping along through a construction area. Now it's starting to rain. There is a stir in the back seat. All snacks are devoured, and naps are done. You are way behind schedule because it has taken way longer than expected. And so it begins:

"Are we there yet?!" *"How much longer?"*

"You said just a little while!" *"I have to use the restroom!"*

Adding to the drama is the fact that you took a wrong turn somewhere. The parents are completely lost – still trying to figure out whose fault THAT was. The gas gauge says "empty" without a station in sight. (Trying to figure out whose fault THAT is!) The kids don't know any of this, yet. It's starting to feel more like a family feud than a family vacation.

And so it begins:

"She's looking at me!" *He's on my side of the line!*

She keeps laughing! *He keeps breathing!*

You said it is my turn! *Why do I always have to sit here?*

Almost simultaneously, these warnings come from the parents:

"Do you want me to stop this car and come back there?!"

"Do you want us to turn this car around and go home?!"

You look at each other, realizing you just set yourself up for responses you do NOT WANT!

So, what's the problem? What's really going on here? It was supposed to be better than this! Fatigue, frustration, boredom, impatience, and disappointment. It was supposed to be the highlight of the summer. You looked forward to this for the entire year. During these moments, nobody is having fun!

What's happening? In these moments, everyone has lost sight of the big picture of where they are going and what is in store. They are forgetting this is all part of the great adventure you will celebrate when you arrive and fondly remember for years to come. The big picture is more than this.

The kids were made for more than their current frustration and disappointment. Whatever THIS IS is not what they agreed to, in their minds! (Parents, too.) Instead of attacking their adventure, they pick at each other. They're trying to make sense of it, trying to take control of it—mostly, trying not to lose their

minds! Kids are full of energy and excitement. They were made for more than being stuck in this car ALL DAY!

Biblical Examples

The Bible has many examples of this. There is an Old Testament example that is recalled throughout scripture. It happens in **Exodus 15-17**. By God's miraculous intervention, Moses has led God's people **out of Egyptian slavery**. They are moving into God's promises through Abraham. Through them all the nations of the world would be blessed by God because of their journey to the **Promised Land** – flowing with milk and honey.

A month into their adventure, it looks like they have lost the vision of what God is doing. Traveling in the desert, they encountered a familiar problem – *lack of water*. Making this trip with a million people, another one: *what about food?* Tired, hungry, thirsty, afraid. That's a perfect **recipe for conflict**.

The text in **Exodus calls it "quarreling."** They *quarreled* with the leaders, Moses and Aaron. They *quarreled* with God. And they *quarreled* with each other. Their question was an accusation: "*Did you bring us out here to die?!*" In those moments, they were not focused on the vision of the promise before them. Their threats and frustrations in the present had their full attention. That is, until they started looking back at the "good old days that never were" as slaves back in Egypt.

By Exodus 17 something took root deep within the community. It was like something died inside them. Those moments of despair began to define them. They called the place *Testing and Quarreling* because they quarreled and tested the Lord. Something shifted in them that they carried the rest of their lives. Psalm 95 says they hardened their hearts. Instead of *finding their rest* by trusting God, they spent their remaining days *striving*. They forgot the big picture: who they were and where they were going. "*Are we there yet?*" became "*We're never gonna make it!*"

Jesus experienced conflict like this. He came to announce an eternal kingdom that is out of this world. Yet it is intended to redeem and transform the kingdoms of this world. He invited everyone to follow Him with the promise that they would be transformed to become like Jesus. None of this would be accomplished by power or force, but by the cross. Jesus still invites would-be followers of His to take up their cross of sacrifice and self-denial.

At least three times in the Gospels, Jesus announced His coming death and resurrection. Each time resulted in conflict. Mark says that after the first time, Peter rebuked Jesus for saying such things. Then Jesus rebuked Peter for continuing the temptation from Satan: the glory of resurrection without the

agony of the cross. Peter's mind was not on the things of God – but mere fleshly concerns. Jesus said, *“If you lose your life for me and the gospel, you will save it.”*

Luke records some interesting conflicts after Jesus' second announcement. Jesus overheard an argument among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. We don't know if they were arguing about who should be in charge, whose idea was the best, or who has the say-so. But they are missing Jesus' message. Right after that, they offer to call fire down from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village! Of course, Jesus rebuked them. (I would LOVE to have Jesus' exact words, here! *“Are you kidding me?!...”*)

Conflict followed Jesus' third announcement of His coming death and resurrection. Jesus' example of the ultimate sacrifice was met with another argument among the disciples. I wonder if they ever looked back with embarrassment. It was started when James and John pulled Jesus aside and asked if they could sit to the right and left of Jesus in heaven. (*“I call shotgun!”*) Matthew says their mother even got involved. It bugged the snot out of the other disciples because they wanted the front seat! Peter, James, and John ALWAYS got the front seat!

Like the people of God following Moses, they were missing the point. They did not have the mind of God. Like the kids in the back seat, they had lost sight of why they got in the car in the first place. Without a clear vision of the destination, they were losing the joy of the journey. Instead of looking forward – together – in great expectancy, they looked around and fussed with each other. Conflict.

The Good News about conflict is that through it, we can learn to live, love, and lead like Jesus. Not just follow Jesus, but love and live like Jesus. Think about it. Conflict helps us grow in humility and patience and Trust. Conflict reminds us that we are not always right, and we do not always get our own way. Conflict shows us how to learn from each other and how to honor and respect others – even if they disagree with us. Conflict forces us to grow up and mature. To move out from the center of our own lives. Conflict is a great opportunity to be better together. It will keep us in check and keep us seeking the Lord together for his will and his way.

Somewhere along the way, we need to realize that the mission of Jesus is more than all that. There are SO MANY THINGS that threaten to distract us from the mission of Jesus. We were made for than this . . .

Jesus said: *“Take up your cross and follow me. The only way you save your life is to lose it.”* (Luke 9:21) *“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it remains only a single seed.”* (John 12:24) The Apostle Paul said: *“I have been crucified with Christ. The life I now live is by faith in the Son of God, who love me and gave Himself for me.”* (Gal. 2:20) He said *“We*

were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God made us alive with Christ, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 2:1-6)

Death includes loss. Laying aside what was to take hold of what is to come.
We come to terms with that loss by realizing we were made for much more than this life.
I don't know who first said it, but I LOVE the truth of the statement:

**Everybody Wants To Go To Heaven
But nobody wants to die.**

Something deep within tells us we were made for more than what we are experiencing.
That's EXPECTANCY.

SONG: Made For More *"I wasn't made to be tending a grave! I was made for more."*