

2013 Virginia Annual Conference Report

Virginia Annual Conference
Hampton Roads Convention Center, Hampton, VA
Theme: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"

Bishop Young Jin Cho presided over his very first annual conference session, with the theme "Lord, Teach Us to Pray," where more than 3,000 United Methodists gathered at the Hampton Roads Convention Center in Hampton for the 231st meeting of the Virginia Annual Conference.

"We pray that this holy conferencing will be an opportunity to encourage and challenge the churches to take our prayer life more seriously, and spread the culture of prayer," Bishop Cho said during the June 21-23 gathering.

Cho offered an inspiring Episcopal Address, speaking about having hope for a positive future of The United Methodist Church. The foundation of that hopeful future, the bishop said, would have to be prayer. "Of course, all of us pray. But just saying hello to Jesus a couple of times a day is not enough. We, United Methodists clergy and laity, should pray more. We need to pray harder, longer and deeper in such a time as this. We need to learn to do our ministry on praying knees."

Dr. Steve Harper, professor emeritus at the Orlando campus of Asbury Theological Seminary, was the Bible study leader, also speaking on prayer. "How do you see your life modeling the priority of prayer?" asked Dr. Harper. "Jesus modeled prayer for us by his life and ministry and is the best example for us to follow. ... If the Son of God couldn't get through the day without prayer, how can we?"

The 2013 Annual Conference approved a new, streamlined structure for its Common Table, and a new method in electing clergy delegates in 2015. Members also approved a budget with a 3.35 percent increase over last year, due mainly to a 50 percent jump in the clergy pension liability assessment (pre-82).

The conference approved a resolution condemning predatory lending practices. All four proposed constitutional amendments from 2012 General Conference passed by huge margins.

Bishop Cho led the commissioning of new General Board of Global Ministries missionaries Kip and Nancy Robinson, who are being assigned to Sierra Leone.

A time of worship featured the conference's new partnership with the Methodist Church of Cambodia. Worship was led by the Rev. Dr. "Romy" del Rosario, director of the United Methodist Mission in Cambodia. "We want to change love into mission. Our prayer is the Holy Spirit will set our feet in mission in the world as the word becomes flesh," he said. He thanked the Virginia Conference for "stepping up to the plate" in its strong and ongoing support for mission.

The annual conference offering will go to children's ministries in Brazil, Mozambique, Cambodia, and in three locations in Virginia. The bishop recognized the "Holy Rollers," a group of cyclists in the conference who bike to Annual Conference each year to raise awareness and funds for the offering.

In other mission giving, the conference collected 10,216 school kits, 17,996 health kits, 5,878 birthing kits, 1,698 layette kits, 343 cleaning buckets, and 345 other kits for the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), for a total of 36,476 kits. Some 7,000 pounds of canned and boxed food was brought to Annual Conference for the Virginia Peninsula Food Ban through the "4 Cans 4 Conference" food drive. Volunteers bagged 50,000 pounds of sweet potatoes for area food pantries at the "Potato Drop" sponsored by the Society of St. Andrew and the Virginia Conference.

Harry Denman Evangelism Awards went to the Rev. Dr. Clarence Brown, senior pastor of Annandale UMC (clergy); Brent Staul, member and youth leader at Tabernacle UMC in Poquoson (laity); and Tim Hares, member of Fredericksburg UMC (youth).

Members also joined in the celebration of Ferrum College's 100th anniversary. United Methodist Women founded the school as Ferrum Training School in 1913.

Dr. Brown was the preacher for the evening Service of Remembrance. He urged that we be joyful enough "that young folks might actually want to come." Twenty-nine Virginia clergy who have died in the past year were remembered, including Bishop Leontine T.C. Kelly.

The conference also rose to welcome the pastors of five new faith communities begun this year. Since 2008, the Virginia Annual Conference has started 26 new faith communities.

The Rev. Larry Davies presented the "All Things New-Equipping Vital Congregations" Task Force report. The conference is developing a system that will eliminate the replication of data entry while providing real-time data use by congregations. This process is projected to begin in January. Davies asked each member of Annual Conference to reach under their chair and retrieve a card that had the name and contact information of a faith community in the conference. They were asked to take that card and begin praying for that faith community.

At the Service for the Ordering of Ministry, 13 were ordained as elders, 5 ordained as deacons, 19 commissioned as provisional members, and 28 licensed as local pastors. The Rev. Tom Berlin, senior pastor at Floris UMC in Herndon, was the preacher, and told the group of the need to have joy as they perform the many phases of their ministry. "I don't trust members of any type who lack joy," Berlin said. "You can smell them coming a mile away. Stay away from them, because they will steal your joy."

Forty-six retiring clergy were thanked by the Bishop and the conference. The Rev. Margaret T. Kutz preached from Isaiah 40:8 and, employing the image of sandcastles, said that while much of what we build in life is temporal, what we do in service to the Word of God endures forever.

Membership stands at 332,431, down 2,140 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 105,128 (down 3,727). Professions of faith were up, however, and ethnic membership climbed by 26 percent.

-Neill Caldwell is editor of the Virginia United Methodist Advocate