

## 2014 Virginia Annual Conference

June 20-22, 2014 at Hampton Roads Convention Center, Hampton, VA.

Virginia United Methodists were water washed and spirit born at the 232nd session of Virginia Annual Conference, held June 20-22 at the Hampton Roads Convention Center.

Presentations centered on the theme of “Lord, Renew Us With Your Spirit,” with most speakers touching on how the presence of the Holy Spirit can renew us and our local churches. Then during the closing worship, the 3,000 attendees remembered their baptism by touching water in small basins throughout the hall.

Members votes to “postpone indefinitely” a resolution that would have asked the 2016 General Conference to change language in the *Book of Discipline* related to human sexuality.

In his Episcopal Address during the opening session on Friday, Bishop Young Jin Cho called for a period of discernment throughout the conference on the sexuality issue over the coming church year. Cho said he changed his mind about dealing with the issue after speaking with members of the conference’s Common Table. “I had hoped to spend more time on mission and revitalizing the churches,” Cho said. He called the issues of same-sex marriage and other matters related to homosexual inclusion a “gathering storm” for the church, mentioning talk of schism and the counter proposals to keep the church together. “This is a time when we surely need to pay and seek guidance from our Lord,” Cho said, also asking members to “pray for the future of our United Methodist Church very seriously.”

The proposal was part of a look at things coming for the conference in the new church year. The others include the expansion of the new Discipleship Circles model – creating small groups composed of lay and clergy that participants from more than one church or district for spiritual vitality, personal accountability and collaborative learning – the start of new faith communities, and the conference’s jumping into the denomination’s Imagine No Malaria effort.

Cho challenged everyone to take on Imagine No Malaria as a spiritual discipline rather than just another fund-raising drive. The bishop said he would also like to see every church in the conference participating. After the positive vote on the Imagine No Malaria effort, Bishop Cho donned a t-shirt and broke into dance with youth and others to Pharrell Williams’ “Happy” song. Conference director of Mission and Social Justice the Rev. Glenn Rowley introduced Maria Maxwell, who will be the conference field coordinator for Imagine No Malaria. Cabinet members spelled out “Save 100,000+ Lives” with large letters on the back of their t-shirts. Bishop Cho then asked “after dancing, what next? ... Open your checkbooks!”

In recapping this past year, Bishop Cho also announced that more than 200 churches had signed the bishop’s Prayer Covenant, and his Convocation on Prayer was very well attended.

Three new faith communities were introduced, bringing to 26 the number of new faith communities that have been started since the adoption of an emphasis on planting churches six years ago.

Members approved a resolution calling for an appeal for a phased-in increase in the federal minimum wage, but defeated a measure asking the conference pensions and benefits agency to divest from fossil fuel companies.

Preaching for the Service of Remembrance, the Rev. Rhonda VanDyke Colby, vice president at United Methodist-related Shenandoah University, imagined Jesus as a gardener,

not a carpenter. “It makes sense,” she said. “God’s world started in a garden. ... Jesus says a sower went out to sow, not a strategic planter. ... Jesus is betrayed in a garden and on the third day after his death, where does Mary go? (Murmurs of “a garden” throughout the crowd.) Of course she does. That was not a mistake.”

Dr. Elmer Colyer, professor of systematic theology and Wesley Studies at the University of Dubuque (Iowa) Theological Seminary, is leading “teaching sessions” during conference. Colyer said the Virginia Conference is doing something right after hearing of its financial successes in the past year. “Virginia is bucking the trend and you ought to be proud of it.”

But there is a malaise that is disturbing the larger Church, he said. “Fear propels congregations into survival mode. It’s often a self-fulfilling death spiral.”

Political battles and cultural controversies “hinder the church from moving forward,” he said. Colyer suspects the greater problem is “connection,” not the *Book of Discipline*. John Wesley said connection is deep and utterly real – a union and communion that unites us with God and others, Colyer said. “Connection is a gift that comes to us from God.”

Bishop Robert Hayes from the Oklahoma Area led Saturday morning worship and preached for the Service for the Ordering of Ministry. Hayes told ordinands that “there are no easy jobs in God’s kingdom if you do it right. We may as well say that here and now.”

George Howard, deputy general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), handed out awards for having the highest giving to The Advance for Christ and His Church (\$2.5 million) in 2013, and for leading the Southeastern Jurisdiction in giving to missionary support. Howard also praised the conference for contributing \$1.1 million to the United Methodist Committee On Relief (UMCOR).

As Bishop Hayes said a few minutes later, “Virginia is one of the most outstanding – if not the most outstanding – conferences in the denomination in terms of reaching out to people.”

Bishop Cho commissioned the Rev. Pat Watkins as a missionary with the GBGM, working on the “Care of God’s Creation” through the Council of Bishops. Deaconesses Laarni Bibay and Anselma Samson were also commissioned; they were consecrated as deaconesses in April in Louisville.

Members as always brought health kits collected for UMCOR to Annual Conference. The total number of kits collected was 41,218, with a total value of \$533,834. Specifically: 30,844 Health kits, 11,306 School kits, 5,325 Birthing kits, 1,666 Layette kits, 228 Cleaning kits, 394 Bedding kits, and 1,455 miscellaneous kits. They also collected more than 85,000 pounds of non-perishable food items for the Peninsula Food Bank.

At the Service for the Ordering of Ministry, 13 were ordained as elders, one ordained deacons, 22 commissioned as provisional members, and 27 licensed as local pastors. One elder also had her orders recognized. Forty-one clergy took retired status this year.

Denman Evangelism awards went to the Rev. David Burch, pastor of Vision of Hope UMC, Harrisonburg District; David Bailey of Trinity UMC, James River District; and to Casey Heinlein, who attends Burnt Factory UMC, Winchester, and is the current chair of the Conference Council on Youth Ministries.

Members approved a 2015 budget of more than \$32.7 million, down by one percent from the 2014 budget.

Conference membership stands at 330,696, down 1,735 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 104,231, down by 897 persons.

In his sermon for closing worship, Bishop Cho talked about coming to the U.S. in 1979 from Korea. He compared that adjustment to how our churches are struggling in a new way of being that is very different from the culture of 20 or 30 years ago. "We are losing touch with the world and the communities in which we live. Truly, we are living in a foreign land. (Churches) are not gaining new members. They do not know how to reach out into their community. They sit and wait for people to come to them.

"Please, do not stop praying. Now, we go back to our mission field. If we truly listen and discern the will of God in prayer, we can faithfully and effectively sing the Lord's song in a foreign land."

Learn more at [www.vaumc.org/AC2014](http://www.vaumc.org/AC2014).

*-Neill Caldwell is editor of the Virginia United Methodist Advocate*