2024 Virginia Annual Conference Report

By: Brenda Grembowski

The 242nd session of the Virginia United Methodist Church Annual Conference was held June 20 - 22, 2024 at the Hampton Roads Convention Center in Hampton, VA. Over 1,000 Methodists were in attendance. Pastor Brian Johnson, Kim Johnson, Deb Angerman, Jeremiah Johnson, Travis Angerman, Ezekiel Johnson and myself attended the Conference from Haymarket Church. Kim, Deb, Jeremiah, and Travis served as at-large members from the Northern Virginia District (they were elected at Northern Virginia District Conference in the fall of 2023). I served as Haymarket Church's lay member of Annual Conference, representing our church.

My first impression of this year's Conference was many weeks before June and was very positive. I really appreciated the Conference's efforts to prepare the delegates beforehand with videos and emails so that reports could be reviewed ahead of time and questions could be answered, if needed, so that the business portion of Conference would go smoothly and efficiently. The preparedness beforehand allowed for more time to experience three spiritual teachings for the first time at Conference, enabled us to have more worship time together with vitalizing sermons and music, and for fun and fellowship. There was a refreshing sense of moving forward in unity, focusing on being a church centered in Christ for all to gather and concentrating on what it means to do God's work.

On Wednesday night, June 19, clergy and laity gathered for a moving observance of Juneteenth. While this service was held prior to the official start of the Conference, many fellow Christians came early to have the opportunity to worship together in recognition of this significant event.

On Thursday morning, Bishop Sue Haupert-Johnson called the Virginia Annual Conference to order. In her opening sermon, Bishop Sue made a plea to the delegates and our churches to work on our spiritual disciplines by spending 30 minutes each day in silence with God. In doing so, she said, we all receive the fruits of the Holy Spirit necessary for leading a Christian life, such as love, kindness, faithfulness, peace, joy and self-control.

The theme for this year was "A Conference in Three Movements," which was based on the belief that there are three principal movements of the Holy Spirit taking place in the present era of the church as follows:

- The theological movement from prevenient grace to sanctification. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit in the human heart.

- The historical movement of Methodism captured in our past, lived in our present, and pointed toward our future. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit in the church.
- The missional movement from gathered spaces into all the world. This is the movement of the Holy Spirit in community.

These movements build upon each other, intertwining together to demonstrate what has been, what is, and what will be as God continues to move amongst God's people.

The 2024 session looked at these movements as a whole. The 2025, 2026 and 2027 sessions will look at each of these movements in depth to focus on our work moving forward as a Conference.

There were three spiritual teachings given in regard to the movements. All three pastors gave powerful testimonies, which were both thought provoking and inspiring.

Rev. Dr. Rodrigo Cruz spoke about the movement of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. The day after his very first sermon, he found himself ministering to a mother who had lost her child. The mother wanted to know if her 12-year-old son was in heaven, even though he never went to church. Dr. Cruz shared that through God's prevenient grace, her child is with God even though he may not have known about his need for God's grace. He continued meeting with the mother for over a year until she confided in him that she now knows that her son is in heaven. Dr. Cruz stressed that sometimes being part of what the Holy Spirit is doing through the movement of grace means simply showing up and listening.

Rev. Dr. Michael Beck spoke about the Holy Spirit in the church by pointing to the historical movement of Methodism and its role in the church's future. He talked about going outside of our church walls to reach people not connected with a church. Dr. Beck reminded us of Susanna Wesley who was the first Methodist to reach out beyond the confines of a church building and formed holy connections in her very own kitchen. He encouraged everyone to start a movement of "Fresh Expressions" outside of their churches to meet people where they are and find ways to sincerely connect. Dr. Beck shared some examples of this movement in his church, such as "Burritos & Bibles," "Church @ Chargers" (meet ups while charging your electric vehicle), "Dog Park Church," and "Shenanigans" (meet ups at an assisted living facility), to name a few. This is a true reflection of "where two or more are gathered in my name." Dr. Beck was a wonderful speaker and will be coming to the Northern Virginia District later this year. I would recommend all to see him when given the opportunity.

Rev. Woo Kang spoke about the movement of the Holy Spirit in community and our desire to be a missional church. But why do we want to be missional? As United Methodists, we have an open table. We want to reach all people. Rev. Kang points out that is easier said than done. We strive for diversity by being welcoming to all, yet we crave the comfort of unity. Ponder the fact that diversity and unity are seen as antonyms. We want them to co-exist, but it is hard. Are we willing to walk with someone we don't fully understand? We need to be willing to sometimes be uncomfortable, willing to try new things and agree to disagree. We need to embrace our differences and be good neighbors. Rev. Kang invited us to take comfort in Acts 2:5-6 where people from every nation under heaven assembled. The Holy Spirit could have done any miracle when it entered this world, but God chose to share church with ALL of them at once by having each person hear the disciples' good news in their own different diverse languages. How can we be diversely unified? We can be centered in Christ as we gather in his name.

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Page, Director of Connectional Ministry for Innovation and Creativity, sat down with the three speakers for a dialogue after each session. I found these Q & A sessions to be as good as the teachings themselves because they provided some practical ways to connect with people. One profound statement that stuck with me when discussing being a welcoming church came from Rev. Dr. Cruz, who stated, "People go where they are welcome, people stay where they are valued." What a great reminder to be a connectional church.

In addition to the spiritual teachings, new Lunch Labs were offered at the Conference for the first time. These classes were voluntary and held during the breaks. I took the "Theology of Mission" lab on Thursday where we discussed how it is always God's mission, not our mission, and sometimes our good intentions can do more harm than good if we do not know why we are doing what we are doing. On Friday, Kim and I took the "Who's Your Neighbor" lab that stressed getting to know your neighbors on a deeper level and not expecting everyone to be like you. We talked about how while there are a lot of big programs you can start to help your neighbors in need, do not forget that friendship is free and simply loving your neighbor doesn't cost a thing. You just need to invest your time.

As for the Conference business conducted in the 2024 session, I offer the following highlights that may be of interest to Haymarket Church:

- Rev. Andrew Ensz made a motion that the Annual Conference make a resolution of apology to LGBTQ+ persons. A resolution was approved to form a Commission of Truth-telling and Reconciliation and Creative Work Group, made up of traditionalists and progressives, to begin the holy work of hearing

stories and seeking healing for those who have suffered religious trauma of any kind. The Commission will make a report at the next annual Conference. This was a holy moment with a huge majority affirmative vote, representing unity, while respecting other people's opinions.

- Thirteen churches closed in the Commonwealth. One of those was in Northern Virginia – Spirit & Life UMC.
- Two new churches opened.
- The Conference has 876 churches and 257,777 members
- In 2023, there were 85,568 in average worship attendance; 1,864 professions of faith, 1,172 baptisms and 43,458 small group participants.
- 39,000 served in missions (reaching over 1.4 million people in need).
- A motion passed to have the Just Compensation Task Force continue its work for another year studying pastoral salaries and added the responsibility to ensure all parsonages have regular safety inspections. (Haymarket Church is in a good place in this regard compared to other churches in Virginia.)
- The General Conference Delegation reported that the vote on Regionalization will occur during the 2025 Annual Conference, and results across the denomination will be released in 2026. (Further information regarding regionalization can be found at vaumc.org/regionalization)
- A new site in Harrisonburg, VA was approved to hold Annual Conference in 2026 and 2027. The 2025 session will be in Roanoke, VA.
- As of 6/24/2024, over $82,000 was collected for the Conference offering. This year's offering benefits two organizations: Partnerships of Hope Countries (supporting Brazil, Cambodia, Mozambique, Native Americans, Haiti and Vietnam) and UnDue Medical Debt (a non-profit that purchases medical debt for pennies on the dollar and then cancels the debt for the people who need this opportunity). Haymarket Church and Grace United Methodist Church were thanked publicly at the Conference for bringing the UnDue Medical Debt nonprofit to the Conference's attention.
- 14,427 UMCOR kits were donated.

Other happenings of interest in the 2024 session include the following:

- Rev. Dr. Sarah Calvert, our former District Superintendent, was recognized and is now going to be the new DS for the Mountain View District.
- Rev. Kirk Nave was recognized as our new Superintendent for the Northern Virginia District.
- Many of you know Claire Miller, who attended Haymarket Church and is now a minister. Claire was voted in as the new Conference Secretary. This is a huge job, and we wish her well.

- The Service of Remembrance remembered 61 Conference clergy and laity who passed away in 2023. Rev. Kyungsuk Cho preached a beautiful sermon.
- The Service of Recognition and Call honored the following persons:
  - 31 clergy who retired in 2023, representing 763.50 years of service.
  - 14 individuals of the Lay Supply Class of 2024
  - 10 individuals of the Certified Lay Ministers Class of 2024
  - 26 Local Licensed Pastors, 3 Provisional Deacons, 11 Provisional Elders, 2 Ordained Deacons and 9 Ordained Elders were recognized / ordained.
- Pastor Brian was publicly thanked by the Local Licensed Pastors group for his teachings and mentorship during Licensing School.

As always, it was a busy Conference time, but a holy time as well. If anyone has questions about the Conference or this report, please feel free to reach out to me or your other delegates.