

# 2022 Annual Conference: a celebration of generosity

By Paul Black

**PEORIA** -- The Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference gathered in a first-ever, hybrid annual conference session June 9-11. The theme of annual conference session was *A Time for Love and a Time for Peace*, the second of four themes focusing on a quadrennial theme of *God Has Made Everything Beautiful in His Time*, based upon Ecclesiastes 3.

The Conference provided opportunity for celebration on a number of fronts – the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the annual conference following the merger of the former Central and Southern Illinois conferences in 1996 and the approaching bicentennial of Methodism in Illinois when the first session of the antecedent Illinois Conference convened in 1824.

Conferees also celebrated the completion of the six-year Our Conference, Our Kids campaign, in which funds were raised to finance the chaplaincy programs at the five children's health and welfare agencies in the IGRC – The Baby Fold, Chaddock, Cunningham Children's Home, Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House and Spero Family Services. The \$2.5 million goal was eclipsed and the Conference celebrated total giving of \$3,000,130.76. The Conference also approved the naming of the endowment at the Bishop Frank J. and Melissa K. Beard Our Conference, Our Kids Endowment.

The generosity of the Annual Conference was evident as a report showed that IGRC churches contributed \$6,619,996 to missions beyond apportionments through The United Methodist Church.

Special offerings during the Annual Conference included: \$21,900; John Kofi Asmah School in Liberia, \$3,750; Tom Brown Scholarship at Wiley College, \$4,500; and funds for the 2023 Ordinands' Trip, \$4,600.

Bishop L. Jonathan Holston, episcopal leader of the Charleston (S.C.) Area, was the preacher for the Opening Worship and Memorial Services and Bishop Frank J. Beard preached the Ordination and Commissioning service.

A total of 28 retirees with a combined 759.5 years of service were recognized. A Memorial Service remembering clergy, clergy spouses and lay members to annual conference that had passed away in the previous year and remembrance of 14 congregations with a combined 2,032 years of ministry that have completed their mission – Ashley, Bonfield First, Dow Bethel, Elkville, Kenney, Ludlow, Oak Grove, Okawville, Parkville, Plainville, Pleasant Mound, Tamms and West.

The Conference also approved the closure of a congregations -- the former Xenia UMC -- which have left the denomination to become independent. The departure brings the total number of congregations to three with all three becoming independent.

The Annual Conference approved a 2022 budget of \$9,106, 853 – a reduction of 18 percent. This is the third straight year of decrease in apportionments of more than 7 percent. While budgets have been relatively flat over the past 10 years, the \$9,106,853 apportioned total returns spending levels to 2001. The \$1,934,056 reduction comes on the heels of apportionment collections of 90 percent in 2021 and a \$37,942 surplus.

The Conference also approved a \$604,288 payment from Conference reserve funds as its part in the \$30 million Boy Scouts of America Survivor Trust Fund as part of the BSA bankruptcy proceedings. No payments are being required of any IGRC church.

The Conference also received news of a \$1,933,404 bequest from the Richard White Estate. Lay and clergy approved a “double tithe” for Our Conference, Our Kids, pushing it over the \$3 million mark and the remaining 80 percent to be referred to the Conference Council on Finance and Administration to be used for student debt of clergy.

The Conference also approved a resolution from Cabinet to reduce the number of districts from 10 to five, effective July 1, 2023. This is the first reduction in districts since 2005 when the Conference went from 12 to 10 districts. Currently, the 10 districts are being staffed with eight superintendents.

Several members expressed concern about the workload that a reduction of districts would create, while others affirmed faith in leadership to work out the details to make the plan work. In 2005, there were 589 pastoral charges with 921 congregations and a membership of 152,118. As of Dec. 31, 2021, the Conference has 527 pastoral charges, 778 congregations and a membership of 106,277.

In anticipation of a potential split in The United Methodist Church, the Conference adopted, on a 487-250 vote, that all ordained clergy who have served and retired from the IGRC or subsequently, become a member of a Wesleyan denomination as part of a disassociation from The United Methodist Church, will be eligible to receive retiree benefits from Preachers’ Aid.

A motion to take a \$4.2 million overfunding in the retiree health insurance fund and apply it to the Conference’s pension withdrawal obligation. While the amount represents anywhere from 3 to 5 percent of the total obligation, the amount applied would lower the pension withdrawal cost for a church wishing to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church.

Legislatively, the conference announced that the health insurance allowance paid to full-time pastors will remain at \$17,500 for 2023. The conference also approved a 6 percent increase to its minimum salaries. In 2023, the salaries will go to \$48,967 for clergy in full connection, associate members and provisional elders; and \$44,934 for full-time local pastors.

Retirees under the pre-1982 pension plan will see a 2 percent increase to \$844 per active service year in 2023, funded by a gift from Preachers' Aid Society and Benefit Fund.

The Clergy Session, held June 4 at McKendree University, approved the election of two elders in full connection and a deacon in full connection. They also approved the commissioning of five provisional elders and one provisional deacon; the election of one pastor into associate membership; and celebrated the graduation of four local pastors from Course of Study.

Membership stands at 106,211 in 2021, down 3,323 (3.0 percent) from 2020. Average worship attendance is 29,800, down 2,773 (8.5 percent), although congregations also reported 30,733 persons attending online, which would result in a substantial increase. Church school attendance stands at 9,984 in 2021, down 1,986.

The 2023 Annual Conference will be held June 8-10, 2023, at the Peoria Civic Center in Peoria, Ill.

*(Paul Black is the Director of Communication Ministries for the Illinois Great Rivers Conference)*