

Andy and Linda Garlington served as Ebenezer's lay representatives to the 2023 Virginia Annual Conference and provided this report...

The 2023 Virginia Annual Conference was held June 15-17, 2023 at the Berglund Center in Roanoke, Va. (<https://vaumc.org/ac2023/>) The conference theme was based on Acts 1:8b. This year clergy and lay members focused on fellowship and joy, with dedicated time for Bible studies and worship in the mornings and an Advocacy event, Mission Social, Youth and Campus Ministries Tailgate, and a Game Night in the evenings.

Our VAUMC General Conference Delegation provided an overview of the Christmas Covenant, a proposal for regionalization and contextualization as a way forward for the UMC. If a regionalization plan passes at General Conference 2024, Annual Conferences will have to vote to ratify resultant constitutional amendments. The VAUMC Delegation unanimously supports the Christmas Covenant as the wisest and most hopeful way forward for the United Methodist Church, and the Annual Conference members voted to affirm their discernment and endorsement in advance of the 2024 General Conference. (More information may be found at <https://vaumc.org/gc2024/>)

Two new faith communities were announced: Provision Church in the Northern Virginia District, and St. Andrew's UMC in the Three Notch'd District will launch a Korean language faith community as a sister congregation. Fifty-nine new faith communities have been planted in the conference since 2008. Of these, more than 70% remain active. This year, 13 churches were closed. The closest one to Ebenezer is Grace Oak Grove UMC, about 37 miles away.

During the Equitable Compensation report, there was discussion and a motion was raised to increase the minimum salary for full-time clergy in each category by \$1,000 for 2024. The motion was approved. A motion was also made and approved to appoint a work group to analyze and give new recommendations on housing allowances.

The conference treasurer reported that apportionment receipts in 2022 were \$23,398,006, a 3.75% increase from 2021. Second-mile benevolences increased \$55,000 from 2021. The 2024 budget was approved for \$27,362,000, a 1.33 % reduction from the 2023 budget.

We held a Service of Remembrance for the 75 conference clergy and laity who died since the last Annual Conference. We also held a Retirement Service for 58 clergy members, with a combined total of 1,210 years of service.

Finally, we held a Service for the Ordering of Ministry, where our own Anji Budzynski became a licensed local pastor! Congratulations, Anji! She is serving the congregation at Andrew Chapel here in Stafford.

Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson preached on "Going Beyond the Walls of the City." She reflected on the pressures of the world in light of Covid, war, and more as it creates exhaustion for individuals and the Church. She referenced the book of Hebrews – a sermon to an exhausted congregation who were worn out, worn down, and considering dropping the load and walking away from it all.

Bishop Sue shared that as followers of Jesus, it is our job to follow Him outside the walls of our church, where He waits for us. We don't belong hiding behind walls. "If you want to find Jesus, don't look in your churches, don't look inside the walls, go out to those who are suffering and burdened and you will find him there."

"I feel like the church in many places is circling the wagons: Let's build our own schools so we don't have to mingle with those who are outside our churches, let's insulate ourselves from evil and those we disagree with, let's insulate ourselves and circle the wagons. The problem is when we circle the wagons, we aren't going anywhere. Christ is waiting for us outside the walls to be salt, and light, and yeast. And the beauty of those images is it only takes a little bit to change the whole thing. So go find Jesus outside the walls."

Since October 2022, 107 churches have disaffiliated under Paragraph 2553, of which 70 have completed the legal closing process. The remaining 37 churches will be completed in the next several weeks. The final called session to consider disaffiliating churches under Paragraph 2553 in the Virginia Conference will be October 7, 2023. The conference projects that by year end, the Virginia Conference will comprise 900 churches with 268,000 members.