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# John Gill leaves permanent imprint on Arkansas ministry to children

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John Gill, *Photo by Dwain Hebda*

By Dwain Hebda

Featured Contributor

When your father and your maternal grandfather are both named after a Methodist bishop – and the same one at that, Bishop John Christian Keener – you can't really get

much more bona fide in the Church. But John Gill's faith runs much deeper than mere surface identification.

Gill — senior attorney/shareholder and director with Gill Ragon Owen, P.A. in Little Rock, Arkansas — has also devoted decades of time and expertise to Methodist Family Health. In so doing, he's helped the organization navigate the shifting needs and regulatory tides of serving Arkansas's children and families in need.

"Well, my wife, Marjem was a social worker out there, we didn't have any children at that point," Gill said of his origins with the organization. "Edwin Keith was the superintendent then; he had been an associate pastor at First United Methodist Church of Little Rock at one point. Anyway, he had some legal issues come up and either he knew I was a lawyer or he asked Marjem or Marjem said, 'We'll get John to answer that for you.' And that's how it happened."

Gill began his work with Methodist Family Health in the early 1960s at a time when the organization, like the nation itself, was undergoing radical change. Founded in 1899 as Arkansas Methodist Orphanage, the organization had recently changed the delivery of services from the classic orphanage model to family-style living. These units operated under the updated name of Methodist Children's Homes and featured smaller numbers of children per living unit.

"The house parent-child relationship is the basis upon which the organization prospered for decades," he said. "Each cottage, as they are called, all of them nice brick homes, had a house parent, almost always a husband and wife and a certain number of kids, maybe five or six, not a huge number."

As the organization refined this model, it turned its eye to expanding the number of units to reach more children and all of the challenges that entailed. The payment model for the ministry also changed, as it went from directly funded by the United Methodist Church to being compensated through state and federal programs, each of which brought its own set of guidelines and requirements.

Gill helped guide the organization through all of this as legal counsel and as a member of the board. He also provided a steady hand of leadership as the organization broadened its scope yet again in 2001 with the establishment of the Methodist Behavioral Hospital in Maumelle, Arkansas. Today, the facility is one of the only service providers of its kind in the state.

"Children needing care and getting help by way of Methodist receive treatment that has changed enormously. House parents are still there to some degree, but nothing like the majority of the children," he said.

"With the acquisition of the Methodist Behavioral Hospital came what was called the parent teaching model which changed the method by which you were teaching the child.

Not a house mother necessarily, but a group of teachers almost in a school environment teaching the child.”

Today, Gill looks at what has been accomplished with great pride. As his service to the board of directors winds down, he leaves knowing despite the continued pace of change in this sector of human services, the organization remains in good hands, doing good work.

“What they’re doing is being done well,” he said. “The success stories are just enormous and to get to be a part of something like that is pretty special.”

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