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Arkansas Holds First Ever Online Annual Conference

George Floyd Honored, New Initiatives to Strengthen Black Church Announced

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The 2020 meeting of the Arkansas Annual Conference was different than any past gathering, in more ways than one.

Taking place on June 13, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m., this year's Annual Conference was a one-day meeting, held completely online via the Zoom video conferencing platform, and took the place of our usual 3-day conference at Bank OZK Arena in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

"It's at this time that I would usually say, 'Welcome to the Arkansas Annual Conference in Hot Springs, Little Rock, or Rogers.' Today, I get to give a first-ever greeting. Welcome to the Arkansas Annual Conference, wherever you are!" said Bishop Gary Mueller, in his opening address to the Conference.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended all in-person gatherings planned by the Arkansas Conference in 2020, which forced the meeting to be moved online in order to protect the health and well-being of the attendees.

The virtual conference, which was made possible by Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson's [Executive Order 20-15](#) in early April, was a stripped-down and condensed version of our usual annual meeting and consisted only of business deemed essential by the Conference staff and cabinet.

Remembering George Floyd

Not only was this year a first for the manner and location of our conference, but it also arrived during the middle of massive protests across all 50 states and the world over the killing of George Floyd, a black man, at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, a white man.

The Bishop's Cabinet [released a unified statement](#) a few days prior to the meeting, which stated the commitment of the Conference to better work toward eradicating racism, listening more to black voices within the Conference, and putting into action a plan for creating a more just and equal environment for people of color within the Conference.

At the start of the Conference, Bishop Mueller asked for a moment of silence to be taken to honor the memory of George Floyd. A silent video with a picture of George Floyd played for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the amount of time that Officer Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck before Floyd died from his injuries.

Afterward, the Rev. Mark Norman, Southeast District Superintendent, offered a powerful prayer to the conference, asking for justice to be served, healing to happen, and for us all to remember the work of John Wesley and the mission of United Methodists to offer justice and peace to a broken world.

Strengthening the Black Church in Arkansas

During the afternoon business session, Bishop Mueller presented more details on new initiatives the Conference would be taking to better support and work with members of the black community, both clergy and laity, in the Arkansas Conference.

Part of the initiative includes a partnership with Philander Smith College, a Historically Black College with Methodist roots, for an annual mandatory training event for clergy with Philander's Center for Social Justice. This training would work to educate clergy on issues related to race and better equip them to understand the needs of the black communities they serve.

Other elements of the initiative include a new landing page on the Conference website dedicated to dismantling racism in the church. Links to resources on the topic of racism and race will be included on the page in the coming weeks.

Additionally, the Arkansas Conference Cabinet will undergo implicit bias training provided by the General Commission on Religion and Race. Small groups of black clergy will also be invited to meet with the Bishop and District Superintendents to voice their concerns and questions.

The Rev. Rashim Merriwether, who currently serves as the Developer of Ethnic Faith Communities in the Center for Connectional Ministries, has also been appointed as a member of the Cabinet to increase the representation and voice of the black community in the Arkansas Conference.

And finally, increased funding for ethnic ministries in the Conference, as well as a new working group to develop strategic plans for Black churches in Little Rock, were announced.

At the conclusion of Bishop Mueller's presentation, the Rev. Michael Roberts, First UMC Conway, **presented legislation** that proposed using funds from the Connected in Christ Endowment Fund, in the amount of \$550,000, to purchase St. James Pine Bluff from the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas and deed it back to the congregation for continued ministry.

The church fell into financial distress after a previous pastor was implicated in an embezzlement scheme with a former Arkansas state representative in 2018, which resulted in the church not being able to pay the mortgage held by the Methodist Foundation. This resulted in the church voluntarily deeding the property to the Methodist Foundation.

The legislation passed on a vote of 577 to 69. In addition to the congregation regaining control of their church property, the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas has awarded St. James with a \$100,000 grant which will be used to renovate existing space into a new kitchen and dining area for the church.

"I am very excited about the recent transaction between the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas, The Arkansas Annual Conference, and St. James United Methodist Church, Pine Bluff," said the Rev. Wayne Clark, president and CEO of the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas. "A plan that truly helps the local church, campus ministry, and the Annual

Conference do mission and ministry better is a blessing to everyone. I continue to be amazed at how God works.”

Spending Plan Approval

The 2020 – 2021 Conference Center for Finance & Administration report was presented in the morning business session by Todd Burris and the Rev. Brittany Richardson Watson.

Overall, the Conference budget, which we are now calling the Conference Spending Plan to better reflect the goals of the Conference, saw a reduction from \$10,547,689 in the 2019 – 2020 fiscal year to \$8,429,924 in the 2020 -2021 fiscal year. That translates to a 20% overall reduction in budget.

Factors that contributed to the lower spending plan include the reduction of Conference staff, as well as the dissolving of the Center for Multiplying Disciples. Rev. Merriwether, the only remaining member of the Center’s staff as of July 1, will be moved to the Center for Connectional Ministries, which will also absorb the remaining budget for New Places for New People.

Additionally, effective July 1, the 10% tithe for Conference apportionments will increase by .5% to help the transition of district offices to the Conference office. This increase in tithing will last for one year, from July 1, 2020 to July 1, 2021. After that time, Conference apportionments will return to 10%.

The CF&A Spending Plan was adopted by the Conference, 631 – 25.

For more detailed information on the Conference Spending Plan, please refer to [pages 9 -23 of the Pre-Conference Journal](#).

Ordination Class

The clergy session of the 2020 Annual Conference took place prior to the June 13 meeting. During the session, seven people were approved to be ordained as elders in full connection: Rev. Andrea Cummings, Rev. Brad Moore, Rev. Daniel Read, Rev. Doug Phillips, Rev. Jonathan Bevil, Rev. Matthew Carter, and Rev. Taylor Loy.

The 2020 Ordination Service is tentatively scheduled for Aug. 30 at 4 p.m. A location has not yet been announced.

The Rev. J.J. Whitney, current chaplain at Hendrix College and senior pastor at Bentonville First UMC beginning July 1, was the recipient of this year’s Jim Beal Barnabas Award. The Barnabas Award is given annually by the Board of Ordained Ministry to a person, lay or clergy, who has a heart for pastors and mentoring others. It is given in remembrance of the late Rev. Jim Beal.

Retirees and Celebration of Life

Although it looked quite different this year, the Arkansas Annual Conference was able to find a way to honor our faithful pastors who retired this year, as well as clergy and clergy spouses who passed away since our last meeting.

A Retiree Service video was presented, with Bishop Mueller offering a few words of encouragement to the 21 retirees who, combined, served for 572 years of service.

In the Celebration of Life Service, we honored the memory of the clergy and clergy spouses who we lost this year. Additionally, special recognition was given to the family of Rebecca Davis, Administrative Assistant for Connectional Ministries, who passed away shortly before Annual Conference after many years battling cancer.

Next year's Annual Conference is scheduled for June in Hot Springs, Arkansas. An exact date will be announced later. An order form for print copies of the Conference Journal and Directory will be available soon.

To view the 2020 Arkansas Annual Conference in its entirety, watch the video below.



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