

Select Page



Online or In Person, Our Conference Is Connected

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Have you ever been to a hybrid Annual Conference, one that takes place both in-person and online? Do you know of any other Annual Conferences that are having hybrid events? Did you even know such a thing was possible?

Last week, the Arkansas Annual Conference held its annual meeting of business, worship, and fellowship. The June 2-4 meeting was in an entirely new format, one that we have

never attempted before, and if we're being honest, one that we weren't entirely certain would work.

Although we had successfully completed an entirely virtual Annual Conference experience last year in 2020, adding an in-person layer to the event created a completely new layer of complexity.

But it worked! Our tech crew and backstage staff faced a few hiccups at the beginning, but once all the tech demons were exorcised, the event ran flawlessly, perhaps better than we could have imagined.

People attending in-person at the arena were able to hear and see virtual participants on our big projector screens near the main stage. When the Bishop spoke on his stage microphone, or when someone came to a mic in the crowd, the Zoom participants were able to hear them as well. It was sort of like a TV news station going to a reporter on the scene of an event for a live report.

One of the biggest advantages of pulling off this hybrid event was the sense of connectionalism and fellowship that it brought everyone attending the event. Whether online or in-person, you were able to see and hear people who many of us have been separated from since the start of the pandemic in early 2020.

COVID protocols were still in place for our in-person members, but those who had been fully vaccinated were able to hug their friends and colleagues for the first time in more than a year. For some, this was the first time they had seen many of their fellow United Methodists in person since Annual Conference 2019!

Despite the pandemic continuing to spread through our communities — granted, at a much slower rate than before vaccinations become available — the Arkansas Annual Conference was able to bring some semblance of normalcy back to our people.

I don't have to tell many of you how important connectionalism plays in our United Methodist heritage. The pandemic not only devastated people's lives, but it also devastated their connection to their communities.

Technology kept us connected last year, true, but it's simply not the same as seeing your friends and neighbors in person, being able to hug their necks, squeeze their arms, and see their facial expressions in person when you recall a funny story from the past.

The hybrid experience was difficult, perhaps one of the most difficult things we've ever attempted at an Annual Conference, but it was worth the added struggle to be able to offer people that sense of community and connectionalism that they have sorely missed in the last year. I hope that if you attended Annual Conference this year, whether live or online, you felt some of that normalcy return. And let's continue to pray for COVID to be defeated so we can return to full in-person fellowship at Annual Conference 2022.