

Western North Carolina 2024 Annual Conference Overview

The Western North Carolina Annual Conference gathered at Lake Junaluska from June 20-23, 2024. The following information provides a snapshot of the Conference and the work done during the three days of business. Along with Pastors David Hockett, Jim Humphries, and Brad and Meredith Hinton, DUMC sent 5 lay delegates, including Dale Brown, Eric Franzen, Tom Helms, Tom Peckham and Nancy Tarte.

The Western North Carolina Annual Conference includes 643 churches across the 44 western counties of North Carolina, 16 emerging faith communities, 10 new church plants, 200+ fresh expressions of church, and 130 Lighthouse Churches. We are blessed with 173,159 members and an average weekly worship attendance of 53,818, not counting online, which we need to count! Our ministries are led by 1,165 clergy.

Over 1500 delegates attended the Western North Carolina Annual Conference; approximately 800+ were laity, and 700+ were clergy.

The conference offering was over \$20,000 for youth and young adult scholarships to the Junaluska Peace Conference and toward Sowers of Hope, an endowment for our campus ministries.

We established a Rural Life Sunday to be observed in each local church.

Our retiring clergy have served a total of 880 years in the ministry of the gospel.

We prayed for our five appointed military chaplains, with three present, and their families. The conference also included a recurring rhythm of spiritual exercises.

We held conversations and listened to messages about creation care, racism, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. We named progress, confessed failure and harm, and acknowledged a deep need for continuing personal, local, and conference engagement.

We learned that over 1,000 laity and clergy served at the UMC General Conference in Charlotte.

We approved a budget of almost \$13 million, and our apportionment to the general church is the third largest in the connection. Over \$800,000 was invested in salary support for clergy of color last year, and over 97% of tithes and offerings remain in the local churches for vital ministry there.

5,000 youth have attended ministries at Lake Junaluska this summer, and several hundred attended our conference camps. Over \$6,000 was given to the Youth Service Fund, which supported scholarships this year for Harambee, sponsored by Black Methodists for Church Renewal. We also celebrated the 75th Anniversary of Camp Tekoa.

We welcomed 14 new candidates for ministry, approved 7 persons for their first pastoral licenses, recognized the orders of two elders, welcomed three elders from other annual conferences into full connection, commissioned 12, and ordained 11.

We also commissioned 27 presiding elders to serve alongside the superintendents in encouragement, mentoring, and supervision ministries.

We heard reports about new and chartered churches, Fresh Expressions of Church, new models of evangelism, and innovation. We also learned of three initiatives in the coming year: The Purple Church, which will resource churches during the fall political elections; The Healing Centered Churches Summit in February, which will offer training in response to trauma; and the Junaluska Peace Conference in April.

We approved changes in our organization and rules to include youth participation fully.

We surprised our Conference Director of Communications, Aimee Yeager, with a special presentation from United Methodist Communication, during which Aimee was named a 2024 recipient of the Epikoinonia Award for Excellence in Communications Ministry. Five recipients are selected for this award annually, as recommended by staff within United Methodist Communications, based on proven commitment to the work of communication ministry throughout The United Methodist Church. We announced a meeting of the Order of Deacons on September 16 to learn about sacramental theology, fellowship, worship, and early authorization for sacramental leadership.

We celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Reynolds Leadership Program, sponsored by the United Methodist Foundation of Western North Carolina.

Our conference, for the first time, was translated into Spanish.

Our conference began for the first time with a Land Acknowledgement led by Gerri Wolfe Grady, a member of Cherokee United Methodist Church.

The music was led by Dr. Melodie Galloway, professor of music at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, Tate Addis, and the following: The Place, the Modern Worship Collective and Vocal Space.

Our spiritual focus was on John 15, and preachers included Magrey DeVega, Ann Haywood-Baxter, Lynda Ferguson, and Bishop Carter.

Bishop Carter articulated our four strategic priorities: vital local churches and fresh expressions of the church; anti-racism as discipleship and sanctification; the well-being of spiritual leaders (laity and clergy); and our United Methodist identity—grace, connection, and holiness.

The annual conference began with the song “And Are We Yet Alive?” and concluded with the making and fixing of clergy appointments and the singing of the “Hallelujah Chorus.”