

MINUTES
Annual Meeting
The South Carolina Conference Historical Society
At
Bethel United Methodist Church, Spartanburg, South Carolina
Saturday, November 1, 2025

The South Carolina Conference Historical Society met on Saturday, November 1, 2025, at Bethel United Methodist Church, Spartanburg, South Carolina. The meeting was held in the Church's Fellowship Hall.

The Society met jointly with the Conference Commission on Archives and History. The meeting was hosted by Dr. Phillip Stone, Conference Archivist, and a member of Bethel Church.

Those attending began gathering at 10:00 am for refreshments, conversation, and fellowship. The number in attendance was small and a disappointment to the Society's and Commission's officers, but interest among those attending was strong.

Business Meeting. The Business Meeting of the Society was called to order at 10:32 am by the Society's President, the Reverend Meredith M. Dark, who reflected briefly on the significance of tomorrow, All Saints Sunday, in the life of the Church and offered prayer.

Report of the Secretary-Treasurer – Financial and Membership Reports. The Reverend Roger M. Gramling, the Society's Secretary-Treasurer, presented his report. Due to the fact that the Society did not meet in 2024, the report covered the period October 1, 2023, through September 30, 2025. He noted that there were ten persons in attendance for the 2024 Meeting of the SEJ Historical Society at Lake Junaluska, the largest attendance from any of the conferences in the jurisdiction.

Mr. Gramling reported a balance on hand at September 1, 2023, of \$5,926.70. Income for the period totaled \$2,295.00 which included Membership Dues of \$995.00 and gifts to the Society of \$700.00. Expenses for the period totaled \$1,974.68, which included dues to the SEJ Historical Society of \$200.00 and Newsletter expenses of \$756.03, bringing the balance at September 30, 2025, to \$6,247.02.

Membership decreased from 97 to 81 for the period mainly the result of memberships not being renewed. The 81 figure includes 46 Life Memberships and 24 Individual Memberships. Mr. Gramling noted that recent declines in Society membership resulted mainly from the effects of the pandemic, disaffiliations, and an aging membership.

Methodist Heritage Trail Project. In the absence of Dr. Huff, Mr. Gramling reported that the Heritage or Historic Trail Project had been completed. He reported that he had compiled a handout containing the write-ups for all the sites which was offered to Society Members. Requests for copies had been received from more than two dozen members. Copies had also been made available at the Society's table at the 2025 Annual Conference Session in Greenville. There is interest among the leadership in exploring other ways to make this information available to interested parties.

Conference Commission on Archives and History. Dr. R. Phillip Stone, Conference Archivist, reported that reference inquiries have declined over time as other agencies have become involved in providing information. There have been fewer than 200 Methodist requests about half of which are *Advocate* obituary requests. Much of *The Advocate* has been digitalized by the South Caroliniana Library. New to the experience this year has been requests from attorneys for church records for the increasing number of churches joining the litigation to leave the Conference. Processing the church records of separated churches continue along with charge conference records from several districts. The Archives continues to be involved in processing the papers of individuals which have been given to the Archives including those of Bishop William H. Willimon and the late Eben Taylor as time permits.

Time of Remembrance. Mr. Gramling led a time of remembering members of the Conference Historical Society who have entered the Church Triumphant since the last annual meeting of the Society. The following persons were named and remembered:

The Reverend Marvin Ira Lare(09/22/1934 – 12/28/2023)
The Reverend James Herbert Thomas(05/04/1925 – 02/10/2024)
Mr. H. Richard “Dick” Edlund(12/16/1931 – 08/27/2023) – Life Member
Mrs. Marlene Laite Edlund(06/23/1936-04/09/2024) – Life Member
The Reverend Thomas Nesmer Brittain(09/30/1927 – 03/06/2025)

Mr. Gramling concluded the “time of remembrance” with a reading of a portion of Psalm 90 and a prayer from the Ritual.

Nomination of Officers(2026-2027). The floor was opened for nominations for the three officers to be elected at the annual meeting. The Reverend Joseph D. Kovas was nominated as President. The Reverend Roger M. Gramling was nominated to serve another term as Secretary-Treasurer. The Reverend Meredith M. Dark was nominated to serve as Vice President. There were no nominations from the floor for any of the offices. The three nominated were elected. (Mr. Gramling asked that this be his last term as Secretary-Treasurer having served as an officer since 2002 and Secretary-Treasurer since 2006.)

Program Presentations

“Surviving Separation: First-Hand Perspectives on Disaffiliations
In the South Carolina Conference”

The Reverend Joseph Kovas spoke first. He began by expressing his appreciation for the opportunity to serve as President of the Historical Society and reflected on the centrality of Grace in Methodism. He spoke of his experience as pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church in New Ellenton, South Carolina, beginning with a brief history of how the church came to be, the result of two congregations, Springs and Ellenton, uniting in a new location following the forced relocation of the Ellenton congregation due to the construction of the Savannah River Nuclear Plant. The new sanctuary was built in 1953.

Mr. Kovas stated that the “honeymoon stage” of his being appointed there ended around Advent 2022, the result of an argument over the appointment of gay or lesbian persons as local church pastors. After the 2023 annual conference, a particular member of the

congregation pressed hard for action while he, as pastor, advised the church to wait until after the meeting of the general conference in 2024. A lengthy meeting followed and by year end a team was put together to explore and answer questions. In June of 2024 there were information sessions and resources being circulated which seemed too pro-separatist. The Administrative Council was challenged to think about the issue but instead voted seven to two to enter the process leading to a decision.

Then came the Judicial Council decision declaring that Par. 2549 could not be used as a basis for disaffiliation. The congregation reacted by reducing the level of giving, giving instead towards possible litigation expenses. Mr. Kovas indicated that regardless of what he tried to say or do, the congregation was moving towards separation. This seemed firmly fixed as early as January, 2025. A vote produced seven “nos” but the remainder was “yes” towards moving into the process to pursue separation through litigation. Mr. Kovas stated that he felt that there was a bad feeling in the congregation going back some fifteen years when the congregation felt they began to be penalized with “bad preachers” for not paying their apportionments. This was a part of the resentment within the congregation leading further to the desire to separate.

After his planned move to a new appointment, the church reduced the salary, received a local pastor who was not treated well, and later an elder from the North Georgia Conference as a supply. The church did not “sign on” to the litigation process until the end of September. The pulpit was vacated, and the local church is now controlled by the separatists as a result of being in the litigation process even though no court decision has yet been rendered as to the legality of such separation.

The Reverend Meredith M. Dark spoke next. Following her time as Associate Pastor at First United Methodist Church, Myrtle Beach, she was appointed to Socastee United Methodist Church where she would serve for two years. The first year was marked by a good deal of positive activity including a decision on the repair of the 1875 sanctuary building and the acquisition of property behind the church cemetery. She indicated that trouble began to appear during her second year. A minister colleague approached her about her leading Socastee to separate from the United Methodist Church which disturbed her.

After the General Conference, the matter became more serious as persons began to approach separation in what she characterized as an underhanded way including meetings to promote separation. It became evident that a certain group in the Church wanted to control the discourse and lead the church to separation. Ms. Dark proposed an information session for the congregation with a minister invited to speak on the issues. This resulted in she being accused of presenting only one side of the issue. Dissidents decided that they would invite their own representative who presented the separation position very strongly without moderation. Following this session, the situation began to deteriorate including personal attacks and threats against Ms. Dark herself. She was moved to North Charleston at the 2024 Annual Conference.

The congregation was canvassed to reach an outcome. Approximately one-third of the congregation stayed, and Socastee remains a United Methodist congregation. The dissidents who wanted to control the church and the outcome left which she characterized as a positive result.

Dr. Phillip Stone spoke about the two roles which he had, professionally as Conference Archivist required to receive records from disaffiliating churches and personally as a member and Council member of Bethel United Methodist Church in the middle of the issue as it played out at Bethel. He stated that he had all kinds of experiences as Conference Archivist receiving records from disaffiliating churches ranging from local churches claiming that they had no records to churches being belligerent over the conference requirements. The assistance of the Conference Chancellor was crucial in certain situations.

Dr. Stone stated that while the Bethel congregation was aware of the growing controversy arising from issues before the general conference, few people were believed to be in favor of separation. The matter arose from a small group of men who held certain important positions in the local church. In response, in early 2023, the ministers presented several options, one of which, to wait until after the session of the general conference, was endorsed by the Church Council by a vote of 25 to 6. Members of the separatist group continued to lobby for a congregational vote, however. The separatist group began raising other issues influenced by such organizations as the Wesleyan Covenant Movement and the Institute for Religion and Democracy. In September, 2023, the Church Council was pressured to consider rescinding its earlier vote. The vote was 18 to 12. While the separatists gained six votes, the decision to wait until after general conference still prevailed.

Following the general conference, a decision was made to enter into the discernment process. A congregational vote was scheduled for August 12th. An Education Committee was formed composed of progressives, centrists, and traditionalists. Two presenters were engaged with both presentations livestreamed. Votes were cast in person and counted by the several church treasurers. The result was 185 to remain and 121 to separate. Many of those favoring separation left Bethel going to Lyman or Reidville Road Churches. (A new Global Methodist Church plant has recently been started in Spartanburg.) The loss of membership has left Bethel struggling financially with the expectation that this struggle will continue for at least another year. Dr. Stone noted that Bethel is learning how to “live into being smaller.”

It was suggested that a possible project to consider would be what do we want to do to tell the story of who remained.

The Reverend Leo W. Roy volunteered to share some from his experiences. He stated that both churches on the first charge which he served separated after he was appointed elsewhere. Although one church had decided on separation, both churches in his second appointment, the Jordan Charge(Bethlehem and Jordan) still remained United Methodist as of the 2025 Annual Conference.

Mr. Roy stated that in June, 2025, he was appointed to the Langley Charge(Langley, Capers Chapel, and Warrenville). One of the three churches, Langley, had raised the issue and wanted it presented to the other two churches which decided to wait until after general conference. This was unsettling to the church who wanted it raised. After general conference and annual conference in 2024, a retired minister brought a resolution to invite a representative from the Wesleyan Covenant Association to come and talk. The resolution was not voted on. And, the retired minister in time left. The church decided to table any

discussion on the matter and never to bring it up again. The Langley Church is clearly staying United Methodist; however, about half of the congregation has left.

The Warrenville Church has close ties to the St. John Church in Graniteville which has now entered into the litigation with other churches wishing to separate. Concerns have been raised about misinformation and lies about the United Methodist Church and its beliefs being spread. The concern is that the Warrenville Church will be influenced by the St. John Church to separate.

Discussion and questions followed each presentation reflecting the interest of all attending in this significant and distressing issue with which the United Methodist Church continues to struggle. Appreciation was expressed for everyone's participation. The meeting of the Historical Society adjourned at 12:25 pm.

Members attending the Society's meeting were invited to stay for the meeting of the Conference Commission on Archives and History. Matters of interest to both the Society and the Commission were discussed including ways to increase participation and ways to be of greater service and reach a wider audience.

Respectfully submitted,

Roger M. Gramling
Secretary-Treasurer