

The following press release has just been issued by Sara Isbell and Anish Hermon, members of the North Central Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy and Nicole Cox, chair of the IGRC Committee on Episcopacy.

SPRINGFIELD — The Illinois Great Rivers Committee on the Episcopacy (IGRCOE) is delighted to announce the assignment of TWO new bishops to the IGRC. Bishop David Bard and Bishop Kennetha Bigham-Tsai will begin their joint episcopacy on September 1, 2024.

Bishop Bard is also assigned to the Michigan Annual Conference (where he has served for the past eight years), and Bishop Bigham-Tsai is also assigned to Iowa (where she has served for the past two). Both bishops are tremendously gifted leaders, deeply spiritual, and bring contagious joy and energy to their ministries.

The assignments were announced on Saturday, July 13, at the North Central Jurisdictional Conference in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, by Rev. Sara Isbell (Bloomington Wesley UMC).

“While we know and trust that Bishop Bigham-Tsai and Bishop Bard will be able to discern the balance of their ministry in Illinois Great Rivers over the quadrennium, we anticipate that Bishop Bard will have primary responsibility for our conference over the first two years, and Bishop Bigham-Tsai will have primary responsibility during the last two years,” she informed the Conference.

It should be noted that both bishops will actively serve for the next four years; the balance of duties may shift, but not the shared assignment. Bishop Bard’s focus will likely include finishing up the gracious exit process for congregations wishing to depart the UMC, while Bishop Bigham-Tsai will have the opportunity to pave the way for a shared episcopal area with Iowa.

Bishop David Alan Bard was elected a bishop in 2016 at the North Central Jurisdictional Conference in Peoria, Illinois and has served since as bishop of the Michigan Area. He also served as interim bishop of the Minnesota Conference in 2021-2022. Bishop Bard explains that among the most important roles for a bishop, and one he attends to thoughtfully, prayerfully, relationally and carefully is helping create a culture for an annual conference. As a group of Jesus followers in the Wesleyan tradition, our annual conferences should be places where the love of God in Jesus is evident, where we are deeply hopeful, trusting that the Spirit of God continues to work in us and through us, where we long to work together for personal and social transformation, where there is graciousness and spaciousness, and where there his joy for the journey. “Bishops,” he says, “help shape the culture of a conference through the relationships they develop, particularly with leaders, through the appointments they make, through their preaching and presiding.”

“This new episcopal arrangement, which creatively extends itineracy,” Bishop Bard adds, “provides us with a unique opportunity to experiment with new ways of providing

leadership. This is an adventure in the Holy Spirit, and just as circuit riders went out into new areas, not always certain what they might find, so we are venturing forth into new territory, where we will draw the map as we travel. We go remembering the final words of John Wesley, 'the best of all is God is with us.' We travel together in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference trusting that among all our great rivers we will also discover in new ways the healing and renewing river, the streams of which make glad the city of God."

Bishop Kennetha Bigham-Tsai was elected on the first ballot at the North Central Jurisdictional Conference of 2022, and has served in Iowa since that time. She has worked within annual conferences, our jurisdiction and throughout the whole church on justice and equity issues, including with groups such as Black Clergywomen of the United Methodist Church, Black Methodists for Church Renewal, and the Methodist Federation for Social Action.

"I bring a strategic mind, a deep passion for equity and justice for all people, and a commitment to building what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community," said Bishop Bigham-Tsai. She also has a passion for leading change to help local churches grow in their vitality and impact, and is particularly skilled at 'adaptive leadership', a style of leadership that looks at the systemic and emotional barriers to change.

"I am very excited to bring my gifts to the IGRC," she says, "and to work with my colleague Bishop David Bard to help the IGRC live into its mission and vision. Bishop Bard and I will build upon the good work already done by Bishop Frank Beard and the clergy and laity of the IGRC. I am excited to see what God will do through all of us."

Bishop Frank Beard, who has shepherded the Illinois Great Rivers Conference faithfully since 2016, begins a Long-Term Disability Leave on August 1, 2024. The gap between his departure August 1 and the arrival of Bishops Bard and Bigham-Tsai September 1 will be covered by the NCJ College of Bishops, including retired Bishop John Hopkins, who will be on-call for the first two weeks of August.

Any inquiries or requests of the Episcopal Office in IGRC may be made through the Bishops' Executive Assistant, Rev. Dr. Charliam Renner (crenner@igrc.org).

The North Central Jurisdictional Committee on the Episcopacy is composed of one lay, and one clergy member from each Annual Conference in the Jurisdiction (Dakotas, Illinois Great Rivers, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Northern Illinois, East Ohio, West Ohio, and Wisconsin). The Committee meets at least twice a year to support, assess, evaluate, and make episcopal assignments for the Jurisdiction. IGRC's representatives to the NCJCOE are Rev. Sara Isbell (sisbell@wesley-umc.com) and Anish Hermon (ahermon@gmail.com). Rev. Nicole Cox (Willow Hill UMC) chairs the IGRC Episcopacy Committee (jonicolecox@gmail.com). Please feel free to contact any of the three about our new assignment.

Anish Hermon shared his enthusiasm for the arrival of our two new bishops. "I was excited by the possibilities when we made this creative assignment," he said. "As we move further from the conclusion of NCJCOE's work, my excitement continues to grow. The gifts and graces of our two new dynamic leaders complement each other and will drive us forward with strength and vision."