BY DAVID KUNKEE

GRSS: Continued Growth in Difficult Times

In this issue's "President's Message" column, I want to first convey how the IEEE Geoscience and Remote Sensing Society (GRSS) is continuing to respond to the enduring COVID-19 pandemic by defining our future conferences and growing our outreach while continuing a strong membership trend in 2021. We are in an unprecedented time, initially driven by the impact of COVID-19, and now we are also motivated by the newly gained accessibility and the extended reach of virtual and hybrid meeting formats. Second, I want to discuss how we are evolving and modernizing the Society with a goal of providing better membership value overall. Some examples you may have seen and are perhaps already experiencing are our focus on webinars and our social media outreach as well as our recent website upgrade. The changes that lie ahead include removing print options for *IEEE Transactions on Geoscience and Remote Sensing* and *IEEE Geoscience and Remote Sensing Letters* in 2021. We will also roll out a record number of GRSS initiatives in 2021, including a new student grand challenge, increased standards activity, new industry career skills workshops, and more regional-based initiatives, to name a few. At the end of this column, I offer a few words about our continuing collaborations and regional activities, which are an important aspect of the Society's continued growth and outreach.

Recently, I was particularly happy to report that, through the continuing pandemic era, GRSS has retained its membership over this past year, listing exactly 3,406 members in both February 2020 and February 2021. Although this is a serendipitous result overall, we note that our number of higher-grade members has increased while those gains have been offset by a lower number of student members at the beginning of 2021. We recognize that younger members may have been impacted more by the pandemic. We are continuing to focus on Young Professional (YP) and student activities, with several new

initiatives in the making for 2021, including multiple opportunities for Chapters and YPs to be involved with nanosatellites through engagements in Spain, France, and the Middle East and North Africa region.

Related to membership, I am excited to welcome two new Chapters to GRSS! In January, the IEEE Beijing Section GRSS Chapter Qingdao was formed and approved. Then, in March, we welcomed the IEEE Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology Student Branch Chapter in the Kerala Section. These two new additions are our 94th and 95th Chapters, respectively, of GRSS. As we approach 100 Chapters (Chapters and student Chapters combined), we want to better serve the needs of Chapters on a regional basis, so we will be implementing a Chapters Committee within the GRSS Administrative Committee (AdCom). We hope that this will facilitate coordination among our Chapters and lead to awareness of IEEE and GRSS resources that Chapters can utilize to enhance the value of IEEE and GRSS membership for their own members.

In March, GRSS also held its first AdCom meeting of 2021. Among the topics discussed was a summary of GRSS initiatives now beginning to get underway for 2021. These activities include support for students working with pocket satellite cubes, regional initiatives to support conferences, support for standards activities, and multiple geoscience and remote sensing summer schools (GR4S), among others. The number of internally generated initiatives by members of the GRSS leadership is the most ever seen for GRSS, and with it comes perhaps the best opportunities for continued growth in activities and outreach. We are excited for all the initiatives in 2021 and hope they will benefit the community to the greatest extent possible. But, with this, we now may have to change the name GR4S to GR3S schools because of not being able to fit all of the planned offerings into just summer!

Specifically, we are planning three schools for 2021: Drone Acquisition, Processing, and Applications, in Belgium (7–9 July); Advanced Remote Sensing Techniques for Risk Management, in Argentina at the end of

September; and Advanced Techniques in Remote Sensing Data Processing and Analysis, to be held in India (25–27 November). With all the activity, I expect to hear a lot more about GRSS schools. We will see if the new acronym holds!

As in the past, the Belgium GRSS (summer) school is to be held the week before our flagship conference, the IEEE International Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium (IGARSS), and I would like to take this opportunity to cordially invite you to participate in this year's conference. This year's IGARSS is planned as a hybrid conference, with a three-day in-person meeting held 12–14 July and an online-only portion held 14–16 July. The response to our call for papers was strong, with more than 2,500 papers submitted, and we expect to have a full and exciting technical agenda. This year has also presented a unique set of challenges due to the uncertainty of conditions related to the pandemic. Please refer to the IGARSS 2021 webpage for up-to-date information as the meeting date approaches.

As I mentioned earlier, one of our priorities within GRSS is to put in place improved processes to handle the Society operations that support our many activities. A new website ticket system that will facilitate updates and changes to the website is just one example of changes to Society operations that improves our internal processes to better serve you. This year, IEEE will also roll out new processes for financial review focusing on conference finances (called *NextGen financials)*. We anticipate that this will also help us streamline and align projects by GRSS members with our Society's initiatives.

Along these lines, a historic moment occurred at our March AdCom meeting when the committee approved the removal of the print option for *IEEE Transactions on Geoscience and Remote Sensing* and *IEEE Geoscience and Remote Sensing Letters* beginning in 2022. This will not only allow for further reduction of our submission to publication timelines but will also continue to reduce operating costs. Over the years, the number of print subscriptions has steadily declined to the point where many considered it no longer worthwhile to invest in creating the print version for so few print subscribers. At the same time, page counts are continuing to increase along with mailing costs and greater online activity. These trends contributed to the perspective of AdCom members in making this decision.

Finally, I would like to take another moment to reflect on the current trend of increasing GRSS regional activities and collaborations. Of note, 2020 was planned to be the first year of three new regional conferences: the Mediterranean and Middle East Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium (M2GARSS), held in March; the Latin American GRSS and International Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing (ISPRS) Remote Sensing Conference, also to be held in March; and the India Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium (InGARSS), which was held online in December. By continuing these activities in 2021 and beyond, we are adapting to the conditions driven by the pandemic and making new plans: M2GARSS 2022 is scheduled to be held in Istanbul in May 2022, and the next InGARSS is planned for an in-person meeting in December 2021. We are planning a joint session with ISPRS within the technical program of IGARSS 2021 to discuss future collaborations. The Society has been working with SpaceNet, with a focus on engaging in activities driven by the industry, and with the Van Allen Foundation, to expand our past Student Grand Challenge; this year, we are looking at ideas for identifying and monitoring plastics and debris in our oceans.

In closing, I'd like to remind everyone to stay safe as the pandemic continues to evolve and present new challenges for many of us. I look forward to meeting with you either online or in person at IGARSS or at one of our many GRSS-sponsored activities.

GRS