

The Monthly Update

September 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This edition of the Monthly Update contains an annual conference summary and information that we have wanted to send you but that had been superseded by our need to send you the annual conference reports from the Methodist Church around the world.

Recently I had taken to a local swimming pool the two girls (being raised in foster care) in whom I have long had a fatherly interest. One of their distant cousins was there, a seven-year old boy named James. As I was playing “alligator” with James, another kid joined in the game. It turned out that Tayler was also about seven, judging from her size. Alternately, the “alligator” would go after James, and then Tayler, or sometimes it would grab both of them together. With shrieks of laughter, they would try to get away.

Finally, during a pause in the game and while I was resting in the shallow part of the pool, Tayler came over and said to me, “You’re my daddy.”

I replied, “No, Honey, you have a daddy” (not knowing her family situation).

She then replied, “Then you can be my step daddy. Then my daddy can leave and you can come and be my daddy.”

I responded, “But, Honey, why is that?”

Tayler replied, “My daddy says that he wishes I had never been born and that my mama is ugly.”

To me that was like a stab in the heart. What kind of man could have been so cruel to any child, much less to his own little girl? I could only say to her while looking her right in the eyes, “Honey, any man would be glad to have you as his little girl.”

It is sad that there are so many dysfunctional family situations in this world and so much hurt foisted on children. Also, as Christians, we know that we have a Heavenly Father who knows us, who is glad that we have been physically born into this world and who have been spiritually born to know Him. It is some measure of comfort that little Tayler has the same Father who cares for her and is watching over her. As Christians we need to alleviate as much of this hurt as we can, and to let them know that their Father in Heaven loves and cares for them – very much.

Please remember these “little Taylers” in your prayers - as we ask that you continue to pray for those of us in Concerned Methodists – that we remain centered in God’s will.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

September 2007 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

The nicest thing about the future is that it always starts tomorrow.

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Of Interest.

+ *Annual conferences summaries*

[Note: In this summary of annual conference minutes, it is interesting to note the priorities. There is a plethora of concerns and activism, but where is there a clear concern for what should be the central purpose of our church – communicating the complete gospel of Jesus Christ, with the assurance of salvation. Indeed, those conferences that had the most illustrious-sounding names and themes appeared to be the furthest away from what should have been central.]

Concerns over shrinking United Methodist membership in most of the church's regional U.S. jurisdictions-and strategies for reversing those overall trends-were pervasive as the denomination's annual conferences convened in 2007.

Sixty-three U.S. conferences met during May and June as lay and clergy representatives from local churches gathered to approve regional budgets, speak on social issues, establish conference programs and address administrative and stewardship matters. They also elected most of the 992 clergy and lay delegates that will attend the 2008 General Conference, the top lawmaking body of The United Methodist Church that meets once every four years and will convene next spring in Fort Worth, Texas. Sixty-six United Methodist conferences outside of the United States meet annually as well, but not always during May and June. By early July, 59 of the 63 U.S. conferences had filed annual reports, along with 10 conferences outside the United States.

The issue of church growth was frequently addressed-consistent with the denomination's plan to make building and revitalizing congregations one of its four areas of emphasis at the dawn of the 21st century. The United Methodist Church has more than 8 million members in the United States and 11.5 million members worldwide.

"It is most imperative that we embrace the future with hope," Bishop Violet L. Fisher told the Western New York Annual Conference, where membership stood at 56,127 at the close of 2006, down 969 from the previous year. Like most U.S. annual conferences, Western New York also saw a drop in its worship and church school attendance.

In all, at least 32 annual conferences celebrated plans to start new churches and revitalize and redevelop existing ones. At least 13 began campaigns to support camping and campus ministry or received reports about campaigns and efforts under way.

United Methodists in Central Pennsylvania approved an \$11.2 million plan to fund a ministry that includes an additional \$100,000 for church revitalization and startup. Kansas West Conference initiated a \$4.2 million campaign to develop new and existing congregations, camping and campus ministry infrastructures.

Celebrating new churches

The meetings also included celebrations of new church growth and updates on initiatives already in place. The Florida Annual Conference celebrated the launch of nine churches in 2006 and 10 new churches in 2007. The conference has a goal of 23 new church starts by the end of the year.

Since 1995, Florida has created 86 new churches-56 percent of which are congregations with racial, ethnic or language diversity. The conference also approved an African-American Comprehensive Plan to make churches

in urban areas a higher priority and improve worship through better technology and training. The conference is considering developing an African-American Church Redevelopment office.

Much United Methodist growth in recent years has been in Africa. The North Katanga Conference in the Democratic Republic of Congo reports starting 150 new congregations in the past year.

Five new church groups were registered during the East Russia and Central Asia Annual Conference session. Three were new church plants in Urals, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, one was a local church that reopened in Vladivostok and another was an independent congregation that applied to become part of The United Methodist Church. The Rev. Steve Johnson of the California-Nevada Annual Conference was appointed to oversee the development of these churches.

Indiana United Methodists chartered the first Hispanic congregation in Indiana as the Christian Getsemani United Methodist Church in Fort Wayne, and the South German Annual Conference gave the green light to found a special church for young people in 2008 in Karlsruhe.

Among the four new churches planned by the Arkansas Conference is a Vietnamese congregation in Fort Smith. A Korean congregation is slated to begin in North Georgia, while a Navaho congregation was constituted in the New Mexico Conference in the past year.

In addition to new church starts, 11 annual conferences celebrated growth in membership through profession of faith, baptism or transfer of membership, plans to grow members and efforts to stem the rate of membership loss.

New Mexico members "rejoiced" upon learning that the conference in 2006 experienced the smallest membership loss in more than 20 years. Central Texas celebrated its 33rd consecutive year of growth, and Alabama-West Florida celebrated 27 straight years of growth.

Global Connections

Members of the Florida Annual Conference celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Cuba-Florida Covenant, signed in June 1997. Members of more than 140 Florida churches have participated in the covenant, including traveling to Cuba to serve and worship there, connecting with about two-thirds of the approximately 230 Cuban Methodist churches.

Seven annual conferences called for continuation of the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino/a Ministries and also passed resolutions related to Hispanic ministries within their boundaries.

Eight annual conferences addressed immigration and immigration reform in the United States. East Ohio approved a petition urging the U.S. government and the Supreme Court to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to give a visa to an alien who was fathered by a U.S. citizen after 1950 in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea or Thailand.

A resolution calling for Comprehensive Immigration reform was passed by West Virginia United Methodists. The resolution called for reducing the obstacles "for all who want to settle here." South Carolina approved a resolution that calls "for a workable comprehensive immigration bill that is not harsh and retributive but seeks to meet the standard of effective public policy and biblical faithfulness."

Living healthy, living safe

Encouraging the physical health of clergy has been emphasized across the denomination in recent years, and the issue was revisited during many annual conference meetings.

The two conferences in North Carolina joined the Duke Endowment and the Duke Divinity School in a seven-year, \$12 million plan to assess and improve the health of United Methodist clergy in the state.

In Wisconsin, conference members heard presentations on better health practices and had the opportunity to participate in identifying their own health risks through Procheck Health Screening, a blood draw that provides a comprehensive panel of tests. The North Georgia conference held a blood drive.

More than 100 walkers and runners participated in the third 5K run/walk of the Mississippi conference, and nearly 600 people enrolled in the conference's Amazing Pace wellness program. The bishop and cabinet in Arkansas, to model clergy self care, pledged in 2006 to lose 100 pounds. Together, they shed 132 pounds over the past year.

At least 19 annual conferences addressed issues related to health insurance of current and retired clergy. Minnesota and West Michigan voted to provide benefits for domestic partners of eligible lay employees. The action of Minnesota was referred to the Judicial Council for the declaratory decision.

At least 10 annual conferences adopted resolutions or addressed Safe Sanctuaries- guidelines, policies and procedures designed to create an environment where children, youth and the adults who work with them have boundaries of safe space. In 1996, the denomination's General Conference adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church.

Resolutions and petitions

Much of the annual conference business was directing toward gearing up for next year's General Conference meeting. The nine-day session of the only body that officially speaks for the denomination will be April 23-May 2, 2008.

Throughout the annual conference sessions, members passed petitions and resolutions to send to the General Conference for consideration and action.

Memphis United Methodists voted unanimously to petition the General Conference to rescind the denomination's current pension plan and reinstate its predecessor plan, effective in 2009.

Twelve annual conferences adopted resolutions on the Iraq War, two approved legislation in opposition to conflict with Iran, two approved action on issues related Israel and Palestine, four conferences took action about the war and violence in Sudan and two approved positions about continuing to hold prisoners "hostage" at Guantanamo Bay. Ten annual conferences adopted petitions and resolutions on peacemaking.

Iowa conference members approved a resolution calling for "the United States to remove all troops as soon as logistically practical and to relinquish all military bases on Iraqi soil." A similar resolution from North Alabama calls on U.S. leaders "to use all of the diplomatic, economic and political resources available to assist the people of Iraq in restoring order and justice to their land."

Conference members in West Ohio supported a resolution to end the U.S. military presence in Iraq and preemptive military strikes and promoting the efforts of military chaplains, especially United Methodist clergy who minister to the military.

Western Pennsylvania defeated a resolution calling for a timetable for withdrawal of troops from Iraq. While North Carolina United Methodists defeated a resolution opposing the war in Iraq, the conference passed a motion to pray for peace and healing of all people affected by the conflict and to minister to the emotional and spiritual needs of soldiers, veterans and their families.

A resolution urging churches to study the Israel-Palestine conflict and to pray for peace in that region was defeated by West Virginia. Opponents described the measure as being too critical of Israel.

Peninsula-Delaware United Methodists approved Sept. 2 as a day of prayer for peace and for the armed forces, chaplains, advisors and support staff, including families who have lost loved ones in service.

Oklahoma United Methodists approved a resolution opposing torture and urging adherence to the principles of the Geneva Conventions, but they opposed a proposal seeking to establish a U.S. department of peace and nonviolence.

Support of a "roadmap for peace" in the Middle East was approved by Tennessee. The conference urged direct talks with all nations in the region to work toward a climate of "lasting peace, self-determination and recognition of human rights, free elections, freedom of (the) press, speech, religion and assembly for all people." The roadmap also "urges that that a state of Israel is fully recognized to exist by all nations of the Middle East if not the world."

Focusing on Sudan and Israel, Oregon-Idaho is petitioning General Conference to "refrain and divest of companies that harm Palestinians and exacerbate the Sudan crisis."

Homosexuality

Twenty-two annual U.S. conferences noted their support of or opposition to Judicial Council Decision 1032, which gave United Methodist pastors the authority to determine a person's readiness for church membership. The 2005 ruling was prompted by a Virginia pastor's refusal to allow a homosexual man into church membership.

Twelve annual conferences passed resolutions regarding issues surrounding sexuality, homosexuality, same-sex and civil unions.

Western North Carolina and Troy approved legislation allowing United Methodist clergy to participate in homosexual unions and giving them permission to bless whatever marriage arrangements are legal in their states.

New York forwarded two resolutions to General Conference calling for equal rights for all people regardless of sexual orientation and that transfer of membership from another denomination is not subject to evaluation by the pastor but by an appropriate letter of transfer. Another resolution called for acceptance of the declaration of faith from any person seeking membership in The United Methodist Church. North Texas adopted a resolution challenging Judicial Council's 1031 decision, declaring that "it misinterprets the authority of clergy in deciding who will be received into membership."

Pacific-Northwest approved an action urging U.S. lawmakers to oppose the appointment of James W. Holsinger as U.S. surgeon general. A United Methodist and medical doctor, Holsinger is president of the denomination's highest court. He has come under fire from gay rights groups for that court's decisions regarding homosexuality and for a 1991 paper that he wrote that gay sex is unnatural and unhealthy.

Arkansas United Methodists adopted a resolution calling the denomination to "a renewed commitment to the Doctrinal Standards and Discipline" while urging General Conference to maintain current language regarding human sexuality, marriage and pastoral authority.

Baltimore-Washington United Methodists voted down proposals to petition General Conference to delete from the Book of Discipline the church's position that "the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching."

Declarations

United Methodists in the Wyoming Annual Conference-300 United Methodist congregations in parts of Northeastern Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York state-"acknowledged the history of our denomination that led to separation and splintering, as well as the treatment we have often visited upon pastors of color who have been assigned to serve our churches, and to people of color who have joined out congregations." The conference, in a service of repentance and reconciliation, also confessed and repented "of our sins corporately and personally."

A resolution adopted by the Western Pennsylvania Conference requires all appointed clergy to attend conference-sponsored training to address racism and strategies for its eradications. During a service at "The Table of Restorative Justice," the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference "owned our history and proclaimed a new story" of repentance and reconciliation.

Mergers

Spring and summer are the most common months for getting married, and United Methodist conferences got engaged or are moving toward unions. Thirteen annual conferences approved plans to reduce districts, increase districts, maintain districts, examine conference boundaries or reorganize in other ways.

The size of the East Africa Annual Conference compelled members to vote to divide into four annual conferences. The action was forwarded to the Africa Central Conference and General Conference for review.

Indiana United Methodists voted to combine their north and south regional conferences after a decade of discussion and debate. They will consider a plan of implementation at next year's annual conference sessions and could meet as a new unified conference as early as 2009.

Conversations among the Troy, New England, North Central New York, Western New York and Wyoming annual conferences are under way to explore jurisdictional boundaries. There is growing interest in the possibility of all or part of Vermont merging into the New England Conference. A special session of the Troy Annual Conference will be held Oct. 6 to act on the proposal and, if approved, the plan will be submitted to the 2008 Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference.

United Methodists in the two annual conferences in Michigan received an update from a transition team developing a plan for a new single annual conference in 2009, and the annual conferences in the Northeast passed petitions and resolutions to include Bermuda within the boundaries of the Northeast Jurisdiction.

Mergers of churches and decommissioning of churches in Louisiana are due to damage from Hurricane Katrina, paving the way for new emerging ministries.

Church members in Austria addressed ecumenical cooperation with regard to a common understanding of baptism between the Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist churches and the Alliance of Baptist congregations.

Other news

Included in the annual conference celebrations was the recognition of George S. Lightner of the Virginia Conference who has attended annual conference for 73 consecutive years. Also recognized was William T. Stephenson, who due to ill health could not attend North Texas Annual Conference but answered roll call for the

63rd time from his home after conference members extended the boundaries of the conference. South Georgia celebrated the consecration of Sandi Hortman, first deaconess from the conference in the last 44 years.

The year 2007 was the 300th anniversary of Charles Wesley's birth, and seven annual conferences acknowledged the occasion with special music and performances. The brother of Methodism's founder John, Charles was a prolific songwriter who penned many of the hymns and songs of traditional Methodism.

The Desert Southwest Annual Conference endowed a chair of health sciences at Africa University and named it in honor of Joel Huffman, the conference treasurer who retired after more than 23 years of service. United Methodists in the Memphis Area contributed \$10,640 to establish a "dream farm" at Africa University, buying animals and tools to help the farm serve as model of "sustainable agriculture" for Zimbabwe's small farmers.

The Kentucky Annual Conference voted to settle a dispute with the former trustees of the Good Samaritan Foundation over control of its board of trustees and the foundation's \$25 million in assets. Under the settlement, the conference and former trustees have named 15 members to a transitional board with the conference naming all members to the board by 2012.

Annual conferences also ordained clergy, licensed local pastors and commissioned others; conducted memorial services; presented awards to churches and individuals for outstanding service; awarded scholarships; commissioned missionaries; conducted Bible studies; and participated in service activities to help the poor and hungry.

- Linda Green, *United Methodist News Service (UMNS)*; Nashville, Tennessee; July 10, 2007.

+ Update on Joe Arpaio

To those who are not familiar with Joe Arpaio, he is the Maricopa County (Arizona) sheriff who has taken unusual steps in his disciplining of prison inmates. He keeps getting elected over and over. Here are some of his actions:

- Sheriff Joe Arpaio created the "Tent City Jail."
- He has the cost of jail meals down to 40 cents a serving and charges the inmates for them.
- He stopped smoking and pornographic magazines in the jails.
- He took away their weights (with which they would exercise).
- He cut off all but "G" movies.
- He started chain gangs so the inmates could do free work on county and city projects.
- Then He Started Chain Gangs for Women so he wouldn't get sued for discrimination.
- He took away cable TV until he found out there was a federal court order that required cable TV for jails; so he hooked up the cable TV again and only lets in the Disney Channel and The Weather Channel. When asked why the weather channel he replied, "So they will know how hot it's gonna be while they are working on my chain gangs.
- He cut off coffee since it has zero nutritional value.
- He bought Newt Gingrich' lecture series on videotape that he pipes into the jails. When asked by a reporter if he had any lecture series by a Democrat, he replied that a democratic lecture series might explain why a lot of the inmates were in his jails in the first place.
- With temperatures being even hotter than usual in Phoenix (116 Degrees Set A New Record), the Associated Press Reports that about 2,000 inmates living in a barbed-wire-surrounded tent encampment at the Maricopa County Jail have been given permission to strip down to their government-issued pink boxer shorts.

On Wednesday [of a past week], hundreds of men wearing boxers were either curled up on their bunk beds or chatted in the tents, which reached 138 degrees inside the week before. Many were also swathed in wet, pink towels as sweat collected on their chests and dripped down to their pink socks. "It feels like we are in a furnace," said James Zanzot, an inmate who has lived in the tents for 1 year. "It's Inhumane."

Joe Arpaio, the tough-guy sheriff who created the tent city and long ago started making his prisoners wear pink, and eat bologna sandwiches, is not one bit sympathetic. He told all of the inmates: "It's 120 degrees in Iraq and our soldiers are living in tents too, and they have to wear full battle gear, but they didn't commit any crimes. So shut your... mouths!"

When the inmates complained, he told them, "This Isn't the Ritz/Carlton. If you don't like it, don't come back."

Sheriff Joe Arpaio was just re-elected sheriff in Maricopa County, Arizona.

- Received by e-mail.

(UM) Bishops

+ *Resources Explore UM-Episcopal Ties*

[Note: This is ill-advised. The Episcopal Church is barreling ahead of us down the road to full homosexual acceptance.]

UMs and Episcopalians have a new way to get to know each other. Building upon the interim agreement of shared Eucharist approved by the UM Council of Bishops in 2005 and the Episcopal General Convention in 2006, the two denominations have released resources to promote study of the agreement at all levels. "Make Us One With Christ" is a report based on the sessions between the Episcopal and UM dialogue teams from 2002-06. A second resource is a study guide version of the report that includes discussion points, questions for reflection, and worship tips. The Council of Bishops is leading the process of dialogue for the UMC in coordination with the denomination's General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. Bishop William Oden (retired), co-chair of the dialogue, said the process "is open-ended" but that both denominations hope the final result will be a formal relationship in full communion, a sharing of faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission. In such a relationship, "each church retains its own identity and its own polity but . . . sees each other as full members of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church," he said. The report of the dialogue covers points of shared theology, information about the shared heritage of the two churches, explanations of the character and ethos of each body, and a discussion of what it means to be in full communion. In some regions, interactions between UMs and Episcopalians already are occurring, Oden reported. For example, Seattle area UMs, led by Bishop Edward Paup, are conducting special services with the Episcopal Church. In Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Gregory Palmer and the Episcopal diocese "are in joint conversations at every level."

Dialogue between the two denominations began after the 1948 General Conference and the Episcopal General Convention voted to form joint commissions on union. Those talks were set aside in the mid-1960s when the Consultation on Church Union was formed. "The nine denominations of COCU agreed they would not enter bilateral conversations as long as COCU was in process," Oden said. In the 1980s, "when it became evident that COCU would not go forward, bilateral dialogues began to resume," he said. The most recent round began in 2002. A resolution to ratify the action of the Council of Bishops approving the interim agreement will be presented to the 2008 General Conference.

- Linda Bloom (UMNS)

+ *Bishops updating 'In Defense of Creation' document*

[Note: The bishops would be better off to let this document rest in the past. This was an ill-advised document then that failed the most basic tests of rationality. As you read through the reasoning in these actions, you will see a blatant one-sided anit-Americanism just as was exhibited by the bishops in the original document. The 1986 document showed a woeful lack of international expertise. This thinking further exhibits an intellectual bankruptcy and ignorance of history.]

Springmaid Beach, S.C. - More than 20 years ago, the United Methodist Council of Bishops introduced a pastoral letter called "In Defense of Creation." The 1986 letter responded to the possibility of nuclear war and the potential for extinction of life. "The pastoral letter ... came as an urgent reminder that this world is God's creation, a sacred gift to be received and nurtured with respect," according to an episcopal invitation to the church for conversation on a new creation document. On May 3, the Council of Bishops heard a presentation from a task force seeking to update the 1986 statement with input from The United Methodist Church and "other persons of goodwill" as authorized by the 2004 General Conference. When the first statement was drafted, the world faced the threat of nuclear disaster in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The original document called for the elimination of nuclear weapons and "was one of the most serious engagements by our church with public policy," said Florida Conference Bishop Timothy Whitaker, chairman of the task force. "By taking up the task of renewing In Defense of Creation for our time ... we are building a tradition of our church being seriously engaged with public policy concerning the issues that most affect the human race," he said.

The bishops are being assisted with their research on these complex issues by the Church's Center for Theology and Public Policy at Wesley Seminary in Washington. "The problems facing the world have changed dramatically in the 20 years since the previous pastoral letter. It is the responsibility of the church to provide leadership and discernment to meet those challenges," said the Rev. Barbara Green, a Presbyterian clergywoman and the center's executive director.

Those challenges, she said, include global warming, endemic poverty and disease "and a world awash in weapons."

"Defending creation is important because it is God's comprehensive gift which is the basis of all life."

While the Cold War is over and the Soviet Union no longer exists, an increasing number of countries possess nuclear weapons and others aspire to become nuclear powers, the invitation notes. Acts of terrorism are part of the world's new political landscape.

The world faces a very different situation that is "more complicated by the interconnections" between the ongoing nuclear danger and realities of violence, the environment, global warming and the continuing struggles by hundreds of millions of the world's people for basic economic subsistence," the invitation says.

Two decades ago, the world was a dangerous place and a "great wave of social moral concern arose." Countries demanded an end to the nuclear arms race and In Defense of Creation "was a central part of that great awakening and moral voice," said David Cortright, president of the Fourth Freedom Forum, a Goshen, Ind.-based organization that tracks and addresses global nuclear nonproliferation and security issues. "The danger of nuclear war has not gone away. In many respects, it is more alarming today than it was then," he said, adding that the U.S. policy of unilateral militarism drives nations to seek weapons. "While the U.S. encourages others to give up bombs, we are in the process of developing nuclear weapons" that may be acquired by terrorists. "This danger is very real," Cortright said, "but there is also reason for hope."

The Rev. David Beckmann, Lutheran pastor and president of Bread for the World, an advocacy group seeking to eradicate world hunger, thanked the council for including poverty in its new creation document. Poverty, he said, breeds violence, cynicism, disorder and environmental degradation. "It is a threat to creation and it is really right that it be lifted up in your proposed pastoral letter," he said. Beckmann spoke about the hope to eradicate hunger, disease and poverty "in our time." However, while developing countries are addressing poverty, the United States has not made significant progress on the issue since the mid-1970s, he said.

The task force will host a two-day hearing in October in Washington to explore the interconnection between debt and nuclear weapons, poverty and economics and the environment.

- By Linda Green, UMNS; May. 15, 2007.

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Money will buy a fine dog, but only kindness will make him wag his tail.