

The Monthly Update

August 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This “June Update” contains continuing information on the various annual conferences being held around the country and throughout the world. Some overall trends that we are observing is a decreased number of conferences that are showing a net membership gain, and in those that are, the gains appear to be somewhat reduced.

An associate of ours (Doug) and I recently traveled to Columbus, Ohio to attend a conference held at the convention center. As in others, these conferences can be taxing, both in terms of time and energy. We tend to stay up late meeting with people, and are involved in meeting the information needs for those requesting our material. I am an early riser, often getting up early in the morning so that I can study my Bible and spend time with the Lord. This conference was no exception.

So as to not wake Doug with whom I shared a hotel room, I would get up early, quietly leave the room with my Bible and study material, and go downstairs to where we had our display area. ‘ Since this in a public area, we normally have a lot of visitors there during the time of the conference. I was not aware that in the early morning hours, there were other types of visitors: the night cleaning people, hotel personnel, and security.

Many of the night cleaning people were Hispanic, which I readily discerned. The hotel and security personnel were from other countries, as well as the United States. I was able to share my witness with several of the Hispanic men and women, one of whom was from Ecuador. I learned that I need to really brush up on my Spanish; it is one thing to talk conversationally with someone in another language, but quite another to explain the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them.

With the Muslims, I was careful to start on common ground – their Khoran, which speaks of Jesus Christ. They were quick to point out that Jesus is regarded as a prophet and were often complimentary of Him. I did not disagree with them but offered them a copy of my book *New-Life Witnesses* and invited them to read my testimony “A Texas Mule” which talks about my coming to faith later in life. Of course, what they did not know is that the chapter following the one with my testimony is one examining who Jesus Christ is – with an apologetic argument that He is fully the Son of God and necessary for salvation. They were glad to get a free book; I was glad to give them one.

The person who tugged at my heartstrings, though, was a member of the Columbus police department; we talked extensively and I was able to lead him in a prayer of confession.

This is what is most important and something that I wish we as a denomination would make our primary purpose – leading people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. What can be more important than that? May I ask that you continue to pray for our United Methodist Church – that we would once again put “first things first” in bringing people to the Lord?

In His service:

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

August 2008 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

Some people are kind, polite, and sweet-spirited – until you try to sit in their pews.

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The Good Stuff

+ **Pray for China.** The eyes of the world will soon be on the Olympics. But the eyes of God remain on His children and especially those who suffer for their faith. Despite what you may hear in the news, Chinese Christians who refuse to register with the government controlled church are being persecuted. Many have undergone horrific suffering. Recently a prominent representative of a group of house churches in China asked Christians throughout the free world to pray for China during the Olympics. The Voice of the Martyrs, in partnership with China Aid Associates, has accepted that call – and would like for you to be in prayer for the country during this time. – *The Voice of the Martyrs.*

Of Interest. Presbyterian Assembly votes to drop homosexual clergy ban

[Note: This is of importance to us in the UMC because this can influence what we will do at the next General Conference in Tampa, Florida, in 2012.]

WASHINGTON - The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), bitterly divided over sexuality and the Bible, set up another confrontation over its ban on ordaining non-celibate gays and lesbians. The denomination's General Assembly, meeting in San Jose, Calif., voted 54 percent to 46 percent Friday to drop the requirement that would-be ministers, deacons and elders live in "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness." The proposed change to the church constitution requires approval from a majority of the nation's 173 presbyteries, or regional church bodies - a yearlong process that has proven to be a barrier to similar efforts in the past. The vote could put further strain on the 2.2-million member church, which like other mainline Protestant denominations has seen some conservative churches leave after losing battles over the place of gays and lesbians in the church and what the Bible says about gay relationships.

Another vote signaled the church was not eager to change another institution. The assembly voted 77 percent to 33 percent to preserve the church's definition of marriage as a covenant between "a man and a woman," rather than changing it to "two people." The denomination allows ministers to bless same-sex unions, but the ceremonies can't mimic marriage ceremonies. The denomination adopted the "chastity and fidelity" clause in 1996, replacing language that had the same effect: prohibiting non-celibate gays and lesbians from ministry.

The proposed new language would demand candidates "pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions." By agreeing to that, "they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church." A presbytery or church council could decide that a gay or lesbian person does not meet that standard.

More conservative Presbyterians can take comfort in the fact that twice before - in 1997 and 2001 - the nation's presbyteries overwhelmingly rejected efforts to rescind the gay ordination ban. Ministers and elders who vote at the church's General Assembly meetings generally are more liberal, and in the next step small conservative presbyteries have an equal vote as those of larger liberal ones.

Paul Detterman, executive director of Louisville, Ky.-based Presbyterians for Renewal, which opposes changing the ordination standards, said the debate is not about homosexuality but following the Bible. For much of Christian history, denominations have interpreted Scripture as prohibiting gay sex. "From the evangelical perspective this is a lovers' quarrel," Detterman said. "We are so passionate about people understanding and knowing the love of God for them. If there's a situation where we were simply against gays, there are a lot of easier places to be than the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)"

- *OneNewsNow. Internet. <http://www.onenewsnw.com/Business/Default.aspx?id=158556>*

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Annual Conference Reports

Arkansas emphasized "Holy Healthy" living habits during its gathering June 8-11 in Hot Springs, Ark. The conference's first-ever 5K Fun Run/Walk drew more than 200 participants for a 6:30 a.m. trek through the hills of Hot Springs. A Health Fair hosted by Methodist LeBonheur Healthcare offered screenings for cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure. Clergy and laity were encouraged to make healthy lifestyle changes and become better educated about health

issues. These efforts are supported by the conference's HolyHealthyUMC.com web site. Special offerings supported Nothing But Nets, the Global AIDS Fund, and water wells and student scholarships for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The body applauded the \$90,000 Arkansas UMs have given to Nothing But Nets and the generous and unflinching responses of churches and individuals to the series of weather-related disasters to hit the state this year caused by a spate of tornadoes, wind storms, an ice storm and flooding. "Walk the UM Way" was the theme of the Conference. A proposal from Hendrix College to reduce the number of UM clergy representatives on the college's Board of Trustees from 10 to 5 was approved by a vote of 338-253. The measure changed a tenet of the college's charter that dates to 1903 and prompted the most spirited debate of the conference. The body approved resolutions which: 1) reiterated the conference's opposition to the expansion of legalized gambling in Arkansas; 2) established a minimum quadrennium Advance Special goal of raising an average of \$1 per member for the Global AIDS Fund; and 3) expressed the conference's support of the Moratorium Campaign Committee which is urging Gov. Mike Beebe to place a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in Arkansas. The Board of Pensions opted to give the Publishing House's pension contribution-nearly \$10,000-to the Central Conference Pension Initiative, in support of pastors who give their life to the church and retire with little or no pension income.

A report on the conference's 10-year plan for starting 30 new churches was shared. At the five-year midpoint, pastors have been appointed to start 13 new churches in locations across the state. The 2009 budget of \$2 million was approved. It represents a 2.8% increase over the previous year. Conference membership is 138,729, down 89.

- Jane Dennis, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Desert Southwest convened June 12-15 at the Scottsdale Doubletree Resort under the leadership of Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño. The theme was "A Future with Hope, Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World." The Conference Mission Project was called Happy Feet, and thousands of socks were donated to local charities by local churches as a part of the project. Thousands of dollars were also collected for international mission projects. The conference recognized the 100 year anniversary of the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, and addressed the multimillion dollar retiree healthcare liability in our own conference. A multifaceted approach was taken in addressing the liability, including increasing the local church contribution, adding additional conference funds, and placing retirees on a sliding scale of benefits. The youth of the Desert Southwest Conference brought an important resolution before the Annual Conference Session that asked every local church to have a Safe Sanctuaries policy instituted by 2009. The Safe Sanctuaries Resolution passed with little discussion and great enthusiasm. Other Resolutions included one asking for the creation of a Campus Ministry and Young Adult Taskforce, which passed, and one asking that the Conference Journal only be made available in a paperless format, which was defeated. Other occurrences that were important to the future of the conference were the celebration of two new church starts, the ordination of three elders and the commissioning of one deacon.

The Annual Conference took four offerings including: Northwestern Conference of the Methodist Church of Mexico (CANO) Immigration/Border Initiatives, Justa Center, Youth Service Fund, and Central Conference Pension Initiative. Membership is 41,414 down 1,034.

- Stephen J. Hustedt, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Eastern Pennsylvania met in Philadelphia May 29-30, with "Building the Connection" as the theme. Bishop Marcus Matthews shared good news: "Pennsylvania has sent more Volunteers in Mission teams in mission around the world than any other place! In 2006, more persons worshiped in our churches. We cut our decline by more than 50%! Ruth Daugherty presented a check from the UM Publishing House for \$11,974, which will be contributed to the Central Conference Pension Fund. Moses Kumar, conference treasurer, along with conference staff and leadership of the Conference Council on Finance and Administration, presented the budget for 2009: \$3,984,030 for conference ministry, \$1,480,938 for World Service, and \$1,305,650 for General Church Funds. With no questions, the total \$6,770,618 was approved unanimously.

Twenty-five retirees representing 744 years of ministry were celebrated in the Retiree Recognition Service on Friday morning, as they passed the mantle of ministry to the 2008 ordinands. Eight persons were ordained for elders orders, and one for deacons orders. Eight persons were commissioned for elders orders, and one for deacons orders. The conference approved thirteen resolutions including those relating to: adoption of a Safe Sanctuaries Policy, reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church; support of a Death Penalty Moratorium; support for "One Handgun a Month" Legislation in Pennsylvania; and approval of 18 ministries as Conference Advance Specials. Membership is 123,360, down 1,014.

- Suzy Keenan, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Holston met June 8-11 at Lake Junaluska, N.C. The conference's 906 churches raised \$172,340 for its partnership mission in southern Sudan and \$60,011 for children's ministry, for a total \$232,351 in record-breaking offerings. The Sudan offering exceeded a \$125,000 goal to build a school and clinic, while the "Change for the Children" offering was the conference's highest ever, topping the 2007 Change for Children offering by \$10,000. In addition, the UM churches of east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, and north Georgia sent 7,200 supply kits to Liberia and Zimbabwe, surpassing the 2007 total of 6,300. The theme was "Offer Them Christ," and members were urged to return to their Wesleyan roots and preach the gospel to break a long cycle of declining membership. Each clergy and lay member received the book, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, by Bishop Rueben P. Job.

Four resolutions were considered. Members quickly approved environment-related resolutions supporting local food self-sufficiency and energy audits for parsonages, new buildings, and renovation projects. The body referred to the Board of Pensions a resolution that would provide treatment for the obese through the conference health insurance plan. However, members rejected a resolution to study and talk about homosexuality through UM materials developed for that purpose. After an emotional debate, the vote was 339 to 314. The Dialogue Task Force gave its first report after a year-long study, recommending a conference-wide event for church members to learn how to "dialogue" on disagreements. A report by the Rev. Randy Frye urged members to "work together in the UM way" by practicing holy conferencing, learning to disagree in love, committing to open itineracy and staying focused on the mission. The conference approved a \$15.9 million budget for 2009, a .77% increase. In other business, the conference: welcomed Bishop Daniel Wandabula, resident bishop of the East Africa Conference, who thanked Holston for its work in southern Sudan; celebrated that Holston Conference youth rank first in the UMC for Youth Service Fund giving; and learned that Cokesbury UMC will start a new church in west Knoxville this fall. Membership is 166,987, up 172.

- Annette Spence, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Illinois Great Rivers met June 4-7 at the Peoria Civic Center in Peoria, Ill. This year's session focused on "Living the UM Way," spotlighting Wesley's general rules "Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God." A video segment began each day with one of the three areas. This was the final conference for Bishop Sharon A. Brown Christopher, who announced her retirement last fall. Christopher has been the only bishop of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, which united just two weeks prior to her arrival in 1996. Special offerings totaling more than \$50,000 were collected for a variety of causes: \$11,089 was collected by conference laity during its laity session for the construction of a new school in Monrovia, Liberia; \$14,819 for an educational endowment fund that will provide scholarships and construction funds for Liberia; \$7,274 for Africa University to provide scholarships for two students, including one Liberian student; \$4,642 for the Tom Brown Scholarship at Wiley College; \$6,558 for the Ordinands work mission trip to Liberia in spring 2009; and \$5,893 for the Global AIDS Fund. The conference also celebrated its partnership with the Liberia Annual Conference. Liberia Bishop John G. Innis preached the ordination service. In all, more than \$1 million was raised for a variety of projects in Liberia during 2007 with projects focusing on: education and scholarships; pastoral salary support; church reconstruction and healthcare, particularly bed nets to combat malaria.

Conference members focused on aligning financial resources in the \$14.6 million budget with the stated priorities of development of spiritual leaders; development of disciple-making systems; new and revitalized congregations; mission and outreach and communication relations and technology. Conference members approved revisions to its comprehensive plan for church growth and development to include the new Congregational Development Leadership Institute, aimed at creating a culture for church growth. Membership is 144,978, down 2,678.

- Paul Black, as reported in UMNewscope, June 20, 2008.

Iowa gathered June 5-8 in Ames, Iowa to celebrate "A Future with Hope." The Iowa Annual Conference celebrated that it gave \$181,585 to Africa University and also that for the second year in a row, the conference paid the apportionment for Africa University. Special offerings collected over the course of the conference totaled \$20,000 for the Global AIDS Fund, Hispanic Ministries and Congregational Development. Laity and clergy worked side by side accepting donations of health kits, school kits, flood buckets and more with a value over \$20,000 that will be transported to UMCOR's Sager Brown Depot in Baldwin, Louisiana. A resolution in response to the Postville, Iowa raids was passed overwhelmingly. The resolution calls upon President Bush, the Presidential candidates as well as Congress "to put an immediate stop to the raids and to work for a just and humane comprehensive immigration reform." Members gave generously to Nothing But Nets. Inspired to double the fund raising goal of \$100,000 set by Bishop Palmer coupled with a district challenge, they joyously gave \$210,000 to save the lives of hundreds of children by providing specially treated bed nets. The UM Publishing House presented the conference with a check in the amount of \$17,608.10 which the conference designated toward the Central Conference Pension Initiative. The budget for 2009 was approved at 4.27% over 2008. Membership is

186,464, down 2,310.
July 4, 2008.

- Iowa Conference Communications Ministry Team, as reported in UMNewscope,

Kansas East met June 4-7 at UM-related Baker University in Baldwin City, Kan., under the leadership of Bishop Scott J. Jones. The theme was "Just Go!" which reflected the fourth year of the conference's mission statement to invite, nurture, equip and send forth disciples of Jesus Christ. The conference celebrated pledging more than \$5.1 million toward the Bridges to the Future capital campaign for infrastructure at the conference's camp and campus ministry locations and for church development for new and existing congregations. The conference adopted a resolution requesting a declaratory decision on Discipline ¶507.2 and the scope of its application to petitions to General Conference. The conference approved the proposal for a half-time paid Executive Registrar for the Board of Ordained Ministry.

The conference adopted a spending plan of \$5.35 million for 2009 and a change to the conference's formula for figuring apportionments. The new formula is based one-third on membership and two-thirds on the church's operating expenses

as reported on Statistical Table II. The body also adopted a new health care plan from Humana beginning Jan. 1, 2009. The conference received a check for \$5,739.21 from the Publishing House and voted to contribute the entire amount to the Central Conference Pension Fund. Membership is 72,061, down 1,634 (2.2%). Worship attendance stands at 31,525, down 716 (2.2%) from 2006. Sunday School participation is 10,999, down 912 (7.65%) from 2006.

- Lisa Elliott Diehl, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Kentucky was held in Louisville, June 1-4. The theme was "Let the Redeemed Say So." Ten people were commissioned and twelve people were ordained, three as deacons and nine as elders. Bishop James R. King Jr. recognized the Four-and-Five-Star Pastors, presenting special medals to the Five-Star pastors. At the Mission and Ministry Celebration a short play titled "When God is Hungry" was presented and The Hope for Africa Children's Choir sang and danced. Bishop Ann Sherer, of the Nebraska Conference, Dr. Terry Faris, retiring Superintendent of the Corbin District, and Bishop Al Gwinn of the North Carolina Annual Conference preached. Dr. Leonard Sweet led Bible studies. Conference members approved the 2009 budget and heard the report from the Task Force on Uniting Principles and District Lines. The mission offering totaled \$55,037.78 to be used for the Kentucky East Africa Initiative, the Red Bird Missionary Conference and for Katrina Recovery in the Mississippi Annual Conference. Membership is 152,459, up 330.

- Cathy Bruce, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

Mississippi, meeting June 8-10 at Christ UMC in Jackson, voted to change the standing rules to accommodate a plan for creating a "called" plan for ministry. One of the key changes would be in how the leadership of the conference works. A group of 25 people would be primarily responsible for keeping the denomination's mission before the annual conference. Coupled with the Connectional Leadership Team, as the 25-member group would be called, are five "tables"-spiritual leadership, reconciliation, mission, stewardship and young people. Amid lively debate, the conference voted to begin a four-phase process to remove clergy pensions and insurance from the apportioned budget and bill churches directly for the funds. Some argued the plan is unfair to small-membership churches, putting too much strain on their budgets. Those in favor of the plan pointed out that most churches would see their appointments [i.e., apportionments] reduced. The measure passed by fewer than 100 votes.

The Rev. Dr. Lovett Weems, a Mississippi native and distinguished professor of church leadership and executive director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., spoke on his 10 Provocative Questions. He focused primarily on question eight: "Can the church change to reach more people, younger people and more diverse people?" Weems said one of the keys to grow churches is to connect with the community. "I encourage you to go back to your communities and get in touch with the community," he said. "The longer a church is in existence, the more it loses touch with the community. Go back and fall in love with your community again." Membership is 184,453, down 1,755. Worship attendance stands at 74,135, down 616. Church school attendance stands at 38,511 down 1,276.

- Woody Woodrick, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

North Alabama gathered June 6-7 on the campus of Clear Branch UMC for its 139th Session. The theme for the 2008 Session was "Hope," based on Hebrews 10:23. Conference work was focused around the conference vision of "Every church challenged and equipped to make disciples of Jesus Christ by taking risks and changing lives" and the four conference priorities 1.) Establishing new congregations; 2.) Natural Church Development; 3.) Effective Leadership for the 21st Century; 4.) Empowering a new generation of Christians. The featured presenter was Dr. Lovett H. Weems Jr., Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership and Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley

Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. He told those gathered, "There is no future for United Methodism in America unless we can figure how to reach more people, younger people and more diverse people." He added, "If we reach more people they will be younger and more diverse people." He encouraged clergy, members and congregations to make an effort to listen and reach out to younger people.

During its business together, the North Alabama Conference: celebrated the 2,567 professions a faith within the Conference in 2007; announced the new Weekly Benchmark Reporting system which will allow local churches to report their benchmark statistics (worship attendance, membership, baptisms, professions of faith and connectional giving) on a weekly basis through an online reporting system. The conference featured one of its new congregations-Community Church without Walls-an inner city church using the house church model, and remembered the clergy and clergy spouses who have died since the last Annual Conference meeting.

The Conference budget of \$10,861,055 was approved. The conference heard a report from the Board of Ordained Ministry explaining a downward trend in the number of elders serving in the North Alabama Conference and a prediction that this trend will continue. The Board also encouraged conference members to ask promising young people if they had ever considered that God was calling them into ministry and offered a resource to those committing to have such conversations. Membership is 150,348, down 1444.

- Danette Clifton, as reported in UMNewscope, June 20, 2008.

North Texas met June 8-11 in Plano, Texas, with Bishop Alfred L. Norris presiding. The theme for the conference was "Our Hope Is Built." A conference high point came during the Africa Celebration and worship at Hamilton Park UMC, Dallas, as Rev. Tyrone Gordon, pastor of St. Luke "Community" UMC, Dallas, and Lisa Tichenor, Highland Park UMC, Dallas, presented a \$500,000 check to Africa University vice president and director of development director Dr. James Salley, to cover the cost of building a new health center facility. Bishop Norris challenged the conference to raise \$1 million for the Africa University health center and scholarships in the school of health science.

A \$2.6 million trust-fund gift for clergy pensions was instrumental in allowing the conference to retire unfunded pension liability and allow for the completion of funding the retiree liability within approximately 10 years. The gift was also key in the reduction of 2009 apportionments by 7.7%. At the same time, additional funds were provided for new church starts and conference programming, which together received an increase of \$524,143. The conference approved a total 2009 budget of \$11,545,486.

The conference approved a number of resolutions, including one presented by the Accountability Group, Anti-Racism Team and Hispanic/Latino Ministry Task Force, highlighting the harmful nature of the current hostile environment against Hispanic/Latino Americans and other immigrant groups. Members also approved a resolution recommending that 20% of clergy be proficient in conversational Spanish by 2020 and another resolution with recommendations for local churches from the Safe Sanctuaries Task Force. Membership is 158,712, down 778.

- Joan G. LaBarr, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Northern Illinois met June 5-7 with the theme "Planting Passion for God." Bishop Hee-Soo Jung presided and told the conference, "There is enough of God's love for all our brothers and sisters, there is enough food in our refrigerators to feed the hungry on the streets. There is enough money in our wallets to stomp [i.e., "stamp"] out malaria, there is enough room in our churches for people who look different, or speak another language or that worship in ways that do not match what we know."

Harvest 2020, an initiative for church growth and revitalization was celebrated through inspiring messages and small group discussion. The Annual Conference celebrated paying 101% of apportionments during the last year and approved a budget of \$7,573,289, up 9.3% from last year. The conference adopted fifteen petitions, including one addressing gun violence particularly in urban areas, and one responding to the actions of General Conference 2008 on human sexuality. Offerings were taken to benefit

Nothing But Nets, the Bolivian clergy education fund, the Ministerial Education Fund, and to alleviate hunger in North Korea. A check for \$12,473 from the UM Publishing House was donated to the Central Conference Pension Fund.

Membership is 103,025, down 2,250; worship attendance stands at 43,726, down 2,141 from the previous year, church school attendance stands at 12,490, up 54 from the previous year.

- Susan Dal Porto, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

Northwest Texas and New Mexico Annual Conferences met jointly, June 3-6 at Holcomb Auditorium in Glorieta, N.M. Bishop D. Max Whitfield gave the opening address to the nearly 1,000 members of the two conferences, imploring them to get up and do what God had called them to do. Members of the Northwest Texas Conference celebrated the completion of a year-long capital campaign. Build, Renew, Rejoice! Campaign Director Clark Williams and members of the

campaign committee announced that the \$3.2 million goal had been exceeded and surpassed. A total of \$3,773,247.12 was pledged to build new churches, renovate churches and construct a new Conference Service Center. Membership in the Northwest Texas Conference is 65,229, down 543.

A new conference structure adopted by the **New Mexico Conference** is designed to get the conference up and moving toward its mission "to engage, equip and empower every local church in their mission to develop dynamic disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." The new structure, aiming to increase accountability and clarity of responsibilities, calls for the formation of a Conference Ministry Team that will work to implement the vision and mission of the conference and insure that the decisions and actions of the conference are implemented. Reporting to that team will be an Envisioning Ministry Team, Engaging Ministry Team and Equipping Ministry Team. Membership in the New Mexico Conference is 38,447, down 442. Worship attendance stands at 16,525, down 531 from 2007. Church school attendance stands at 6,119, down by 273. A total of \$14,854 was collected by members of both conferences during special offerings to be distributed to Lydia Patterson Institute, UMCOR Domestic Disaster Fund and McMurry Student Ministries. Another \$20,000 was raised for Nothing But Nets.

- Karla Abernathy-Thetford, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

Oklahoma met May 25-29 in Tulsa, with the theme "Sowing Seeds of Promise, Reaching Disciples of Christ." With a standing ovation, the conference approved a new strategic plan, which each church and conference entity will customize for growing God's kingdom. Resources include printed and online materials, and a local-church timeline was provided. The strategy focuses on three areas for increasing vital congregations across the state. The conference tallied \$31,649 worth of emergency aid kits, including 112 hand-knitted baby sweaters, 912 sewing kits, 348 layettes, 66 school kits, 59 health kits and 13 flood buckets, plus cash donations. A new initiative, the Wellness Rewards program, was introduced at the meeting, and hundreds of people participated in a Walk for Wellness and various health screenings. Environmental awareness and good money stewardship were promoted through a recycling project and distribution of free compact fluorescent light bulbs and bare-root trees-red oak, bald cypress, and golden rain varieties-since storms damaged or destroyed many trees in the state last year.

Oklahoma UM Foundation assets totaled almost \$177 million at the end of 2007, according to its annual report. The 2009 conference budget of \$16.03 million was approved. Membership is 244,170, down 816. Among the 12 districts of Oklahoma Conference, four showed gains in membership, three gained in church school enrollment, one in morning worship and one in church school attendance.

- Holly McCray, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

South Georgia gathered at the Columbus Center in Columbus, Ga. June 8-11, under the theme "Glorifying God-Bearing Fruit." "This theme brings focus to what we seek to do as we live into God's vision for this Annual Conference," said Bishop B. Michael Watson, resident bishop of the South Georgia area. "Glorifying God is our primary motive as we seek to be faithful, fruitful and bold." One of the most exciting examples of spiritual fruit was celebrated through the presence of a delegation from the East Africa Annual Conference, including the 23-member Hope for Africa Children's Choir. In keeping with the theme, conference members scattered across the community Tuesday morning to be witnesses of faith in Jesus Christ. Over 525 people participated in 37 service project opportunities during the third annual Day of Service. In other actions, members: took a special offering for UM Higher Education and Campus Ministries in the amount of \$28,357.57 and a love offering for Humble UM School for \$14,336.45; received \$10,085.44 from the Publishing House and voted to give this money to be utilized for clergy pensions in the central conferences for the sixth year in a row; approved a policy outlining a procedure for when a clergy person goes through a divorce; and approved a recommendation regarding a proposed progression for clergy families to provide their own furnishings for the parsonage.

The conference approved a budget of \$11,988,973 for mission and ministry for the next year. Membership is 135,880, down 925. Worship attendance stands at 52,765, down 193. Church school attendance stands at 27,435, down 367.

- Kelly Roberson, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

South Indiana met June 5-7 at Indiana University using the theme "Friends with Christ, Friends with Each Other" based on John 15:15 as its 1,200 registered members discussed a 52-page Imagine Indiana Design Team report and voted by ballot on a detailed plan to unite with the North Indiana Annual Conference to form a new Indiana Conference. Both conferences approved the new Indiana Conference which will have 10 districts (rather than the current 18 districts) served by five statewide resource centers. The conference center will be located in Indianapolis. Bishop Mike Coyner announced the results of the vote on Saturday morning, June 7 following a vote of the South Indiana Conference the day before. The North Indiana Conference vote, received a week earlier, was 730 to 192 (79% approval). The South Indiana Conference

vote was 616 to 185 (77% approval). A special session of both conferences will convene on Oct. 4 at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis to finalize details and elect officers.

The Rev. Tom Grey, field director of the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling, asked Hoosiers to join in a statewide effort to stop the expansion of legalized gambling. Both the North and South Indiana Conferences approved a resolution to stop the expansion of legalized gambling by asking the Indiana General Assembly for a Public Question (referendum) vote on any more expansion of legalized gambling in Indiana. It approved 2009 income and expense budgets of \$21.2 million, which includes \$7.1 insurance premium income and \$3.3 in pension income, not previously listed in the total conference budgets. Membership is 110,097 down 907 or 0.8%.

- Daniel R. Gangler, as reported in UMNewscope, June 20, 2008.

Troy, held June 4-7 in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., approved a resolution that asks the Northeast Jurisdiction (NEJ) to join the Vermont churches of Troy Conference with the New England Annual Conference. A similar resolution, asking the NEJ merge all or part of the North Central New York, Troy, Western New York and Wyoming Annual Conferences was approved by all four conferences at special sessions held simultaneously on Oct. 7. Members also approved a resolution that enabled the New Area Conference Team (New ACT) to guide the vision and facilitate the creation of a new conference from the merger of the New York churches of Wyoming, Troy, Western New York and North Central New York Annual Conferences if the proposal is approved by the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference.

Approval was also given to resolutions and petitions that: direct the conference offering to support immigrants and refugees ministries, support the Central Conference Pension Initiative, give additional funding for the pension subsidy program, give representation to Religion and Race on both the Sessions and Nominations Committees, urge Congress to stop funding the war in Iraq, promote immigration education, educate and encourage congregations about energy conservation, and approve an equitable compensation package for clergy.

Two individuals were ordained elders in full connection. Two were commissioned probationary elders. At the ordination services, many of the clergy processing did not wear robes, offering a silent protest that those in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community who feel the call of ordained ministry.[?] Members approved the adjusted 2009 budget of \$2,120,579, an increase of \$51,613, or 2.49% more than the 2008 budget. The original proposed budget was increased by \$2,000 to cover the cost of increasing the amount paid for volunteer mileage reimbursement. Membership is 47,518, down 5,687 since 2005, the last year figures were available. Worship attendance stands at 15,130, down 1,677 since 2005.

- Sandra Brands, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

West Michigan met in Grand Rapids June 5-8 under the theme, "Stirring the Waters." The theme was based on the story in the Gospel of John of a man who sat beside the pool of Bethesda for 38 years waiting to be lifted in for healing when an angel of the Lord stirred the waters. Jesus healed the man by telling him to stand up and walk. The Rev. Tara Sutton, Detroit Conference clergy, explored the theme with two sermons: "Stirring the Waters of Deliverance" and "Stirring the Waters of Healing." Highlights of the conference session included: a concert by Christian performance artist Ken Medema; work by conference on a Habitat Build in Grand Rapids; a lecture and discussions by the Rev. Gil Rendle, senior consultant with The Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence and formerly of the Alban Institute. His topic was "Making the Faith Ready for the Next People." After lengthy debate, the conference adopted a resolution encouraging members to urge their legislators to enact comprehensive immigration reform that is not punitive and that provides "earned pathways to citizenship for all immigrants." Offerings were generous. The goal set to construct a Habitat home in Grand Rapids was \$70,000, with an additional \$7,000 for a home in Haiti. The goal was exceeded, with receipts so far of \$90,000. Other offering totals: \$6,556 for Nothing But Nets; \$3,800 for the Ministerial Education Fund; \$3,700 for UMCOR. Bishop Jonathan D. Keaton ordained two deacons and nine elders.

- Ann Whiting, as reported in UMNewscope, June 27, 2008.

West Virginia was held June 5-8, 2008, on the campus of West Virginia Wesleyan College under the theme "A Home for All." The Rev. Randy Mitchell, Conference coordinator for the Global AIDS Fund, announced that the Conference had raised \$24,000 in its campaign in support of the Fund. The conference contributed a gift of \$13,529 from the UM Publishing House for ministers' pensions to the Central Conference Pension Initiative. Bishop Ernest S. Lyght praised congregations, which are fulfilling their stewardship and evangelistic mandates, but he said the fact that 60% of churches in recent years have not received one new member on profession of faith must improve. The Rev. Judy Vetter described how churches in the Moorefield area were helping undocumented immigrants after a recent enforcement action by federal authorities, which left many families without income.

Resolutions encouraging the recycling of plastic bottles and the use of low energy fluorescent light bulbs were approved. Another measure emphasizing a healthy lifestyle for individuals was also passed. A 2009 budget of \$11,473,000, a 2.4% increase, was accepted. Membership is 103,905, down 900 from the previous year.

- Tom Burger, as reported in UMNewscope, June 20, 2008.

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Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers.