

The Monthly Update

March 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

As with so many others, people interest me: their origins, their interests, their families, and their professions. This can – at times – cause interesting situations.

Several weeks ago, I attended the “Pre-General Conference” meeting in Fort Worth, Texas. While enjoying breakfast in the hotel where the meetings were being conducted, I noticed that my waiter had an obvious Middle Eastern accent. I inquired, “May I ask where you are from?” I appreciated his response, “From the land of the Abraham of the Bible. Now, where is that?” He had turned the tables on me; now I was the one being questioned. I responded, “What is now Iraq.” He said, “Right!” Then we got into an animated discussion, since it soon became obvious he was a Christian. Finally he asked, “And you. What is your theology: Armenian or Calvinist?” This was no ordinary waiter! I responded, “Armenian.” Since he was Calvinist in his beliefs, we got into an animated discussion about the concept of eternal security with his citing Dr. Charles Stanley in Atlanta. Thankfully, he had other tables to take care of, because I’m not too sure I would have fared well with him in the ensuing debate. This Christian brother truly inspired me.

This issue of the “Monthly Update” contains news of what is happening across our United Methodist Church with a disproportionate of the space devoted to the important issues leading up to the 2008 General Conference later this year. You will note another change in that this “Update” includes seven pages, starting with the back of this first page. Finally, another difference in this is that a more complete version will appear on our website; a shortage of space precludes our giving a more fuller coverage of all the news that we had wanted to report.

We have run into a two-fold problem. Your response to our appeal for support has helped us close the shortfall we had experienced at the end of last year, but we anticipate another financial challenge in April; at that time, we will face publication of a “double-issue” of *The Christian Methodist Newsletter* which will be at a cost of \$3200, as opposed to half that amount in our normal issues. This combined with anticipated costs of our activism at General Conference will present us with a financial challenge during the April-May time period.

The second problem that we have encountered is in the expected publication of our book *Stewardship Perspectives – 2007*. We have encountered delays, one of which is in not receiving information we needed from two of the General Boards of the UMC. As a result, that has put us behind in the production of the book itself. As it stands now, we anticipate getting the book to you the first week of April. I apologize for this delay but in this instance it could not be helped.

Again, may I thank you for continuing to pray for us – and for all that you do in service for the Lord Jesus Christ?

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

March 2008 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

You and I ought to live our lives in the light of the fact that we are to stand in the presence of Christ.

– Dr. J. Vernon McGee, Thru the Bible, vol. 4, p. 133.

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The Good Stuff Objective: *Display of national motto in America's cities*

What began as a grassroots campaign in a California city to get the national motto displayed in a public meeting room is expanding nationwide. In 2001, Jacquie Sullivan, a resident of Bakersfield, heard about a group of people who were upset with the [lack of] public display of the nation's motto, "In God We Trust." In response, she set to work to get the motto displayed in Bakersfield City Council chambers. After finding success there, the campaign spread to cities throughout California -- such as Carson City, Ridgecrest, Shafter, Sonora, and Paso Robles.

Now Sullivan, who is running for her fourth term to the Bakersfield City Council, is looking to expand the movement and is spearheading a campaign to get the national motto displayed in council chambers nationwide. "City by city, it shows that the elected officials in that city are dedicated to the principles our country was founded upon," says Sullivan. "This is a way, I feel, of getting back some of the ground we've lost over the last 50 years." Sullivan says concerned Christians need to get involved so the motto can be displayed in the nation's city council chambers. "I just need people across the United States to be interested, know how important this is for their area and for our country, and get involved," she urges. "Our mission is to spread this across America."

The California councilwoman has made available an action kit for those who want to head up similar campaigns in their cities. Those kits can be found online at InGodWeTrust-America.org.

- Allie Martin, *OneNewsNow*; 2/21/2008.

Of Interest

+ *This is a must read. (It's also why I never give out personal info on the phone)*

This has been verified by the FBI (their link is included below). Please pass this on to everyone in your email address book. It is spreading fast so be prepared should you get this call. Most of us take summons for jury seriously, but enough people skip out on their civic duty, that a new and ominous kind of scam has surfaced. The caller claims to be a jury coordinator. If you protest that you never received a summons for jury duty, the scammer asks you for your Social Security number and date of birth so he or she can verify the information and cancel the arrest warrant. Give out any of this information and bingo; your identity just got stolen. The scam has been reported so far in 11 states, including Oklahoma, Illinois, and Colorado. This (scam) is particularly insidious because they use intimidation over the phone to try to bully people into giving information by pretending they're with the court system. The FBI and the federal court system have issued nationwide alerts on their web sites, warning consumers about the fraud. Check it out.

General Conference 2008 (GC2008).

[Note: This section has been added to assist those who are going to General Conference 2008. In your review of all of the activities and implementation of programs to "expand the UMC and to get the church turned around, there is one thing singularly missing – the acknowledgment and repentance of our sins in confession before Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Until we do that and realize that everyone in the world needs this salvation, all of our efforts are futile.]

+ *Fort Worth attractions await General Conference delegates*

FORT WORTH, Texas - Talk about irony: United Methodists will hold the 2008 General Conference in an area of town once known as Hell's Half Acre, a brothel- and saloon-packed district where cowhands enjoyed their last bit of fun before riding herd on the dusty Chisholm Trail.

My, how times have changed.

Nearly 1,000 delegates and other United Methodists from throughout the world will gather next April 23-May 2 for the once-every-four-years conference - not in a hick town for cows and cowboys, but in a gleaming metropolis of 665,000 people. Combining the past and present with the "cowboys and culture" slogan, Fort Worth is the fifth fastest growing city in the United States. It is also home to internationally known museums, a nationally recognized zoo, art galleries, a vibrant downtown and The United Methodist Church's Central Texas Annual (regional) Conference. A conference hosting committee has planned seven [one-] day tours. Delegates and others attending the meeting can check the tours stand at the Fort Worth Convention Center for specific information.

[Convention hub](#)

As the perfect symbol to the city's progress, the convention center - site of the General Conference and fresh from a \$75 million renovation - spans 14 city blocks in the heart of downtown Fort Worth, just off Interstate 30. It includes: 253,226 square feet of exhibit space; 41 breakout rooms, with 58,849 square feet of meeting space; A 28,160-square-foot ballroom; A 13,500-seat arena; and An outdoor plaza that links with the Fort Worth Water Gardens, a perfect place for prayer and meditation. Not exactly a brothel or a honky tonk, is it?

Fort Worth is affectionately known as "Cowtown" with the slogan "Where the West Begins." The city anchors the western part of the four-county "Metroplex" of 6.5 million people. Just a 40-minute drive east on Interstate 30 stands Dallas. Smack-dab in the middle is Arlington, home to the Six Flags Over Texas theme park, Major League Baseball's Texas Rangers, and in 2009, the Dallas Cowboys.

Things to do

In between and after conference business, delegates and other guests won't run out of places to visit in pedestrian-friendly downtown Fort Worth.

Among them is Sundance Square, a downtown revitalization project just five blocks from the convention center. Glittering skyscrapers, Bass Performance Hall, music clubs, specialty boutiques, restaurants, art galleries and a massive movie theater line the 20-block square.

The district includes the Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art, a small museum showcasing 60 paintings and bronze sculptures by Western greats Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. There's also the nationally known Jubilee Theatre for plays and musicals reflecting African-American culture.

Tourists can scope out the area in a Clydesdale horse-drawn carriage. They'll also notice that Fort Worth police regularly patrol the area on horseback.

The Stockyards

Fort Worth lore is based on its reputed history as a rough-and-tumble frontier town, where cattle drives ended in what today is known as the Stockyards National Historic District. Located in north Fort Worth, about four miles from the convention center, the Stockyards is a 125-acre, 15-block entertainment district of nightlife, rodeos, cattle drives and dozens of Texas-style shops and restaurants. The Fort Worth Herd, the world's only daily cattle drive, makes its twice-daily run down Exchange Avenue.

Carrying visitors into Stockyards Station is the restored Grapevine Vintage Railroad. The former hog and sheep pens have been turned into a shopping and dining marketplace, with everything from barbecue restaurants and kitschy Western clothing boutiques to the Ernest Tubb Record Shop.

Check out the rodeo and Wild West shows at the Cowtown Coliseum, home of the world's original indoor rodeo, first held in 1918. The Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame, located in the Stockyards' original mule barns, features authentic lifestyle wagons and honors the top cowboys and cowgirls in Texas.

For cowboy wannabes or others wanting to mix with the boot and belt-buckle crowd, check out Billy Bob's Texas - the world's largest honky tonk - where folks can dance a little Texas two-step, listen to live performances by top country music artists or watch live bull riding in an indoor arena. For teetotalers, Billy Bob's also serves non-alcoholic beverages.

World-class museums

A defining aspect of 21st century Fort Worth is the Cultural District, which includes five museums in a park-like setting about three miles from the convention center. The major drawing card is the Kimbell Art Museum, recognized as "America's best small museum." Its masterpieces include works by El Greco, Cezanne, Rembrandt, Picasso and Matisse, and the museum regularly hosts major traveling exhibitions.

Next door, the Amon Carter Museum is renowned for Western and American masterpieces.

The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth maintains one of the foremost collections of post-war art in the central United States. It is ranked the second-largest museum of modern art in the country, behind New York City's famed Museum of Modern Art.

The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History offers hands-on exhibits for children and adults alike, ranging from Lone Star dinosaurs to computer science. Located within the museum are the popular Omni Theater and the Noble Planetarium.

To keep with the area's cultural heritage and Western lore, the National Cowgirl Museum honors women who embody the spirit of the American West such as painter Georgia O'Keeffe, Western sharpshooter Annie Oakley, author Laura Ingalls Wilder and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

What's more, the National Cowboys of Color Museum, located about four miles from the convention center, honors black, Hispanic and Asian pioneers who also helped forge the West.

Sports-and more sports

Once in Fort Worth, visitors quickly realize they are in one of the country's most sports-crazed areas. By the time General Conference opens, pro baseball's Texas Rangers will be in full swing and will play the Minnesota Twins April 25-27 and the Kansas City Royals April 29-May 1. Check out the games at Amerquest Field in Arlington, about 25 minutes from the convention center.

On the basketball court, everybody in these parts expect the NBA's Dallas Mavericks to be in the playoffs for the third straight year. Dirk Nowitzki and the boys will wrap up their regular season in early April, but the first round of the playoffs should hit full stride when the opening gavel falls at General Conference. Home games are at the American Airlines Center in downtown Dallas on Interstate 35E, just off Interstate 30.

For those bent on taking in an NBA playoff game, get your tickets early. They go fast, and tickets sold near game time usually cost a king's ransom. Under any circumstances, don't buy tickets from scalpers, who are notorious for selling bogus tickets.

Lions and tigers and Methodists, oh my!

An ideal venue for kids and animal lovers alike is the Fort Worth Zoo, ranked the top attraction in Dallas-Fort Worth and No. 19 in the United States by the Zagat Survey U.S. Family Guide. The zoo is renowned for its collection of thousands of exotic creatures in their natural habitat. Its popular Texas Wild! exhibit covers eight acres and features 200 native animals and a replica of an 1890s Texas town.

Tree-shaded, winding paths lead to large, lush exhibits for an up-close look at a menagerie of creatures-from primates to parrots, rhinos to raptors.

For the academically inclined, Fort Worth is home to United Methodist-related Texas Wesleyan University. Within a 45-minute drive east on Interstate 30 in Dallas stand Southern Methodist University and United Methodist-related Perkins School of Theology on Mockingbird Lane, just off U.S. 75. Highland Park United Methodist Church-the country's second largest United Methodist church-anchors the South end of the SMU campus.

For kids of all ages, there's Six Flags Over Texas on Interstate 30 in Arlington. Tourists may want to combine the rides and cotton candy at Six Flags with a Rangers baseball game next door at Amerquest Field. And just across the interstate sits Six Flags' Hurricane Harbor, the largest water park in the southwestern United States.

For those seeking an serene environment of beauty and meditation, the 114-acre Botanic Garden bills itself as a "sanctuary of the senses," with more than 2,500 species of native and exotic plants in 21 specialty gardens-all located just six minutes from the convention center. Check out the 10,000-square-foot conservatory, the rose garden and the Japanese Garden.

The Trinity Trails, 30 miles of paved trails along the Trinity River, offer a perfect retreat from the stresses of long meetings. Pick up the trails practically anywhere along the river, but the most convenient spot is two blocks north of the Renaissance Worthington Hotel and the Tarrant County Courthouse.

Airport access

Fort Worth is almost 18 miles from Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, the world's third busiest airport. Located between the two cities in Grapevine, the airport is headquarters to American Airlines.

Airport arrivals who don't want to rent a car can take the Trinity Railway Express to Fort Worth for \$2.50. A cab ride will cost \$52. The Yellow Checker Shuttle to downtown is \$15, while the Super Shuttle runs about \$25.

For those wanting access to a vehicle, Interstate 30 runs east-west straight into downtown, while Interstate 20 also runs east-west but south of downtown. Interstate 35W ferries traffic north and south.

- By Steve Smith, *United Methodist News Service (UMNS #596)*; Nov. 30, 2007. *Smith is a freelance writer in Dallas.*

+ Fort Worth hotel changes challenge General Conference

With just over three months until The United Methodist Church convenes its worldwide assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, the city's changing downtown hotel landscape is forcing organizers to scramble for rooms to accommodate delegates, church leaders and staff. "It has been a perfect storm," said the Rev. Alan J. Morrison, business manager for the 2008 General Conference. "The hotel industry in Fort Worth is in total flux."

Despite the challenges, Morrison is confident the housing issues will be settled adequately with the assistance of the Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau. Together, they are booking rooms in outlying hotels to accommodate any overflow from downtown Fort Worth. "Instead of having five or six hotels downtown with large blocks of rooms as we had hoped, we'll meet our needs with a list of about 20 hotels, including some that aren't downtown and with much smaller blocks of 20, 30 and 40 rooms," Morrison said. "We may have people housed as far as 16 miles away, but we're looking to the next tier down in terms of level of service to try to accommodate people closer."

- By *Marta W. Aldrich*, *UMNS* #025; *Jan. 18, 2008*. A Report. Photos and a downtown map are available at <http://umns.umc.org>.

+ *News briefing offers glimpse into assembly changes*

FORT WORTH, Texas --When United Methodists convene this spring for their worldwide assembly, they can expect wider international representation, a denominational budget built around four new areas of focus, and carefully choreographed opening sessions aimed at fostering unity through common ministry instead of gridlock over divisive social issues. The 2008 General Conference will meet for 10 days--two fewer than the 2004 gathering in Pittsburgh and with no break--but still must sort through more than 1,500 petitions, which is about the same amount of business conducted at the previous assembly. In addition to hearing opening addresses from a United Methodist bishop and lay person, delegates will hear the first-ever Young People's Address--delivered jointly by six teens and young adults who promise a presentation "different from anything that's ever been presented to General Conference before."

The new approaches are among a bevy of changes outlined during the United Methodist Pre-General Conference News Briefing, an informational session attended by more than 200 delegation representatives and church journalists. The Jan. 24-26 briefing, sponsored by United Methodist Communications, was held near the Fort Worth Convention Center, where General Conference will open on April 23.

A new agenda

Weary of decades of the church's top legislative meeting being consumed by debate over homosexuality and other hot-button issues, the Council of Bishops and other denominational leaders have shaped a new churchwide agenda with the overarching purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The agenda includes four areas of focus: developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world; creating "new places for new generations" by starting new churches and renewing existing ones; engaging in ministry with the poor; and fighting the killer diseases of poverty such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Church leaders believe this approach will help United Methodists unite to address the world's core needs, reclaim the church's Wesleyan heritage, start a movement and, as a bonus, reverse decades of declining membership trends. "This is about alignment--with the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, what's happening in annual conferences--and saying we're going to coalesce (and) combine to make a difference," said the Rev. Jerome Del Pino, chief executive of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry, which will oversee the church leadership initiative.

It also is hoped that, when the nearly 1,000 delegates leave General Conference to return to their home districts and churches, they will know the four areas of focus by heart and, with a new clarity about "what my church is doing," spread that vision and sense of identity to the people in the pews. Delegates at the briefing said it's time for Jesus Christ to "do a new thing with our church."

"I'm not hearing as much about the more controversial issues so far," said the Rev. Henry Frueh, a second-time delegate from the Troy Annual (regional) Conference in New York. "There's more talk about the church positioning itself to be more effective in the world. I think there's a sense that if we don't change the way we do church, we're going to lose the opportunity," he told United Methodist New Service.

The Rev. Tom Berlin, a delegate from Herndon, Va., said many people in his generation (ages 30 to 45) are disenchanted by past General Conferences that have focused on discordant social issues that "are so predictable in their outcome"--and not enough on substantive issues of need in the world. The result, he said, is that ordained and lay leaders are tempted to cocoon themselves in their local churches "because it's just not worth the emotional energy."

"Friends, we're going to have to lay down our arms on these other issues if we want to deal with the (new) ones," Berlin told one panel group.

Building a better budget

The briefing featured a session on the \$642 million, four-year spending plan for the denomination beginning in 2009--and the new processes and criteria for developing the budget proposal. For the first time, the plan was built on an "outcome-based" model that much of the business world already follows. Church agencies were asked to shape their funding requests around the four new areas of focus. Also for the first time, the General Council on Finance and Administration shared the budget-building process with the Connectional Table. "We're trying to do something different," said Bishop Lindsey Davis of the North Georgia Area, a member of the council's board. "We're trying to do something in a more

collaborative fashion together." Davis said the previous budget process was "more competitive than it should have been" among various groups within the church contending for their "fair share" of the pie. "What we're trying to do ... is to begin to align this budget not only with the areas of focus ... but with a church that is beginning to think very specifically about outcomes, about being productive and effective and actually changing the world," he said.

The \$642 million plan represents a 1.2 percent annual increase for a total increase of 4.8 percent over four years. "All of us know inflation is more than that," Davis said. "In terms of real dollars, it represents less money for all our boards and agencies and less money for the general church at large." He also emphasized that the budget represents only 1 percent of the net spending of the entire denomination and cautioned against skimping on mission and ministry done at the denominational level. "Ninety-nine percent of all the resources of our denomination are spent at the local, annual conference and jurisdictional level," he said.

New faces, new rules

With United Methodist membership shrinking in the United States and growing in Africa and the Philippines, the makeup of General Conference delegates will reflect those trends. Central conferences (those in annual conferences outside the United States) will have 278 delegates, 100 more than in 2004. Annual conferences in U.S. jurisdictions have elected 714 delegates. Church leaders who oversee delegate training asked the U.S. delegates to show patience and understanding in working with overseas delegates, who need time for translation services and are unfamiliar with parliamentary procedure used in the United States. "If we're going to be a global church, we need to hear each other's voices, and we need to be attentive to each other's voices, and we need to be understanding that the American way is only one way," said the Rev. Gere Reist, secretary of the General Conference. Reist urged delegates to carefully read proposed rule changes that will be voted on at the beginning of the assembly. "There are significant changes this time around," he said. He cited proposals to elect all subcommittee chairs by ballot, merging the Commission on General Conference with the Committee on Rules, and using parliamentarians in all legislative committees. The proposed rules also prohibit talking on cell phones and using laptop computers on the convention floor.

The Rev. Gary Graves, petitions secretary, reported that more than a quarter of the 1,564 petitions filed are related to the Board of Church and Society, the church's social action agency. Delegates will get their first look at all the petitions after receiving *The Advance Daily Christian Advocate*, which publishes petitions and other information related to General Conference and is scheduled to be shipped Feb. 7-8. Graves thanked petitioners for "making the transition to digital submissions." "I know that it was like pulling teeth for some people, and others can't figure why it took us 20 years to catch up with everybody else," he said. He noted that the change saved money and trees and shaved about two months of production time off the petitions process.

Educational setting

The news briefing was designed to be informational, not legislative in nature, said the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive of United Methodist Communications, who welcomed participants to Fort Worth. "We are taking a conversational approach," he said. Briefings ranged from hot-button issues such as Middle East-related divestment to strategies encouraging healthier lifestyles by pastors and church employees. Other panel discussions included ethnic initiatives in the church, proposals to change United Methodist structure to reflect the worldwide nature of the church, a new Social Creed up for consideration, the State of the Church report and how to navigate General Conference. Breakout sessions for delegates addressed "holy conferencing"--practices designed to set a more civil tone of discussion and listening in the legislative process.

Participants also toured the convention center and received an update on the challenges of housing all delegates in downtown Fort Worth's tight hotel market. Many of the 1,500 delegates and staff members will be housed in outlying hotels and must commute daily to the convention center. Thousands of visitors also will attend parts of the meetings and worship services. "These (hotel problems) are nitpicky little things that seek to distract us from the work that we're called to be about at General Conference," said the Rev. Alan Morrison, business manager for the assembly.

- By *Marta W. Aldrich*, *UMNS* #034; Jan. 30, 2008.

+ *Commentary: Profiling delegates is disservice to church*

[*Note*: This is gross mischaracterization to compare this process with "racial profiling". To compare efforts to find out where delegates stand on key issues affecting our United Methodist Church should be considered normal. Don't we want to know where delegates for public office stand on the important issues? Even now, we have a presidential race in full swing; we have heard where the candidates stand on the issues – at least now before the elections (we know that many make campaign promises that are not kept once in office). Don't be confused by this writer's words about "allowing the Holy Spirit to lead" in matters of decision-making; this is a highly politicized process. Make no mistake about it. The laypeople have a right to know where delegates stand. I have no confidence in the writer's arguments.]

I now know what it feels like to be profiled. For the past several years, racial profiling has been identified as one of the most pressing civil rights issues of our time. It is a scourge that negatively affects all people of color of all generations and income levels. On many occasions, profiling ends up victimizing the innocent, non-criminal public. The 2004 General Conference of the United Methodist Church called profiling "an abhorrent manifestation of racism" and "a painful and tragic reality of our lives."

Sadly, my profiling experience came because of my position in the church. I realized just how painful and tragic profiling can be when I received a November telephone call from a telemarketer from Conquest Communications asking me to take part in a survey concerning issues at the upcoming 2008 General Conference. Having spent a number of years in the political world as a congressional staff assistant, I am somewhat dubious of such calls. I am well aware the wording of questions and the underlying messages can have great impact in skewing results. I informed the caller that before I answered any of his questions, I had one of my own: "Who is paying for the survey?" His response: "The United Methodist Church." I was aware that the General Council on Finance and Administration conducts a survey to gather demographic information about those whom annual conferences elected to serve as delegates to the worldwide body. However, the caller indicated we would be discussing issues -- matters to be considered by delegates who gather in Fort Worth in late April and early May.

I pressed the issue further, asking, "Are you saying that the General Council on Finance and Administration is paying for this survey?" The caller backed away from his earlier statement, saying a supervisor would have to answer the question. After putting me on hold for two minutes, the caller came back and told me the supervisor wasn't available. At that point, I ended the telephone conversation without participating in the survey.

Targeting 'anger points'

As I did a Google search on Conquest Communications, I found that the Richmond, Va.,-based organization "provides message consulting and direct contact services to political campaigns and business organizations throughout the United States" (www.conquestgroup.com). I found out that its customers have almost exclusively been for Republican or conservative political causes. Conquest's call center has 80 phones and 1,200 telephone lines operating simultaneously, so calling the 750 U.S. elected delegates to General Conference would be a simple task.

But what drew my attention and raised my ire at the same time was a blog entry from the Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette-Mail concerning a 2006 state campaign in which Conquest was involved. Employing a tactic known as "micro-targeting," Conquest's goal is to identify voters most likely to elect favored candidates (or be favorable to certain issues), and then tailor messages that appeal specifically to those voters, according to the blog. Political consultants build sophisticated databases that include not just how you voted in previous elections, but whether you drive a Subaru Outback or a Ford F-150, and whether you prefer to shop at Wal-Mart (a likely Republican) or Target (a swing voter). Then they develop profiles of the types of voters that support their preferred candidate or issues and determine which are swing voters who need further convincing. Next, they conduct polls to determine what sets you off, known as "anger points." These are the issues that make you mad enough to show up and vote. Finally, you might receive mailings targeted to your "anger" issue.

Similar to push polling, in which a campaign call is shrouded as a survey meant to trash one candidate or viewpoint, or racial profiling by law enforcement, micro-targeting used by anyone in The United Methodist Church is "an unjust and evil reality that needs to be corrected," to use a phrase from church' resolution on racial profiling.

I have no problem discussing issues of concern to my church, but I will not be a party to political agendas, whether they come from the conservative side or the liberal side. In fact, for groups to be counting heads five months before General Conference convenes means that we close ourselves to the Holy Spirit's guidance while gathered in Fort Worth.

Open to conferencing

John Wesley saw Christian conferencing as a means of grace. To have one's mind made up on all the issues prior to General Conference, without deeply listening to a variety of viewpoints, means we could all mail in our votes and save millions of dollars because what we do when we gather makes no worldly or heavenly difference.

Furthermore, the segmenting and micro-targeting of delegates betrays the notion of being a delegate. In the political world, there is tension in the role our elected officials play in the legislative arena: Are they elected to be representatives (meaning individuals who merely stick their finger in the wind and vote as their constituency would like) or delegates (people who are elected to listen to the debate, discern God's Spirit in the midst of disparate voices and then be guided in their voting)?

Throughout history, major things have occurred because people functioned as delegates. Even delegates to political conventions are only pledged to their declared candidate for the first ballot; from then on, they are given freedom to respond in the moment. And even the word used in The Book of Discipline for those elected to General and jurisdictional conferences is "delegate."

Please uphold your General Conference delegates in prayer as they begin their spiritual journey through preparation, serving on legislative sub-committees and voting in plenary sessions. Ask for the Holy Spirit -- not some unofficial caucus or group that has its own agenda, which may or may not be aligned with the mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" -- to guide those who will travel from all over the world to be a part of Christian conferencing. If we do that, then the profiling of delegates, internal polling and spurious agendas will fall prostrate at the feet of Christ and our resolve as stated by the 2004 assembly, "to remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement," and our reaffirmation to Christ's Great Commission will reign supreme.

- *By Paul Black, UMNS #605; Dec. 6, 2007.* Black is the director of communication ministries for the Great Rivers Annual Conference and a lay delegate to the 2008 General Conference. He also is on the United Methodist Commission on Communication, which oversees United Methodist Communications.

+ ***Commentary: Church at impasse on homosexuality***

As The United Methodist Church prepares for its 2008 General Conference, perennial issues related to sexuality are again popping up. Last fall, a letter urged me to work with my congregations and draft petitions to General Conference that get really tough on homosexuality. In short, I was asked to rally my people to stand firm and say that homosexuals who won't repent of their lifestyle are not fit for membership in the church. I haven't received any letters from "the other side," but I imagine they're making similar efforts through similar avenues.

Homosexuality has been a contentious issue in The United Methodist Church and at every General Conference since 1972, soon after the denomination officially came into existence in 1968 through a merger. What has happened in the 36 years of debate since? Not much. While denominational policies have slowly become more conservative, roughly the same proportions of votes for or against have occurred every time. Neither side is gaining ground.

In other words, my friends, it's a stalemate.

'Enough already!'

How does one resolve a stalemate? Quit fighting, and find a different way to confront the problem! Am I going to lobby on this one? You bet! But I'm going to lobby in a manner different from what the lobbyists urge. And I would appreciate my United Methodist brothers and sisters arising and telling both sides firmly, "Enough already!" Do I have an opinion on homosexuality? Of course I do, and I am sure that you do, too. I arrived at my conclusions after a great deal of prayer, study of Scripture and consultation of historic church tradition, as well as current thought on the issue. I'm sure others have done the same. My opinion on homosexuality is not a primary point. I don't think yours is, either.

My point is that a lot of people have been so focused on this issue that they miss the real point. We are losing all ability to work together for the greater glory of God's Kingdom because we've gotten so divided and distracted on one issue. If you really want to know my position, ask me privately, and I will tell you privately. If we don't agree, that's fine. I love you even when we aren't eye to eye on something. Isn't that part of the nature of the true church?

I would think that declining United Methodist membership since 1968 might serve as a glaring warning that we need to do some serious "getting together." If we are to do that, we need to lower our swords and let them be plowshares.

Casting stones

I do not believe the right answer is simply to deny church membership to people of homosexual orientation. Simply put, it's not godly. If I toss out gay people because of their unrepentant attitude, there are a number of unrepentant persons who, in all fairness, I should also excommunicate. For instance: members who gamble or won't stand against gambling, though they know full well the United Methodist position on the practice. Also, members who use tobacco (our Book of Discipline says that use of tobacco is not a morally indifferent issue) or alcohol (after all, we did start Prohibition). Some members recite membership vows in the presence of God to support their church with their prayers, presence, gifts and service. Then they never show up in worship or contribute in any way to the life of their congregation, although they still expect the church to be available when needed. The list could go on, but I think you get the point.

I'm a pastor. What shall I do with all these sinners? Oops. I guess I also should give myself the old heave-ho since I wrestle with sin as much as anyone. Please don't misunderstand. I am not attempting to make sin less important. The Bible is clear that "all have sinned and fall(en) short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23 NIV) Sin is sin. Whether you cheat on your spouse, murder your neighbor or steal - it's all sin. If we are going to "get tough" on the practice of homosexuality because, as the Discipline states, it is "incompatible with Christian teaching," perhaps we should, in all fairness, get more specific and tough on all sin, whether controversial or not.

An instrument of grace

It's a God-given truth that if you want to receive God's salvation, you must repent of your sins, devote your life to following the Lord Jesus Christ and give up conscious sin. There is no salvation apart from Christ and His church, and a place of eternal misery awaits those who will not accept Jesus as Lord. But it's also a God-given truth that there is grace for those who truly seek transformation. As the "children" of Methodism founder John Wesley, we understand this to be the process of perfection in grace: how God, by His grace, transforms us into the persons He always meant for us to be.

The church is an instrument of God's grace. No one should be deprived of the place where it's most likely that you will be influenced to turn to Christ and live for Christ. The final judgment of the condition of our souls will be made by God on Judgment Day. Let Him handle this one. This doesn't mean unrepentant sinners should be able to go anywhere or do anything in the church. A person unwilling to repent of clearly identified sin should not be a leader in the Body. The Bible is clear on this. But why on earth should we shut him or her out and away from what is needed the most?

Expelling people because they're stuck in sin denies them the opportunity to truly experience a holy transformation they won't find elsewhere.

Thorn in the flesh

This debate is going nowhere in the church, nationally or locally, despite all of the "politicking" on both sides. We're stalemated. It is time to consider a different tack. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians about a thorn in his flesh that God would not take away, no matter how much Paul asked Him. Perhaps it's time we United Methodists ask ourselves, "Why isn't God removing this thorn from our flesh?" Perhaps it's time that we work for peace in our "valley" by first celebrating what we hold in common: the foundation of our unity-the salvation of Jesus Christ. The next step is that we do ministry and bring glory to God instead of giving the media ammunition to report on "who attacked whom at the General Conference."

We may never reach consensus on this issue. Why not use all of this energy differently-and create peace instead of division? We surely will bring more glory to the Father in this way than by breaking the Body.

This is my hope and prayer. Peace, my friends.

- *A Commentary by the Rev. Russ Whaley, Marta Aldrich, Nashville, Tenn., UMNS #002; Jan. 3, 2008. Whaley is an elder in the Dakotas Annual Conference, currently serving the Pembina-Joliette-Humboldt Charge.*

+ ***United Methodists explore church's global structure***

[Note: We absolutely oppose this measure. First of all, it would fracture the worldwide church that we are trying to build through our Methodist connection and drive a wedge, whether real or perceived, between those of us in the United States and our overseas members. Secondly, we see this as an effort by those who would insinuate homosexual acceptance into the life of the United Methodist Church by "stealth" methods; designating the U.S. as a "regional" body would do this.]

FORT WORTH, Texas ()--Would making The United Methodist Church in the United States a regional body be the best way for the denomination to function as a worldwide body? Ten speakers explored that question during a Jan. 25 panel discussion on "The Worldwide Nature of the Church: What It Means" during the Pre-General Conference News Briefing sponsored by United Methodist Communications.

General Conference, which meets every four years, is the denomination's top legislative body. During its meeting April 23-May 2 in Fort Worth, the 2008 assembly will consider proposed structural changes to the denomination that acknowledge the fact that the church is growing outside of the United States and that 30 percent of United Methodist members now live outside the United States. Proponents say the structural changes would make the church more effective and equitably organized for worldwide ministry. Opponents say the changes may actually serve to fragment the denomination into national entities, among other things. A task force examining the issue has proposed four substantive changes to the denomination's constitution in an effort to make regional and jurisdictional structures similar worldwide. Task force members say the current structure gives the U.S. church too much influence and marginalizes United Methodists in Africa, Asia and Europe. The constitutional changes would pave the way so that legislation could be proposed to the 2012 assembly that would eliminate U.S. concerns from General Conference. Those concerns instead would become the business of a U.S. regional conference.

Specifically, the legislation would make the church's five jurisdictions in the United States a regional body, similar to the church's central conferences that currently exist outside of the United States.

The six-member task force has sent 24 petitions to General Conference to make changes in 24 paragraphs of the constitution. Most of these changes are grammatical or change the words "central conference" to "regional conference." The committee, chaired by Nebraska Bishop Ann Sherer, also will ask General Conference to allow the task force and the Connectional Table to jointly continue their study of the church's worldwide nature and report to the 2012 legislative assembly.

Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority vote of General Conference delegates and must be ratified by two-thirds of the aggregate annual conference voting members.

Favoring change

Kansas Bishop Scott Jones, a task force member, said the proposal does not change the number, purpose and function of jurisdictional conferences; the way bishops are elected or assigned; the purpose or mission of any churchwide agency; the size or power of General Conference; the way the Social Principles are decided upon or amended; or the apportionment formulas and allocations. The proposal seeks to examine how the church should to carry out its ministry in a world that is increasingly interdependent, he said.

In a videotaped message, Bishop Patrick Streiff of the Central and Southern Europe Area said United Methodists outside of the United States view General Conference as an entity that deals with "issues that do not directly relate to us."

Bishop David Yemba of the Central Congo Area echoed that sentiment, saying that changes are needed in the church's infrastructure and governance to make the denomination more effective worldwide. In his videotaped message, Yemba told the gathering that "the church of Jesus Christ is both local and universal, and we need to struggle with tension of how to be local but at the same time be a church that is worldwide."

Sherer said the task force is seeking a worldwide structure that "keeps us connected in mission, ministry and discipline." Echoing Strieff, she said U.S. dominance in denominational governance damages both the church in the United States and in the world. "It disempowers central conferences from being fully actualized within the body and allows the church in the U.S. to escape from dealing with its internal issues," she said. Sherer also said there is a sense of urgency to reorganize because "our war-torn and broken world needs a better model of unity and interdependence." "Recent developments in the world and in Christianity call for a new emphasis on the concept of mission that addresses a world community and our connectedness that is not impeded by national, cultural and economic barriers," she said.

Questioning the changes

Two panelists disagreed with the proposed structural changes. "The church is global. We do not have to make it global," said the Rev. Eddie Fox, a staff executive of the World Methodist Council. "On the day of day of Pentecost, it was declared global. God spoke and God understood." Fox questioned why a "global" proposal would create a national U.S. entity, particularly at a time when the church is becoming more global and the number of delegates to General Conference from outside the United States is increasing. He called changes to the church's constitution "a very serious matter" and said the proposal's language is problematic because it would mandate central conferences. Fox questioned the desire to push international delegates away from the discussion table on matters related to the United States. "More and more, every decision we make affects the whole world just as it affects one spaceship called earth," he said. "This is not the time for us to be creating national entities," he said, citing the structure of the Anglican Church. He called the proposed legislation irresponsible for "asking to change the constitution without knowing the effects of it." What is needed, he said, "is to walk side by side, not separate, so together we might do our part so the world may know Jesus Christ."

The Rev. Tim McClendon, a district superintendent in the South Carolina Annual (regional) Conference, said he feared the proposal would make the church more fragmented instead of more connected. "We would lose the important voices of those outside the United States, and we would be left among ourselves debating issues upon issues upon issues that lead us into schism," he said. McClendon said that while The United Methodist Church attempts to be global, "we are not a global church and we need to realize that." Outside the United States and sub-Saharan Africa, there are only 250,000 United Methodists around the world, he said. Thirty of the 65 annual conferences outside the United States have less than 5,000 members.

Both Fox and McClendon said the 62 proposed word changes to the church's constitution move the denomination toward the unknown.

Questions of equity

McClendon noted that jurisdictional conferences still will exist in the United States but conferences outside the United States will only have regional conferences. "This is an equity issue," he said, and "a lot of this legislation seems to be about who gets to keep those votes from conferences outside the United States." "Who keeps them?" he asked. "I am pushing for the middle to hold us together. I believe in the unity of the church."

Erin Hawkins, top executive of the United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race, said the church can live into the possibility of a worldwide church, if it consistently holds in tension the balancing values of unity, difference and diversity. Hawkins said it is time for The United Methodist Church to reassess what it means to be the body of Christ in a global landscape fraught with the complexities of language, culture, politics and economic inequality. "The sign of the times point to the fact that the future of the church lies in our ability to be able to reach and include in all aspects of the church those who we in the U.S. consider to be racial, ethnic minority people," she said. Hawkins said the principal

challenge of living in a multicultural reality in the United States and across the globe is inequality. The worldwide nature report begins an important conversation, she said, that could help dismantle institutional racism within the church. "The benefits of any new worldwide structure or organization must be distributed justly in order to truly develop a worldwide church," she said.

Ratification process

If General Conference approves the proposed constitutional amendments by a two-thirds majority, annual conferences would be asked to vote on the 24 proposed changes and the exact tally would have to be reported in order for the Council of Bishops to determine whether a two-thirds majority of all annual conference members had been attained. Jones told United Methodist News Service that the manner in which these votes are taken would be decided by the presiding bishop.

Members of the global nature task force were appointed by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table. The members are Sherer, Jones, Bishop Ruediger Minor, Kristina Gonzalez, Forbes Matonga and Dora Washington. Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader serves as staff executive.

- By Linda Green, UMNS #044; Feb. 6, 2008.

+ *United Methodists discuss how to have hard conversations*

[Note: Again, while we would support such measures, we are concerned by the purpose of emphasizing this now. We in Concerned Methodists have for over fifteen years tried to engage some of these persons in civil discourse on issues dividing our church – and been treated with outright hostility at times. To suddenly seek to do this we see as an effort by those who would insinuate homosexual acceptance into the life of the United Methodist Church by “stealth” methods.]

United Methodists need to learn how to talk about divisive issues in constructive ways that bring people together, says the director of the church's JustPeace ministry. For the last few years, United Methodists have been seeking ways to have debates on difficult issues without stopping dialogue on them. As the denomination's top lawmaking assembly prepares to meet in Fort Worth, Texas, in April, bishops and other church leaders have called for a civil gathering that places more emphasis on common ministry rather than on issues such as homosexuality, which have divided previous General Conferences. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could experience holy conferencing in Fort Worth, if we could name the real issues in our church and talk about them, learn from each other and come to a better place together?" asked the Rev. Tom Porter, executive director of JustPeace.

The Washington D.C.-based ministry seeks to help United Methodists "engage conflict constructively." Members of JustPeace came together Feb. 6 to learn about best practices in having difficult conversations, as identified in the book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. "If you want to understand a difficult conversation, you must understand what people are thinking and feeling," said Douglas Stone, one of three co-authors of the book. Stone, who is also a senior negotiator and instructor in conflict resolution for the Triad Consulting Group, Cambridge, Mass., defined a difficult conversation as one in which a person finds a topic or issue challenging or hard to talk about. Conflicts arise over scarce resources and how to divide them and also involve matters of perception that lead to people not getting along with one another, he said. "The question is about trying to understand in a deeper way how we see things."

Ted Crass, a JustPeace member from the Florida Annual Conference and senior consultant with CMPartners, Cambridge, Mass., called conflict "a natural part of life and a natural part of who we are as individuals." He has been involved in programming and conflict initiatives in the Florida Conference. Sexuality, abortion, immigration and other issues "are difficult to talk about in the church because they get to the heart of peoples' personal experience, their identity and perspective on faith," he said. Often, a person has reactions to what someone is saying that make it difficult to understand the perspective of the other person. "All of those issues strike people at the core of their identity or faith," he said.

Porter said people need to engage one another with a sense of wonder and awe, have "appreciative inquiry" and draw on people's strengths and assets, and "realize that there are a lot of sharp edges in this life." Living together, working together and talking together are issues of deep concern in the church, he said. "We know that we (the church) like to wait to have difficult conversations, and sometimes we wait until it all explodes, and it is not pretty what happens when we don't deal with the issues, we don't name them, don't engage them and don't go on to the table to talk about them," Porter said.

Creating listening space

Stone advised that delegates to General Conference, the denomination's top lawmaking assembly, deal with hot-button issues by creating space for listening and inquiry, to take the role of understanding how others view issues instead of being purely an advocate. Inquiry, he said, "is helping me understand not just what you see but why you see it that way. What goes into your point of view? What values and experiences, what assumptions, what fears, your predictions about

the future, what do you care about?" People fear or avoid difficult conversations because they fear the consequences, but all difficult conversations have a common structure, Stone said. Each difficult conversation is really three conversations - involving facts, feelings, and identity - that can make it difficult to talk with one another, he said. Difficult conversations involve strong emotions or issues about how I see myself in the world," Stone said. Strong emotions may come from the values a person has and also may be the result of how "people feel treated in the relationship," he added. "How we talk to each other may influence emotion."

Porter and others at the JustPeace gathering lamented that Robert's Rules of Order, the recognized guide that organizations use to run meetings, can sometimes impede conversation, listening and learning. According to Stone, the valuable conversations that people need may occur as side conversations or be on a parallel track from the primary plenary sessions. "It also may be that it is time to take a look at Robert's Rules in terms of whether that is the best way to use all of the time or if time can be designated for other conversations." *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* is about more than civil discourse, he said. It is about how to communicate well, clearly and openly. "It is not just about how to be nice to each other or how to be civil to each other. It is about how to really talk and understand each other." Understanding one another is a first step toward conflict resolution, he said. But, even if one does not overcome the conflict, "it is an independent and good thing to understand one another."

A necessary topic

The Rev. Stephanie Hixon, the director of resources and administration for JustPeace, said the gathering's topic was necessary because the denomination is grappling with difficult conversations about critical, yet divisive issues. While the gathering was not programmed to impact General Conference, Hixon said the hope is that the participants, in their various contexts, would interact with delegates and others affiliated with General Conference to share the tools and skills learned from the difficult conversations book and other conflict resolution resources. "What we are trying to do and help people to do and invite people to do is engage conflict well and constructively," she said. "We believe that goes even deeper than civil discourse."

General Conference, which meets every four years, is a time in the life of the denomination when the mission and ministry of the church are outlined but the difficult issues tend to get the attention. "Our hope is that folks will prepare themselves for engagement, that they will be open to others, and that they will draw on a source that not only includes best practices and skills (for conflict resolution) but the prompting of the Holy Spirit to help them to know when to use these kinds of skills," Hixon said. She acknowledged that it is human nature to want to avoid those conversations that are not comfortable. But, she said, "Christians and United Methodists are called to bear witness not only in the resolution of our decision or the decision that we make but also in the manner in which we carry out that decision making."

- By Linda Green, UMNS; Nashville, Tenn.; {#066}; Feb. 15, 2008.

National Council of Churches (NCC). Members are the essence of NCC, says new leader

[Note: With this talk about "investing in each other and good works" what is missing is central – investing in a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Unless we make this central and are obedient to His teachings, all of our efforts outside of that are of secondary importance. Here, the NCC misses the central point.]

Members of the National Council of Churches need to invest in each other as much as they invest in good works. That's the philosophy of the NCC's new chief executive, the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, and why he plans to focus on the essentials. "The essence of a council of churches is not just what we do, but what we are," he said during a mid-February interview with United Methodist News Service. The 58-year-old Kinnamon--who started in January but has had a long history with the council--noted that too many people and churches categorize the NCC as a program agency. "If you think of the council that way, it's possible to duck the accountability that goes with membership," he said. As a way of strengthening relationships, Kinnamon, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister, plans a series of official visitations to member communions. This year, he hopes that a five- or six-person delegation representing various denominations can visit six members. "We've already sent out a letter inviting ourselves," he said.

The council's new president, Archbishop Vicken Azkazian of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), Washington diocese, has an even more ambitious goal. "He's going to visit all 35 of the members during his two-year presidency," Kinnamon said.

More integrated work

Another goal is reshaping the program work the council does do to achieve "a more integrated sense of our work together," Kinnamon said. A January meeting that drew together representatives of the NCC's five program commissions for the first time was a step toward that goal, he added. Those commissions cover communications, education and leadership ministries, faith and order, interfaith relations and justice and advocacy. Kinnamon, who has a doctorate in

religion and literature from the University of Chicago Divinity School, believes the council can play a prophetic role in society. Instead of reacting to the world's political and social agenda, the NCC could "help the churches and society envision an alternate form of human community." For example, the council could build upon its successful minimum wage campaign to demand a "living wage where no one lives in poverty."

The reorganization of NCC staff at the end of last year has brought annual expenses in line with guaranteed revenue, according to Kinnamon, and left the council with a healthy \$6 million reserve fund. Maintaining that financial stability is another goal. "I think the money is being used very wisely," he added. "There's a good sense of stewardship here." While he considers the council's overall health to be good, Kinnamon lamented "the personal toll" caused by the reorganization and said he hopes eventually to recover the NCC's strong emphasis on issues such as racial justice and ecumenical advocacy on Capitol Hill.

Kinnamon also hopes to see progress with Churches Uniting in Christ, another ecumenical movement. He was serving as the chief executive of the Consultation on Church Union when it was transformed into Churches Uniting in Christ in 2002. "I thought we had a lot of momentum," he said, but added that the movement now seems on hold. He was referring to the group's January gathering in St. Louis, where two historically black partner denominations chose not to attend. In Kinnamon's opinion, what has slowed the development of Churches Uniting in Christ is that the alliance represents a new way of being the church together. "It demands that the churches relate to one another and not rely on an office to do it," he said.

Kinnamon spoke at the group's January plenary. He believes that if the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches are "willing to re-engage" with the other member communions, the movement will be worth continuing, if only as a way of addressing the racial divide in both church and society. He pointed out that Churches Uniting in Christ is not a membership organization but a covenant that members made to each other before God.

- By Linda Bloom, UMNS; New York {#069}; Feb. 18, 2008.

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If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, and become more, you are a leader.

- John Quincy Adams

Global Outlook

Good instincts usually tell you what to do long before your head has figured it out. – Michael Burke

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+ *African bishops examine Chinese investments in Africa*

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (#586) — How are African people being affected by Chinese investments in African nations in exchange for mineral and mining rights? The question was explored by a coalition of African and U.S. church leaders seeking to strengthen United Methodist ministries in Africa. The Holistic Strategy on Africa task force met Nov. 3-4 in North Carolina prior to the worldwide United Methodist Council of Bishops meeting. Bishop Fama Onema, a retired bishop from the Democratic Republic of Congo, reported on China's \$5 billion loan to his country under an agreement signed in September. According to Asia Economy Watch, the loan will pay for enhancements to the Congo's extraction infrastructure and give China access rights to extract significant natural resources.

In their conversations about eradicating poverty in Africa, the African bishops noted that China has made similar investment deals across the continent. The bishops expressed concern about the costs to the people of Africa. "Africa is not a poor continent," said West Angolan Bishop Gaspar Domingos. "Many people come to the continent to look for riches to obtain. They take resources back to their countries and then bring them back to Africa to buy," he said, reporting that Africa is purchasing more Chinese-made goods that are industrially manufactured.

"Education is the No. 1 key for the fight against poverty in training engineers and people who can be responsible for the wealth of the continent," Onema said.

Bishop Benjamin Boni noted that, during the civil war in the Ivory Coast that ended five years ago, the region was exploited for gold, diamonds and other minerals. "How can we explain that?" he asked. "It is a very serious problem."

China's muscle

Analysts say China's financial muscle is providing an economic alternative to African leaders, since traditional partners like European nations and the United States are consumed by their own economic and social issues. China also has cancelled debts owed by some African nations.

"I am unclear about the motivation of China and the way in which they are now appearing on the scene and interacting with several of the countries that are related to (The United Methodist Church) and our work," said Bishop Felton May, task force chairman and interim top executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. Zimbabwe, he said,

has experienced an influx of Chinese people over the past seven years. The number of Chinese people in the restaurant and hotel industry has increased significantly, and a large number work in Zimbabwean mines while many in Zimbabwe remain unemployed. "My question is why?" May asked. May wondered if Zimbabwe felt abandoned by the West, namely Great Britain and the United States. "I would like to know whether the U.S. State Department has clear and unmistakable knowledge of what China is doing in Zimbabwe and what the proposed outcome would be in terms of the growing presence," he said. May noted that the United States has invested in Zimbabwe in various ways over the years and that USAID, a government agency providing U.S. economic, developmental and humanitarian aid worldwide, has invested in United Methodist-related Africa University. "For that we are grateful," he said. But in terms of trade, he said, it is "problematic" that Chinese workers are perhaps displacing Zimbabweans in certain jobs and that textiles and other products previously made in Zimbabwe are being manufactured in China and glutting the market. "The price for these items has forced Zimbabweans to ask for little or nothing for what they are doing. For me that is a problem," May said.

U.S. debt to China

Another concern cited is the U.S. debt to China. The United States has borrowed money unilaterally or through secondary banking systems from China to shore up deficits. "Is there a relationship to the indebted of the United States to China and China's encroachment on the social and political scene of Zimbabwe and other sub-Saharan African countries?" May asked. "Should China do something that we are not pleased with, are we able to morally and ethically speak to them about what they are doing or will be silenced by our financial relationship to them?" May expressed hope that the U.S. State Department would give The United Methodist Church or any faith-based organization in Africa an assessment of the U.S. relationship to China and the effect of China's presence on the economic future of Africa. "As we are concerned about the economic future, we want to know if our investments will be to naught or will they help people come out of poverty," May said. "We certainly do not want China to come in and possibly move toward domination of these countries economically and socially."

The African bishops said if money generated from the sale of African products were being mined and invested in the countries where the mines are, the residuals would help to fight poverty. "Poverty is something we can't understand in a country that has everything," said Bishop David Yemba of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

May expressed a desire that the U.S. government or a research department at a United Methodist-related university would provide a clear picture of what is happening socially, economically and medically in African countries where China has invested. "We have underutilized the tremendous academic strength of our institutions of higher education," said May.

The Holistic Africa task force provides the African bishops with an arena to share hurts, dreams and aspirations for their respective areas and allows churchwide agencies to share programs, projects and initiatives that can benefit Africans and the church in Africa. The task force also provides an arena to identify common issues that affect the way the African bishops do mission and ministry.

- By Linda Green, UMNS; Nashville {586}; Nov. 21, 2007.

China. China to open world's largest Bible printing plant

Bob Fu, the president of the China Aid Association, says it's ironic that the communist country of China will soon have the largest Bible print shop in the world. It was recently reported that China will soon open the largest Bible production plant in the world on the outskirts of the city of Nanjing. The plant will be operated by government-sanctioned Amity Press and reportedly will print one-million Bibles each month.

But while Chinese officials have heralded the development, Bob Fu, president of the China Aid Association, says the communist government could do more to get Bibles into the hands of Chinese citizens. "If China is serious on this issue of printing Bibles, they should make the Bibles available, at least in the public library [and] bookstores and so that citizens can have free access to buy it if they want," states Fu. Fu says the Chinese government has nothing to brag about with this new production plant. He says with the world's largest population (1.3 billion people), China has the largest number of Christians within its borders. "To print a few million Bibles does not really show there's any religious freedom to boast [about]," the Christian activists argues. He says despite efforts to make the Chinese government look tolerant, the Bible is still restricted in the public square.

Lead-up to Olympics

Meanwhile, Associated Press reports the director of China's religious affairs bureau is trying to calm U.S. misgivings ahead of Beijing's Olympic Games this summer. In Washington, Ye Xiaowen met with U.S. officials and spoke at Georgetown University. After talks Wednesday with Undersecretary of State Paula Dobriansky, he told reporters that China's peaceful development depends upon its respect for human rights and religious beliefs. Ye said he also met with President Bush's ambassador for international religious freedom, John Hanford, and with Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington. Ye criticized as groundless last year's State Department report on religious freedom

that said China continued to repress religious groups and was cracking down ahead of the Olympics. Fu argues the crackdown on Christians and unregistered house churches is indeed related to the upcoming Olympic Games.

- Allie Martin, *OneNewsNow*; 2/21/2008.

Episcopal Church. Entire diocese jumps out of Episcopal Church

Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin votes 173-22 to remove all references to the national body from its constitution. Dozens of churches and groups have left the Episcopal Church in recent years. Today is the first time that an entire diocese has voted to officially split from the national body. The votes weren't close: the clergy in California's Diocese of San Joaquin voted 70-12 to withdraw, and laity voted 103-10. "We have leadership in the Episcopal Church that has drastically and radically changed directions," diocesan spokesman Van McCalister told the Associated Press. "They have pulled the rug out from under us. They've started teaching something very different, something very new and novel, and it's impossible for us to follow a leadership that has so drastically reinvented itself."

The diocese, which has 47 parishes, 48 church buildings (including its headquarters), and 8,800 members, will affiliate with the Anglican Province of the Southern Cone, headquartered in Buenos Aires. As it removed all references to the national Episcopal Church body in its constitution, the diocese added a clause describing itself as "a constituent member of the Anglican Communion and in full communion with the See of Canterbury."

The *New York Times* notes that the diocese "has long been different from the rest of the Episcopal Church":

It is one of three dioceses that does not ordain women priests. It stopped sending money to the Episcopal Church budget after the consecration of Bishop Robinson. Its cathedral runs a ministry for those struggling "with sexual brokenness," Bishop Schofield said, which includes homosexuality.

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori refused to acknowledge that the diocese is leaving. "The Episcopal Church receives with sadness the news that some members of this church have made a decision to leave this church," she said in a press release. "We deeply regret their unwillingness or inability to live within the historical Anglican understanding of comprehensiveness. We wish them to know of our prayers for them and their journey. The Episcopal Church will continue in the Diocese of San Joaquin, albeit with new leadership."

[Note: The reference to "refused to acknowledge that the diocese is leaving" is a tactic used by liberal leadership; rather than face the reality of what is happening, they refuse to publicly (and sometimes privately) acknowledge unpleasant news or challenges to their leadership.]

- Ted Olsen, *Christianity Today* website; December 8, 2007.

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Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life. – Confucius