

# The Monthly Update

September 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This "Update" contains information on more of the various annual conferences being held around the country and throughout the world. Our preliminary calculations show that the loss is in excess of 60,000 members this year putting our denomination below the 7.9 million-member mark. In addition you will find enclosed a supplemental report on the 2008 General Conference in Ft. Worth; this shows some of our conclusions and evaluations of that event.

I must remark on that portion of the report from the Virginia Annual Conference that states,

*Many attendees and guests viewed the "Eyes Wide Open" traveling exhibit illustrating the human cost of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, with combat boots for each Virginia soldier killed during the war, and shoes of all sorts and sizes representing civilian casualties.*

This is the same type of exhibit set up in front of General Conference in Ft. Worth. That is one of the few times I spoke to an exhibitor – and I severely took her to task for its being such a blatantly pacifistic display. As an Army veteran of over twenty years' service and a veteran of combat, I would have been outraged to have had my name used in such a way; that would have dishonored our war effort and my service. She disclaimed any knowledge of the issues and would not, or could not, engage me in debate. In other words, she was standing there and did not know why she was advocating for that cause. The exhibit at the Virginia Annual Conference was no different. It is no surprise that the statistics as reflected in the last statement of the report on page 5 of this "Update" show "Membership is 337,641, down 2,067" for the conference. Why isn't the conference's leadership engaged in giving people the life-saving message of Jesus Christ? This is far more important than this form of subtle manipulation of people's feelings.

As often happens during the summer, giving to Concerned Methodists decreases because people are on vacation or pursuing other priorities. This year is no exception – but is compounded by the lingering debts that we have stemming from our involvement in the 2008 General Conference in Ft. Worth. We have a residual debt of over six thousand dollars, in addition to a printing bill of \$1969.28 that needs to be paid. Can you help us overcome this shortfall?

We would like to get this cleared up before we go into the printing cycle with our next edition of *The Christian Methodist Newsletter* – which will happen just as soon as we receive the final statistics on membership in our United Methodist Church

We would ask that you make a generous gift to Concerned Methodists at this very needy time. Can you stand with us to solve this problem?

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,  
Executive Director

## September 2008 Update

### Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

*Life consists not in holding good cards, but in playing those you hold well.*

– Blum's Farmer's and Planter's Almanac for the year 2007, P. 26

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#### The Good Stuff

+ Bishop James Swanson of the Holston Area responded to the tragedy by writing on his blog. "We must face the fact that there is within us the potential to commit awful atrocities when we are disconnected from God," Swanson said. "In the face of this tragedy, the one thing I am sure of is that we must continue-no, we must double our efforts-to reach people with the transforming message of Jesus. We must not allow evil to dominate us and place fear in our hearts to the point that we surrender in despair." - Annette Spence, editor of *The Call*, the newspaper of the Holston Annual Conference.

– As reported in the United Methodist News Service (UMNS) and UMNewscope, August 15, 2008.

+ The UM NOMADS will observe their 20th Anniversary with a celebration at their national Annual Meeting and Reunion to be held this year at the Expo Center in Shawnee, Okla., Sept. 22-26. NOMADS, which stands for "Nomads on a Mission Active in Divine Service," is a mission outreach ministry of UM individuals and couples with RVs who wish to be involved in Christian service. The nearly 1,100 NOMADS members worked 179 projects in 33 states and Mexico in the past year. More information about NOMADS is available on their web site at [www.nomadsumc.org](http://www.nomadsumc.org) or from Program Administrator Carla Kinsey at 866-466-6237 or

[director@nomadsumc.org](mailto:director@nomadsumc.org)

– UMNewscope, August 15, 2008.

### Annual Conference Reports

**California-Nevada** circumnavigated wildfires and a major interstate repair project to gather at the Sacramento, California Convention Center June 17-21 under the theme, "Extending Christ's Invitation for a Joyous Life." The Episcopacy Committee created "An Artful Presence" in celebration of the ministry of Bishop Beverly J. Shamana, herself an artist, who retires August 31. Giant paintings depicting joy in worship graced the hall, while each day a new "artist in residence" conducted workshops and led experiments in creativity. The bishop's own art was on display, along with works by her mother and sisters. There was music, dance, and drama, and the business of session was punctuated by brief readings of poetry ("Poeticus Interruptus"). The conference adopted a resolution requiring that every local church complete an assessment of its own vitality by its 2008 Church Conference, and that every clergy member conduct an assessment or his/her own effectiveness by December 15, 2008. A Committee on Hmong Ministry was formed and a Philippines Solidarity Group was commissioned. A resolution in support of marriage equality in California was adopted. After lengthy debate, members also adopted a resolution in support of retired elders who have offered to conduct same-gender marriage ceremonies and Holy Unions in response to the May 15 California Supreme Court ruling extending "right to marry" protection to same-gender couples. An elder called for a Rule of Law on that vote and Bishop Shamana will respond in writing within 30 days, as stipulated in the Book of Discipline.

Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, gave the keynote address at Thursday afternoon plenary. The Right Reverend Chester Lovelle Talton, D.D., Suffragan Bishop of the Los Angeles Diocese of The Episcopal Church, preached at Saturday's Service of Commissioning and Ordination.

– Cate Monaghan, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**California-Pacific** gathered more than 1,800 laity and clergy from across Southern California, Hawaii, Guam, and Saipan June 18-22 at the University of Redlands in Redlands, Calif. This year's theme was "To Be the Cup Overflowing with Joy!" In legislative action, the conference passed three resolutions responding to recent actions of the California Supreme Court, which in May struck down the state's ban on same-sex marriage in a broadly worded decision that would invalidate virtually any law that discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation. One of the resolutions focused on a pastoral response to the legality of same gender marriage in California. It read in part, "while we recognize that we are governed by the Book of Discipline. we support those pastors who conscientiously respond to the needs of their parishes by celebrating same gender marriages, and we envision compassion and understanding in any resulting disciplinary actions." The second resolution entitled "Affirmation of Marriage Equality in California" calls on the conference to acknowledge the Supreme Court decision regarding marriage equality. A third resolution was in response to an initiative on the

California state ballot this coming November. The "Protecting Marriage Equality in California" resolution opposes the "California Marriage Protection Act," which would amend the state Constitution to define marriage as a union "between a man and a woman" and undo the May ruling. Members adopted a 2009 budget of \$12,906,072 representing an increase of 0.77%. Conference members collected offerings for Domestic Disaster Response, Nothing But Nets, Global Disaster Response, the Conference Youth Endowment Fund and the Bishop's Designation for Children. The conference also adopted a resolution encouraging all churches in the conference to calculate their carbon footprint on a biennial basis and become carbon neutral by the year 2020. The conference celebrated the retirement of 25 active clergy representing more than 656 years of active ministry. Membership is 84,812 down 2,265.

– Larry R. Hygh Jr., as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**Central Pennsylvania** met June 5-7 at Messiah College. Bishop Jane Allen Middleton said that witness in a changing world requires visionary leaders who are guided by the principles: Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in love with God. In its legislative moves, the conference unanimously approved a resolution calling for joining the Pennsylvania churches of the Wyoming Conference with the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The conference also voted to tithe 20% of the interest earnings from the deposit accounts of the Conference Board of Pensions to the pensions of the Central Conferences; to transition from a self-funded health care coverage to HealthFlex, to support legislation ensuring standard review and reporting protocols of child fatalities; to encourage education on the prevention of child abuse; to increase minimum clergy salaries by 3% in 2009 and to require ongoing training in sexual ethics for all clergy and lay pastors. The conference treasurer reported that for the twelfth consecutive year, the conference paid 100% of its apportionments. The conference did not approve a resolution submitted to its Board of Church and Society calling for all congregations within a ten-mile radius to merge into one congregation. An \$11.4 million plan for funding ministry was approved for 2009, and conference members were asked to join in a "Miracle Month" fund raising effort aimed at retiring the debt on Mission Central. The conference also approved the sale of Bethlehem Farm, and directed funds from the sale to improving conference-owned camps, its Camp Endowment Fund, and ministry to children in the city of York. Special offerings received at the conference totaled \$76,481.64. Membership is 141,030 down 2,821.

– Skip Spangler and Jerry Wolgemuth, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**East Ohio** met June 16-19 in Lakeside with the theme "Lord, We Come to the Lakeshore." Using the analogy of throwing a stone into a lake, Bishop John Hopkins challenged the delegates during his annual episcopal address to make a ripple and transform the world. At the end of Hopkins' address, nearly 1,700 delegates came forward as they made commitments to support Public Education, Nothing But Nets and the Global AIDS Fund. East Ohio celebrated the continued efforts made by all local churches that allowed the conference for the second time in history to pay 100% of its general church apportionments. The conference received a check for \$18,042.95 from the UM Publishing House and voted to contribute the entire amount to the Central Conference Pension Fund. An additional \$16,789.95 was divided equally among the Global AIDS Fund, The "3Cs": Churches, Clinics and Classrooms Mission Initiative and the Bishop's Discretionary Fund. Bishop Hopkins ordained seven elders and one deacon. He commissioned eight probationary *elders and one deacon*. *Thirty-one pastors retired representing 783 years of faithful service to the church*. In other conference business, members approved the following resolutions: to oppose any constitutional amendment that legalizes gambling/gaming and to further education and discussions about the Social Principles statement on gambling; to continue advocacy efforts for education and educational funding reform; to help farmers earn fair prices through the purchase of coffee, tea, chocolate and snacks via the UMCOR Coffee Project and Equal Exchange; to encourage churches to include youth representatives in their committees, boards, worship services and events; and to support a cancer awareness event to take place during Annual Conference 2009. The conference failed to affirm the Council of Bishops' resolution asking for an end to the war in Iraq. Membership is 173,950, down 2,853.

– Kay Panovec, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

The annual conferences of **Eurasia** met in June under the leadership of Bishop Hans Växby. There are five annual and provisional annual conferences in Eurasia, covering eight of the former Soviet republics from Kaliningrad at the Baltic Sea to Vladivostok at the Japanese Sea. The theme for all conferences was "Source of Life" (1 Cor 1:30), and a new translation of Charles Wesley's "Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine" was introduced. "I believe we're on the right track," Bishop Växby said in his address to the five annual conferences in Eurasia this year. "Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians (3:16) come to my mind, especially how it is phrased in The Message, 'Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.' The UMC in Eurasia faces many challenges; we are not as resourceful as we would like to, and we lack experience in several areas. But we have found "the right track," we know where we are going, and we take "intentional steps towards the goal." This year has been a turning point for the Siberia-Far East District after several years of struggle, District Superintendent Elena Chudinova reports. The work in Central Asia continues to expand. This year, six new Bible groups have been formed, two in Kyrgyzstan and four in Kazakhstan. Ukraine now has the three largest churches in terms

of worship attendance, Kaminitza, Uzhgorod and Chernovtsy. The two planned church plants have not yet started, but are expected to open during the coming conference year. The student ministry in Lviv has had an especially fruitful year. The missionaries Stacy and Fred Vanderwerf return this summer to Minnesota, and the conference is expecting expedient replacements. A new effort to strengthen the pastors is the introduction of coaching. Coaching is a system of giving structure to the relationship between the district superintendent and the pastor. A written covenant formalizes the relationship and gives it more intentionality. It turns the focus from checking to encouraging. Its main purpose is to help translate the vision of the pastor into concrete results. – Bishop Hans Växby, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**Missouri** met June 6-9 in St. Louis. Bishop Robert Schnase offered optimism, hope, and gratitude, recognizing achievements made in reaching out to young people. WOW, an annual youth rally, has been growing year by year and 2,080 youth and sponsoring adults attended in 2008. This summer more than 1,000 are registered for youth mission work camps. Registration for camping ministries has increased for the first time in several years. The Rev. Sue Watson, director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence, joined the Bishop's report and noted that in the last year she has traveled nearly 28,000 miles around the state working with pastors and laity in equipping clergy for strong ministry skills. Bob Farr, director of the Center for Congregational Excellence, also participated in the report. Farr consulted with 95 churches last year. The goals of the Congregational Development Team with which Farr works include starting three churches a year and transforming 30 existing congregations a year from declining or plateaued to growing congregations. Conference giving from local churches and individuals exceeded \$200,000. The big offering was for the PET Project. A PET is a sturdy, hand-cranked wheel chair that is hand-built of simple parts by volunteers and shipped to landmine and polio victims in impoverished countries. \$146,633 was raised, enough to buy 586 PETs. Larry Fagan, Conference lay leader, presented a basketball, signed by bishops who attended General Conference. The Missouri Conference delegation brought the ball home from General Conference after raising \$1,000 for Nothing But Nets. Fagan offered the ball to the district that raised the most money for Nothing But Nets during Annual Conference Session. The Southeast District won, raising \$16,838. The total amount pledged or donated from the entire Missouri Conference was more than \$65,000. Membership is 169,386, down 2,045. – Fred Koenig, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**New England** met June 13-15 at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass. The clergy session was held in the evening of June 12. The theme of "Living the NET-Work" was woven through the three days as more than 1000 clergy and lay representatives from around the conference gathered together to share in worship, business, fellowship, learning and inspiration. Highlights included Bishop Peter Weaver's leadership of a moving, yet celebratory memorial service as the conference honored clergy, local pastors, spouses, and lay members that died this past year. Sixteen elders and local pastors were recognized for their new lives as retirees. Eight persons were ordained elders, one was received into full connection, and five were commissioned for the work of an elder. The "Together for Tomorrow" capital campaign reported more than \$6.3 million received to date. Offerings raised included \$3,358 for the Bishop's Discretionary Fund; \$3,523 for youth ministries, \$2,918 for medical costs for an uninsured pastor, and \$34,059 for Nothing But Nets. In business, the conference approved a budget of more than \$6.5 million, including more than \$1.6 million for the general church and World Missions and endorsed two episcopal nominees: Aida Irizarry Fernandez and Linda Campbell-Marshall. The conference approved 16 resolutions addressing: hospitality and welcome to Vermont churches; solidarity with undocumented immigrants; work toward the elimination of the world's adoption/orphan crisis; white privilege and racism; and renewed focus on fulfilling the conference Global AIDS Fund commitment. Membership is 90,974, down 2484. – Alexx Wood, as reported in UMNewscope, August 15, 2008.

**New York** met June 11-14 at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y. under the theme: "For Such a Time as This: The World Will Know Us by Our Love." In his episcopal address, Bishop Jeremiah J. Park celebrated the growth of mission work through the Volunteers in Mission teams to the U.S. Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, to Haiti, Mozambique, Bolivia, Ghana, Costa Rica; youth ambassador VIMS; and Bishop's Partners in Mission. He challenged churches and clergy to be a "connecting church" and charged the conference's 1,500 lay speakers and board of laity to lead the conference to reach "more people, younger people and more diverse people." The conference celebrated the mission engagement of the youth as they raised more than \$92,000 for the Nothing But Nets campaign last year. This year, more than 1,000 children and chaperones attended the Saturday mission celebration event. In response to the challenge to raise \$50,000 for 10 Noah's Arks (a variety of farm animals to be shipped to UM areas around the world through Heifer International) they gave more than \$79,000 to purchase more than 15 arks. A budget of \$9.19 million was passed. Membership is 120,404, down 2,352. – Dennis Winkleblack, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**North Georgia** met June 17-20 at the Athens Classic Center under the theme "The Heart of the Matter." The conference focused on the Three Simple Rules: Do Good, Do No Harm, and Stay in Love With God. Throughout the week, delegates were filled with a spirit of giving. Two fundraisers brought in \$10,544 for Our Daily Bread soup kitchen in Athens. A friendly challenge to Bishop Lindsey Davis to shoot a basket with a basketball given to him by the General Conference delegation led to an outpouring of cash and pledges for Nothing But Nets. By the end of the week, more than \$10,000 in cash and \$115,500 in pledges were received. In honor of Bishop and Mrs. Davis' 12 years of service in North Georgia, churches gave \$57,000 to Hands to Honduras and Venezuela Now. After hearing the testimony of 17-year-old Ibriham Dandaji, a resident of the Child Rescue Center in Bo, Sierra Leone, a spontaneous offering was collected totaling \$13,000 for the Center. The conference commissioned 27 probationary members, ordained two full connection deacons and ordained 11 full connection elders. North Georgia also recognized 33 retiring clergy members representing 958 years of service. Thirty two clergy and clergy spouses who died in the last year were remembered during a memorial service. The Board of Church Development reported that three new churches and nine new missions were chartered this year. Among the starts are a Korean Mission and a Vietnamese Mission. There are 24 congregations that offer worship services in Spanish or Portuguese and 1,725 Hispanic/Latino members of the Conference. The conference approved a budget of \$26,252,000. Membership is 350,087 up 1.2% (3,657).

– Sybil Davidson and Tim McDaniel, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

The **Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference** met June 5-8 with the theme "Giving Our Hearts Away." Bishop Robert E. Hayes, Jr. was the conference preacher. In 2006 a resolution was passed by the conference that due to the loss of some tribal languages our churches would strive to retain the language by teaching our children our tribal hymns and at annual conference these churches and children would be recognized. The Conference Children's Choir had children from five different churches. Offerings of \$2165 were received to go to the new Clinton Indian UMC Children's Ministry. A resolution was passed opposing English-only legislation that is intended to declare Oklahoma as an official English state. This resolution calls for all tribal governments to take actions to formally oppose English-only legislation, informing their state legislators and other officials of their positions; implementing a policy requiring that a set percentage of tribally-generated moneys given for public education through compacts with the state be designated for teaching tribal languages in public schools; and the creation of a super-fund to support the twenty-four highly endangered and valuable Native American languages still spoken within the state of Oklahoma. In other action, members approved a budget of \$1,250,573. Membership is 6223, down two.

– Josephine Deere, as reported in UMNewscope, July 11, 2008.

**Oregon-Idaho** met June 18-22 in Salem. The Memorial/Communion Service included inspiring music, a touching memorial to those who have died since last year, and a life-affirming, energizing sermon by Bishop Robert T. Hoshibata (Portland Area). Candles lighted for the "saints" remained burning during worship throughout the five-day conference. The Commissioning/Licensing/ Retirement Service featured Marimbanda from a Salem inner-city school and a praise group from Corvallis UMC, Oregon. The Ordination Service changed the mood to classical with the singing, by Dr. Kevin Helppie, of Handel's "Behold I Tell You a Mystery" and "The Trumpet Shall Sound," accompanied by Rev. Don Frueh, organist, and Dr. Joan Haaland Paddock, trumpet. Two people were ordained elders, one a deacon.

For the first time ever, annual conference included a rock concert for youth. Saturday evening, Jars of Clay, an award-winning Christian rock group, presented a throbbing, explosive and exciting three hours of spiritually-grounded music at the Pavilion, Oregon State Fairgrounds. An estimated 5,000 people attended the concert. Bishop Hoshibata garnered contributions from groups and individuals to fund the event outside the conference budget. This free concert, open to the public, was his dream of affirming the presence of the UMC in the community and demonstrating its care for youth and young adults. A strong affirmative vote established a \$5 million major funds campaign expanding and strengthening Oregon-Idaho's Camp and Retreat Ministries and the Oregon-Idaho UM Foundation, as well as Gulfside Assembly in Mississippi and a partner camp in Guatemala. Legislative requests included a "Safe Sanctuaries" policy for the annual conference and a template for local ministry settings based on that policy. The item passed by a large majority. Membership is 31,941, down 1,123.

– Linda Sullivan, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**Peninsula-Delaware** met June 13-15, in Princess Anne, Maryland, under the leadership of Bishop Marcus Matthews. The theme was "Gear Up" and the scripture was 1 Peter 1:13-16. In the Bishop's sermon during the opening worship he encouraged the members and guests to "Gear Up by taking time to be holy, reflecting on past accomplishments, and then moving on to the future!" The conference broke its previous record of \$45,000 by giving \$48,158 to Africa University, Global AIDS, Congo Partnership and the Board of Ordained Ministry. The conference members passed a resolution to encourage Maryland voters to say no to the referendum to legalize slot machines. Using the statement on gambling in the Book of Resolutions, the resolution asked that our Delaware members support Maryland members in November and vote against this referendum that could put 15,000 slot machines at venues in the state that includes the Peninsula-Delaware

and Baltimore-Washington Conferences. Two additional resolutions that passed included a Safe Sanctuaries Policy and the incorporation of our camping and retreat ministries. The proposed \$5.7 million Covenant Funding Plan (budget) was adopted. During the GCF&A report it was noted that our conference has paid 100% of its general church apportionments for the past 24 years. The UM Publishing House presented a check in the amount of \$6,275.27, which was voted by the body to contribute to the Central Conference Pension Fund. Membership is 89,801, down 1,470.

– John Van Tine and Tamara Ward, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**The South German Annual Conference** met June 18-22 in Herrenberg and Sindelfingen, Germany with Bishop Rosemarie Wenner presiding. The conference theme was "Blessed Are Those. Confessing Your Faith by Living It." Fitting with this theme was the emphasis on the social principles in the opening worship service and in the work groups. We heard examples from our churches of faith in action and discussed the role of the social principles in the individual congregations. The report of the superintendents also picked up the theme and introduced the conference to Bishop Robert Schnase's Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. It is hoped that that the churches in the conference can use these ideas to encourage the development of faith in action in their own congregations. Other papers set forth by the committee for evangelization and by the committee for adult education were discussed. A controversial question was the extent to which concrete growth of our congregations is an indication of their spiritual health. In other business, Bishop Wenner chose Carl Hecker to be the new Superintendent of the Heidelberg District. The worship service in Sindelfingen, which closed the conference, was different this year, due to the fact that no one was ordained. This provided the opportunity for everyone to spend the whole day together. The day began with a service for young and old centering on the theme "I love you." The conference honored three retiring ministers this year. The number of confessing members is 17,492, down 306 or 1.72%. The number of baptized members is 13,681. – Jonathan Whitlock, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**Texas** met May 25-28 at The Woodlands UMC near Houston. The groundbreaking covenant partnership between the Texas and Côte d'Ivoire annual conferences has yielded its first fruits-surpassing the \$1 million goal for donations from Texans to fight malaria in West Africa. "The spirit of support for this effort among our congregations has been energizing and exciting," said Rev. Cynthia Harvey, director of the conference Center for Missional Excellence. A team of 35 clergy and laity was commissioned during the conference to deliver more than 800,000 nets to Côte d'Ivoire in November. Covering the country requires seven million nets, according to the Côte d'Ivoire Minister of Health. "Our goal is to still cover the country of Côte d'Ivoire," said Bishop Janice Riggie Huie. "We're not there yet, but friends, God is good and with God all things are possible." The conference also affirmed the covenant relationship between the Texas and Côte d'Ivoire conferences. Bishop Benjamin Boni and Bishop Huie read a partnership proclamation in French and English. The focus areas: evangelism on both continents; eradicating the diseases of poverty-HIV/AIDS, malaria, measles and tuberculosis; and educational support of children, youth and pastors in Côte d'Ivoire. In other business, conference members were empowered by the theme "Risk-Taking Mission and Service," and took time out for hands-on service projects. Some assembled health and sewing kits. Others built walls for Habitat for Humanity homes. The keynote speaker, Rev. Peter Storey of South Africa, delivered penetrating and challenging addresses on being a mission-minded church. – Eleanor L. Colvin, as reported in UMNewscope, August 8, 2008.

**Virginia**, meeting June 15-18 at the Civic Center in Roanoke, approved its "All Things New" plan, planting seeds for 250 new faith communities in the next 30 years and the revitalization of existing congregations. In addition to planting new churches and other types of communities of faith, the plan addresses existing congregations by developing leadership training and support for churches that desire renewal or multiplication. The focus of the conference was on ministry with youth and young people. Much of the music and worship was youth-oriented, and young people took a major role in much of the conference activities. Several youth choirs provided highlights of the gathering. A one-day "expo" offered visitors a variety of resources and information related to youth and young adult ministries. Videos of success stories with youth ministry from local churches across the conference ran throughout the gathering. Members considered and approved a resolution calling for the restoration of voting rights for Virginia felons who have served their debt to society, a resolution calling for accountability of the state's prisons in regard to medical care for inmates, and a resolution calling for ministries of caring and "sorrow-bearing" for families of soldiers killed or injured in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many attendees and guests viewed the "Eyes Wide Open" traveling exhibit illustrating the human cost of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, with combat boots for each Virginia soldier killed during the war, and shoes of all sorts and sizes representing civilian casualties. About 300 volunteers bagged more than 40,000 pounds of sweet potatoes for regional food pantry ministries. Membership is 337,641, down 2,067. – Neill Caldwell, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**Western New York** met June 13-15 in Buffalo. Giving her final Episcopal address, Bishop Violet L. Fisher reminded the members that God has promised a future with hope. The first ever African American female bishop in the Northeastern Jurisdiction, Bishop Fisher urged the church to continue to celebrate what the church has accomplished in the eight years she has led the New York West Area, which includes North Central New York Annual Conference. This conference was filled with celebration of her ministry and Mayor Byron Brown proclaimed June 14 as Bishop Violet L. Fisher day in the City of Buffalo. Members of the Annual Conference authorized the New Area/Conference Team (New ACT) to develop a vision for a new area conference in union with North Central New York, Troy and Wyoming Conferences. The conference also endorsed a New Faith Venture Initiative calling for the establishment of a minimum of one new faith venture in each local church in the period of Jan 1, 2008 to June 1, 2009. The conference affirmed an annual special offering to support the Africa University Scholarship Fund, established an annual special offering on the Sunday prior to February 14 for new church starts as an act of love for non-churched people of our area, designated the third Sunday of September for Hispanic Awareness with a focus on Hispanic culture, ministries and potential ministries in WNY and adopted a plan for starting Hispanic Ministries in Western New York. A budget of \$3,201,093 was adopted for the 2009 fiscal year. The \$3.2 million budget is a 0.29% decrease from the 2008 budget. Membership is 55,659, down 320.

- Marilyn J. Kasperek and Maidstone Mulenga, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**Western Pennsylvania** focused on its core value of love during its June 12-15 gathering at Grove City College. Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton chose the theme "Building on a Foundation of Love" and more than 450 volunteers from local churches demonstrated it by building a UM Habitat for Humanity house in nearby Mercer, Pa., during the week of annual conference. Video feeds kept members updated on progress of the home for a mother and her two teenaged children. Because so many volunteers offered to help, crews were sent to 12 other sites to build handicap ramps, paint, make repairs, etc. Love was also demonstrated through collection of 11,000 kits and flood buckets for the UM Committee on Relief (UMCOR). The Rev. Grace Imathiu, a native of Kenya and pastor of Brown Deer UMC outside Milwaukee, was Bible study leader, and Bishop Gregory Palmer, president of the Council of Bishops, was guest preacher. Conference members contributed more than \$20,000 to aid survivors of flooding in Iowa, where Bishop Palmer serves.

In legislative action, members called for a moratorium on the death penalty in Pennsylvania; agreed to advocate for meaningful health care reform in the state and the nation; approved a \$10 million Mission Share budget; approved a new conference structure using names consistent with the Book of Discipline; and adopted a Conference Disaster Response Plan. The conference voted to give \$500,000 to the Central Conference Pension Initiative. Clergy members affirmed new procedures developed by the Bishop and a Clergy Study Team to ensure that clergy leaders are "faithful, fruitful and effective." Membership is 187,441, down 1,738.

- Jackie Campbell, as reported in UMNewscope, July 4, 2008.

**Yellowstone** met in Billings, Mont., June 12-14. When Bishop Warner H. Brown, Jr., called the conference to order, most conference members had been in attendance for more than 24 hours. All clergy who anticipated appointments were required to attend a sexual ethics workshop the previous day and lay persons were also invited. The workshop was conducted by the Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune from the Faith Trust Institute and was assisted by Dr. Willard Stapp. Fortune addressed head-on the importance of trustworthiness in clergy sexual conduct. She quoted from the hymn, "I would be true for there are those who trust me," pointing out that boundary crossing is about sustaining the integrity of the pastoral relationship which involves clergy being trustworthy and not taking advantage of the vulnerability of those who come to them. This year's conference preacher was Bishop Robert Schnase of the Missouri Conference. Widely respected for his book, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Bishop Schnase's "academies" took the form of three hours of plenary teaching time. Responses to his presentations were universally enthusiastic. So too were the responses to Sister Marya Grathwohl who filled a one-hour plenary sponsored by the Guiding Values Team entitled "Look How the Wild Flowers Grow: Faith & Care of Creation." A Catholic sister, Grathwohl paid enthusiastic tribute to the UM Book of Resolutions and its revolutionary stance on creation issues. She challenged her listeners to hear the cries of creation that call everyone to respond to this burning bush of a planet as a sacred trust.

- Valerie Lindstrom, as reported in UMNewscope, August 8, 2008.

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*Ask questions all your life. It is the best way to learn.*

- Peter Ueberroth, ex-baseball commissioner, as reprinted in Guideposts, March 2007, p. 29.