

Monthly Update

February 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This edition of the “Monthly Update” continues with information on some of the past actions that a lack of space precluded our printing until now. We believe that you will find them informative and helpful in knowing just some of the countless priorities of what is happening in our United Methodist Church – both beneficial and those that cause a bit of concern.

We are mindful of the great devastation that has befallen the people of Haiti. Someone whom I knew – Sam Dixon – was a really good man in terms of both trying to help people and doing it in a practical way; he was one of the casualties when the Montana Hotel in Port-au-Prince collapsed. We need to be in prayer for the people of that country and the relief workers who are on location providing assistance.

One well-known celebrity publicly talked about the connection between that country and satanic worship – voodoo and witchcraft. As a minimum, his public words might have been ill-advised. But with that as a given, what is to be our actions as we provide help to that devastated country? Dave Branon has written the following:*

A friend of mine has the opportunity each winter to attend the Super Bowl as a journalist. His job is to garner interviews with Christian athletes and National Football League personnel for a faith-based radio program. When he first started covering the big game a few years ago, he grew disillusioned with the self-serving, pleasure-seeking atmosphere during Super Bowl week. “I found it to be a very dark place,” he says.

One day he told a former NFL player, a Christian, how he was feeling. The athlete looked at my friend and said, “Brother, you are being light in this dark place.” That comment reminded my friend why he was there, and it helped renew his excitement for serving God in a place where the light of the gospel is needed. It spurred him to shine his light.

In the same way we need to reach out to the people of Haiti at this time with very practical help that will be the hands and feet of Christ to show His love. They are in very great need at this time. But of all of their many requirements, the most important one is the salvation that only He can provide as their Lord and Savior. While we are ministering to these people, let us be sure to give them this eternal answer to their spiritual condition.

We appreciate so much the support you have provided to help us close the financial gap. Please continue to partner with us as we “contend for the faith” at this very crucial time in the life of both our church and our country.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

* *Our Daily Bread*, 2010, January 31, 2010.

February 2010 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

It was the longest night of the world. But the heavens were filled with beautiful stars, and our faith gave us strength that we were not alone. — *Kay Walla of St. Luke's UMC, Indianapolis, on the night she and others from the church mission team spent following the Haiti earthquake.*

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The Good Stuff. Author is new voice for scouting ministry

ATLANTA—Arvin Townsey, 34, an author who has traveled around the world to write books on Eagle Scouts, is the new spokesperson for scouting ministry in The United Methodist Church. "Many United Methodist churches are looking for new ways to reach young people," Townsey said. "Scouting is one of the best ways to develop our church's youth--and also help reach teenagers who are not active members of the church or of United Methodist Youth Fellowships." Townsey serves as a volunteer commissioner for Troop 455 chartered by Haygood United Methodist Church in Atlanta where he has been a lifelong member.

— *United Methodist News Service (UMNS), January 12, 2010*

Of Interest

Haiti

+ Missing mission execs seen entering destroyed Haiti hotel

NEW YORK—Three missing United Methodist mission executives were seen entering the Hotel Montana in Port-au-Prince shortly before the Jan. 12 earthquake rocked the capital, destroying the hotel. Even as hopes for their survival dimmed, officials with the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries were still holding out hope Jan. 14 that the Rev. Sam Dixon, top executive of the United Methodist Committee on Relief; the Rev. Clinton Rabb, head of Mission Volunteers; and Jim Gulley, an UMCOR consultant, are somehow still alive. Rescue operations at the hotel are continuing. [Note: Dixon was found dead and Rabb was injured, evacuated, but later died of injuries. —*ACM*]

— *UMNS, January 14, 2010*

+ Mission volunteers missing, injured in Haiti

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Members of a Dallas mission team working at an eye-care clinic were injured in the Jan. 12 Haiti earthquake, and two Indiana churches are still waiting for news about their members. A group of 12 mission volunteers from Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas was working in the village of Petit Gave when the clinic building collapsed. Volunteers had to dig out people buried in the rubble, the church said. Mission workers suffered injuries including broken ribs, a broken hand and serious internal injuries. Elsewhere, church members at Milroy (Ind.) United Methodist Church and St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis were concerned they had not heard from mission teams in Haiti.

— *UMNS, January 14, 2010*

+ Dallas volunteer dies from injuries in Haiti quake

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—A member of a Dallas mission team providing eye care to Haitians died of injuries suffered in the Jan. 12 earthquake. Jean Arnwine passed away overnight in Guadeloupe. Doctors there tried to revive her, but were unsuccessful," Highland Park United Methodist Church announced Jan. 15. Another team member, Gary Fish, was with Arnwine and working with the U.S. Embassy in Guadeloupe to bring her home. A group of 12 mission workers from Highland Park UMC was working in the village of Petit Gave when the clinic building collapsed. The other 10 mission workers landed in Dallas early Jan. 15. Two members were treated and released from Dallas hospitals.

— *UMNS, January 15, 2010*

+ United Methodist woman saves colleagues in Haiti

NEW YORK—The Hotel Montana in Port-au-Prince was collapsing around Darla Chand moments after a massive earthquake struck the Haitian capital. A piece of debris hit Chand on the head, and all the former staff member of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries said she could think of was not to give up. "If I didn't keep moving, I think I'd be dead," Chand said Jan. 15 in an interview on "ABC News." Chand was able to move through the debris to escape the hotel, and her quick action in bringing back help is credited with saving the lives of several colleagues, including three United Methodist mission leaders.

— *UMNS, January 15,*

2010

+ United Methodists rescued in Haiti

NEW YORK—A team of French firefighters were carefully picking through the rubble of the Montana Hotel in Port-au-Prince to extricate a United Methodist mission leader trapped since the Jan. 12 earthquake. The Times of London said rescuers were using metal cutters to clear the way to the Rev. Clinton Rabb, head of Mission Volunteers for the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, who was trapped under a large concrete slab. Two other church officials trapped at the hotel were rescued earlier. The Rev. Sam Dixon, top executive of the United Methodist Committee on Relief, was taken out of the debris Friday morning, hours after the Rev. James Gulley, an UMCOR consultant, was freed.

- UMCOR January 15, 2010

+ Haiti quake survivor Chand recalls hotel rescue

NEW YORK—Sarla Chand spent hours in the dark, trying to poke her way out of the lobby of the Hotel Montana in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to find help for herself and colleagues, all trapped when the hotel collapsed during the Jan. 12 earthquake. Chand, 65, a United Methodist who works for IMA World Health, made it safely home to Teaneck, N.J. But as she reflects on her dramatic rescue, there also is a sense of distress - both for the people of Haiti and for two of the five colleagues trapped with her who died from their injuries.

- UMCOR January 19, 2010

+ 'We were spared to help,' Indiana volunteers believe

INDIANAPOLIS—They arrived in Haiti the day before the massive earthquake that rocked the nation Jan. 11, and only got back home to Indianapolis six days later. But Kay and Gary Walla, mission volunteers from St. Luke's United Methodist Church, are ready to go back to Haiti when the rebuilding starts. "We are raising funds for immediate medicine and food needs, and gathering building supplies for a future trip," Kay Walla said. "The Haitians are a hardy people. They can sleep on the ground, but without food and medicine, they're going to die."

- UMCOR January 19, 2010

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Growth Patterns: Some churches buck denomination's overall trend of membership decline

The informal, welcoming atmosphere helps draw members to fast-growing Harvest Church, a United Methodist congregation in South Georgia. It's a Sunday morning at Harvest Church, a United Methodist congregation in Warner Robins, Ga. A group of teens with multiple piercings has just arrived for worship. One is wearing a T-shirt sporting the word "Jackass," the title of a popular MTV show. "This is the true test," thought lead pastor the Rev. Jim Cowart, wondering how the elderly woman greeting that morning might react to the PG-13 apparel. He had nothing to worry about. "We're so glad you're here!" the lady told the teens.

"She never said a word about all these piercings," Mr. Cowart said. "She didn't even blink at the T-shirt." It's that kind of welcome and acceptance, he believes, that puts Harvest Church on Outreach magazine's list of Top 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America. The United Methodist congregation ranked No. 8 in percentage growth (50 percent from 2007 to 2008) and No. 28 for its growth in numbers. Currently, Harvest averages 2,100 in worship each week.

Harvest was the only United Methodist church that made the list, which is dominated by non-denominational churches. While there are other UMC churches growing as quickly—Outreach's tally is based on self-reported data—Harvest is clearly bucking the denomination's overall trend of declines in attendance and membership.

So what makes Harvest Church grow? "We just love everybody as they are," said Mr. Cowart. "And we're very intentional about reaching new people for Christ."

Interviews with several growing United Methodist churches revealed a few common denominators: a culture of hospitality, a nimble organization, and plenty of dedicated members with what Mr. Cowart calls a "holy desperation"—a heart for inviting others to church.

Radical hospitality

Carl Palmer, pastor of Elm Springs UMC in Springdale, Ark., remembers an experience at the first church he served as pastor, a tiny rural church in Ohio. When some newcomers turned up one Sunday morning, one member stood up and said, "We're so glad we've got some outsiders with us this morning."

From that mortifying experience, Mr. Palmer took away a lesson: Create a culture where visitors are never seen as "outsiders." So it was no accident that an "open and friendly environment" greeted Meghan Hastings and her family when they visited Elm Springs three years ago. They decided to join and are now active members. "Everything we do is geared toward the newcomer," Mr. Palmer said. "What is evangelism except becoming a very inviting congregation?" Attendance at Elm Springs grew from 147 to 200 between 2007 and 2008.

"Creating places where people are loved and appreciated is enormously important," according to the Rev. John Miles,

pastor of First UMC in Jonesboro, Ark, which welcomed 129 new members in 2008, many of them by profession of faith. Attendance now averages more than 900 on Sunday mornings. The church has a "Parking Pals" ministry, in which members and guests are greeted before they enter the building on Sunday mornings. Several recovery ministries welcome people facing divorce or struggling with alcoholism or drug addiction. "We're serious about Christ, but we're not judgmental," is how Mr. Miles puts it.

Impact Church, a new United Methodist congregation in downtown Atlanta, attracts worshippers by advertising worship as "the best pregame show in Atlanta." On days when the Atlanta Falcons play at home, folks are invited to attend 10 a.m. worship at Impact's temporary space, located next to the Georgia Dome. "They can park at the dome for free and then go next door to the game afterward," said the Rev. Olu Brown, Impact's pastor. The predominantly African-American congregation, now in its third year, averages over 900 in weekly attendance.

Simple, but not easy

Many growing churches say they've grown by doing more with less. "We don't have a lot of programs," said the Rev. David Walters, pastor of The Vine, a United Methodist church in Braselton, Ga. "Instead, we focus on three primary modes for connecting with people: Sunday morning worship, small groups and compassionate outreach." The Vine started in 2007 and now averages over 400 in weekly attendance. Mr. Walters describes the church's outreach as "organic" and "indigenous." In 2007, two church members expressed a desire to help the homeless for Christmas. Church members brought 500 coats and 300 lunch bags to a shelter on Christmas Day. It's not important to make that an annual tradition, according to Mr. Walters. "We didn't create a 'program,'" he said. "It's a ministry led by people who are passionate and who rallied support to accomplish that."

Other growing churches report a similar nimbleness in approach. "We try to stay light on our feet," said Elm Springs' Mr. Palmer. "We don't have a lot of committees, and we try not to propagate things that are not working."

That's worked for Harvest Church, too. "We try not to wear people out with meetings and committees," said Mr. Cowart. Expectations on church members are few but not easy: Attend worship regularly, establish a personal habit of quiet time, get into a small group and join a ministry team. "Traditional churches have been so program-driven," said Mr. Cowart. "They try to cram one more thing in. People are busy enough. We tried to simplify and stay focused."

Creating more with less has worked for Impact Church, too. The church has a worship space but no full-time facility. About 13 small groups meet throughout the area during the week at homes, libraries and coffeehouses. One meets in the community room of a local grocery store. "Our motto is 'Doing Church Differently,'" said Mr. Brown. "We hold fast to the principles of the denomination, but we're meeting people of diverse backgrounds and needs where they are."

Focus is important, too. Elm Springs' leadership set goals to grow by a specific time—and met those goals. The church also prioritized its programming. A few years ago at Elm Springs, Mr. Palmer said, his church's vision team posed a question to the congregation: "If we want to be known for one thing, what would that be?" The answer: an excellent program for children and youth. The congregation turned that vision to a reality; many of the new members are young families who come for the children's programs.

'Holy desperation'

All of the growing churches interviewed offer at least one contemporary service, and many pastors cited the addition of a new contemporary worship service as an avenue for bringing in more attendees. Jonesboro's "Elevation" service, started in early 2008, attracts about 200 people each week, most of them in their teens or early 20s. "Having that option is important," said Mr. Miles. "It's not less serious and it's not 'Christianity lite,' but it makes worship a little more accessible to many people."

Above all, leaders of growing churches say that reaching others has become a defining part of their church's culture. "Our primary driver is to really reach those people who are not connected to God or the church," said Mr. Walters of The Vine. "We filter everything we do through that lens." Worship leaders are careful to explain, or avoid, "churchy" language that might seem unfamiliar to newcomers.

Kyle Smith, pastor of Life Springs, a new and growing United Methodist congregation in Zebulon, Ga., says he can't point to any particular innovation to explain their growth; it's more about basics. "We're just focusing on offering something for children and youth and relevant worship," he said. "My sermon is geared to giving people at least one thing they can take and apply directly in their life and be more like Jesus."

"We have a saying, 'Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where he found some bread,'" said Mr. Cowart of Harvest. "It's become part of who we are."

Top 10 Fastest Growing UMCs – 2006-2007

Mega-churches aren't the only UMCs that are growing these days. Among churches that added 100 or more in attendance between 2006 and 2007, the following U.S. churches showed the highest percentage gains:

1. St. Paul's UMCn Hebron, Md.—441 weekly attendance, up 264 percent
2. Edisto Fork UMCn Orangesburg, S.C.—736 weekly attendance, up 215 percent
3. Ashville Village Chapel—437 weekly attendance, up 168 percent
4. First UMC, Santa Ana, Calif.—210 weekly attendance, up 156 percent
5. Hilliard Scioto Ridge UMC, Hilliard, Ohio—975 weekly attendance, up 113 percent
6. Waianae UMC, Waianae, Hawaii—210 weekly attendance, up 90 percent
7. Faith Spring UMC, Spring, Texas—266 weekly attendance, up 77 percent
8. Highland Hope UMC, Highland, Ill.—321 weekly attendance, up 72 percent
9. Garner First UMC, Garner, N.C.—388 weekly attendance, up 71 percent
10. Community UMC, Circleville, Ohio—330 weekly attendance, up 65 percent

- Source: UMC General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA)

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+ Hudson plane crash survivor still 'braced for impact'

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — "Brace for impact" could have been the last words United Methodist Dave Sanderson heard as U.S. Airways Flight 1549 descended toward the Hudson River on Jan. 15, 2009. Many Americans know those three words as Capt. Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberger's simple, by-the-book instruction to calm his passengers moments before the "Miracle on the Hudson," when the veteran pilot brought the jet down safely, skimming it atop the icy New York river. Given a second chance at life, Sanderson has vowed to make the most of it. That sentiment drives him to climb, sometimes with admitted fear, back onto planes regularly so he can deliver motivational speeches about miracles.

- *UMNS*, January 19, 2010

Homosexuality. United Methodists hold line on gay issues

Ten years ago, the Rev. Greg Dell was put on trial by The United Methodist Church for performing a same-sex union ceremony. Since then, a few states have legalized gay marriage and some mainline Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, now accept non-celibate gay and lesbian clergy. The United Methodist Church, however, has remained firm in upholding its traditional stance that homosexual practice "is incompatible with Christian teaching." In a decision released this week, the Judicial Council, the church's highest court, struck down a resolution from the Baltimore-Washington Annual (regional) Conference that said the church is divided on the issue. "The effect of the Baltimore-Washington resolution is to negate the church's clearly stated position," the council wrote.

In looking to the future, the question is whether The United Methodist Church is separating itself from other, more liberal Protestant churches on this issue, or whether the momentum toward gay rights will lead to an eventual shift in church policy. Dell, for one, is not expecting a change any time soon. "If we're not the last holdouts, we're going to be very close to that," said Dell, who was convicted of the offense but returned to his position as pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago after a year's suspension. He retired early two years ago because of Parkinson's disease.

A policy since 1972

The denomination's top legislative body, the General Conference, first took a stand on the incompatibility of Christianity and homosexual practice in 1972. Since then, Dell said, "the General Conference has moved steadily to more and more explicitly conservative positions."

The voiding of the Baltimore-Washington sexuality statement is the latest example of how the denomination continues to uphold its official position. Earlier in the year, the church's top court overturned resolutions from two California conferences supporting clergy who perform same-gender marriages.

Many rejoice that the church is not abandoning its stance. "I believe that the position of our church is faithful to Christian teaching," said the Rev. Eddie Fox, head of world evangelism for the World Methodist Council. "We are called to faithfulness to the covenant which is expressed in the Discipline of the United Methodist Church."

Church leaders say it is important to keep the conversation going. Bishop Gregory Palmer, president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, said while the denomination upholds General Conference decisions, there are "tremendous efforts" to engage in conversation on the issue of homosexuality in a way that allows people "to listen deeply to each other."

Is the church's position on homosexuality a deal breaker? "I think most United Methodists would say no," Palmer said. "I think they would say it was a deal breaker if we couldn't talk and learn from each other on the subject."

Remaining Orthodox

A survey taken last year among senior clergy in seven mainline denominations showed United Methodists were among the strongest advocates of traditional church policies on marriage and ordination, ranking below only their colleagues from American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. The 2008 Mainline Protestant Clergy Voices Survey, conducted by Washington-based Public Religion Research, found that two-thirds of United Church of Christ clergy support same-sex marriage, but only one in four United Methodist respondents favored the practice. Seventy-two percent of Episcopal clergy back the ordination of gays and lesbians, compared to 32 percent of United Methodist pastors. Eighty percent of Evangelical Lutheran clergy support gays and lesbians as lay leaders, compared to 51 percent of United Methodist leaders.

Robert P. Jones, president of Public Religion Research, did point out that attitudes are shifting among United Methodist clergy. "Forty-one percent of United Methodist clergy report their views have become more liberal on lesbian and gay issues over the last 10 years, versus only 15 percent who report their views have become more conservative," he told United Methodist News Service.

The Rev. Troy Plummer, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, a movement supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender United Methodists, believes church members are simply lagging a bit behind their Protestant counterparts. "The United Methodist Church in the United States clearly follows the trajectory towards inclusiveness mirrored by our North American sister denominations—the UCC, Episcopalian, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches," Plummer said. "Our timing may differ, but God's dance with us will be the same." The next generation is "already there," he added, pointing to the majority votes approving inclusive membership and gay and lesbian clergy by the United Methodist Student Forum and Global Young People's convocation in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Staying true

The Lutheran Church in Sweden is now allowing same-sex marriages in its churches, noted United Methodist Bishop Christian Alsted, who represents the church's Nordic and Baltic Area. Lutherans in Norway may do the same. But Alsted believes United Methodists must stay true to themselves. "I don't think we should try to define ourselves in terms of other denominations," he explained. "I think we should try to discern what we think is right for us as a church as we understand the biblical message." He would like to see less debate on homosexuality in the future. "It seems to me we are directing far too much energy and resources into that question, and it is putting our focus in wrong place," Alsted said. "We should focus on what we need to be about as a church."

Fox argues that The United Methodist Church, which represents about one-third of world Methodists, "is not out of step" on the homosexuality issue. "You've got to look at the world church," he said. "What we hold is very much in keeping with the expression of Christian faith around the world."

[Note: Dr. Eddie Fox has it right. Regardless of what theologically liberal denominations do in this area, we need to stay grounded in our orthodox Christian faith and morality. Theological truths, just like truths of the physical universe, do not change. The information cited above regarding positions on homosexuality of some liberal denominations ignored the record of those evangelical and Pentecostal denominations to include the Southern Baptist Church who maintain traditional positions on homosexuality; they are growing. – AOM]

- By Linda Bloom, *UMNS* Nov. 4, 2009. Bloom is a United Methodist News Service news writer based in New York.

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Sometimes the Lord calms the storm; sometimes He lets the storm rage and calms His child.

Global Outlook

*Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world.
But, the Soldiers don't have that problem.*

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Islam. Muslims Disrupt Christian Prison Ministry...

*This is what every religion will face in the near future - if not already.
This comes from an elder at Green Lawn Church of Christ in Lubbock, [Texas].*

For the last 8 years I, along with Robby Rhodes and Charles McGowan from the Green Lawn congregation have traveled to a prison every third Sunday to conduct bible studies, worship, visits and encourage the inmates who have become followers of Jesus Christ. The numbers are growing and we have been very encouraged with the work. However yesterday, we got a taste of what I believe is the future of Christianity in America .

Just before our assembly began about 15 inmates who have never been to our assembly showed up and asked if they could join us in our worship. Our Christian brothers welcomed them. As one of our brothers (who is an inmate) began the assembly several in the group, (who were Muslim) began to openly and rudely interrupt the assembly by asking questions and challenging the young Christian man who was trying to start the assembly by reading scripture. It became very apparent that these visitors did not come to listen but to interrupt and indoctrinate. They were starting to become belligerent and finally I stood up and told them that this was a Christian assembly for the purpose of worshipping the Creator of the Universe, and His Son, and that they were free to stay, learn and observe, but that it was neither the time nor place for such a public debate.

This seemed to calm them down only for the moment. The guard who was outside the room heard their shouting, stepped in and ordered the men to be quiet or leave. Later Robby Rhodes had to again address the Muslims because of their constant interruptions of the assembly. Later, when our brothers in Christ began passing the plates for the Lord's Supper, the leader of the radical group grabbed a plate of bread, dumped it in his lap and told the whole assembly to "Eat this."

At that point some of the Muslims came over to me and the other elders and started calling us Satan worshippers, white pigs and evil. They vowed to stop our preaching and teaching of Jesus. I thought, "How blessed we were to be verbally attacked because of the Name of Jesus.

Remember it was Jesus who said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11, 12). I believe that if it were not for the presence of the guard it would have become very violent, and possibly deadly. It will not surprise me that our continued visits will eventually lead to our being attacked and harmed.

Our guard was a female about the age of 50, and it is my firm belief that if these men had wanted to, they could have harmed or even killed us yesterday before she could have received the help needed to squelch the attacks. It is my conviction that yesterday was a glimpse of the future for all Christians in America. I also believe that any faith that is not deeply rooted in Jesus will not survive the future when the attacks come. Maybe this is God's way of getting our minds back on the important things in the kingdom of His Dear Son. I have also concluded that we must pray for those who have been too deceived by the teachings of a man named Mohammed. I ask for prayers for me, not necessarily for my safety, but that God will continue to give me the boldness, wisdom and courage to continue preaching and teaching the gospel about Jesus Christ and Him crucified and the kingdom of God. Jack

- Received by e-mail.

Ivory Coast. United Methodist leads Côte d'Ivoire's election effort

Note: This is of interest because Ivory Coast is going to be a factor in the future of the United Methodist Church.]

Robert Beugré Mambé is relying on prayer as he plans his country's first presidential election since 2000. "I am only a man," says the chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission. He is a man with a task both delicate and monumental. As his country makes its way into an uncertain future following a period of civil war, he must balance competing political pressures and organize an election that must be seen as fair and democratic. God's help is essential, he says.

A United Methodist, he believes spirituality is necessary for solving the country's crisis. All the religious bodies – Methodist, Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox – have a role to educate the people in order to have a balanced society, he says. The West African country has struggled through violence and volatility for much of the new century. A rebellion by disgruntled soldiers, heightened by the addition of other rebel groups, led to five years of fighting before agreements signed in 2007 brought a measure of peace. The country's northern region remains in the hands of the Forces Nouvelles – the New Forces rebels.

And to a significant degree, the country's political future is in the hands of Mambé.

"God leads me to this place because I never expected to be where I am today," says Mambé, flanked by staff in a stately government meeting room in Abidjan, the commercial capital of Cote d'Ivoire. "And for me, it is like a ministry, a divine ministry, where I have to work for the truth to prevail."

A 'very difficult' task

Planning an election in a country still recovering from war is complicated, in part because the people have had no identification papers. Mambé and his staff have been developing an electoral list, working to identify people who can vote in the next election, and getting voters registered. In recent months, the Ivoirian press has reported accusations of fraud in the identification and registration process. Militants with the ruling Front Populaire Ivoirien – or Ivoirian Popular Front – have reportedly attacked some registration sites, alleging that foreigners are passing themselves as Ivoirians.

The elections are expected to be held Nov. 29, but the date has shifted in the past year. In trying to reach that elusive date, Mambé is navigating through a political landscape weakened by upheavals that predate the civil war. When longtime president Félix Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993, a struggle ensued among top-ranking officials in the government. Henri Konan Bédié emerged as president, but he came under attack for alleged corruption, and he alienated some with his “Ivoirité” principle, favoring people of pure Ivorian heritage for leadership of the country.

Bédié was overthrown in a 1999 coup by dissident soldiers demanding back pay and better living conditions. His successor, Gen. Robert Guei, held power for only 10 months before being driven from office by the public outcry over his handling of the 2000 presidential election, which he was accused of rigging.

Laurent Gbagbo, who had won a larger percentage of the vote than Guei, became president, a post he holds today. Today, Gbagbo and Bédié are among the contenders for the presidency. Former prime minister Alassane Ouattara is also a major candidate who, like the other two men, bears the marks of high-level political battles. Ouattara was on the losing end of a struggle with Bédié for power following Houphouët-Boigny’s death, and was barred from running in subsequent presidential elections because he was not of pure Ivorian parentage – a requirement that was added to the electoral code in the 1990s and viewed by some as a way of specifically preventing an Ouattara candidacy. However, in 2007, Gbagbo said Ouattara could run for election.

Mambé is trying to organize the elections without favoring any side, “in order for the hand of God to complete its work,” he says. He is a member of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d’Ivoire, or Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire, an opposition party.

Before taking on his current role in 2005, Mambé worked for more than 30 years in civil engineering. While he has had public service roles in the past, none has been as prominent or consequential as the one he now fills.

His job, he says, is “very difficult,” but he takes comfort from Scripture. God never gives someone a task without providing the necessary means, he says. He believes God is helping move the peace process forward. For him, prayer is a must with every step, and he asks that all church members pray for peace.

Leadership values

Mambé draws strength from his spiritual background as well as his experience as a lay preacher at Jubilee United Methodist Church in Abidjan. His church role required him to manage the personal, professional and spiritual sides of his life, a skill that helps him today. One of his leadership principles: If you want to manage people, you have to give yourself up, and you have to love.

He hails from the same region of the country as the Rev. Isaac Bodjé, secretary of The United Methodist Church’s Côte d’Ivoire Conference, and the two are good friends. They became close when Bodjé was pastor of Jubilee from 1995 to 1999.

Bodjé says that Mambé, a lay preacher since 1974, has responded to the call to preach whenever asked, despite his other duties. “He’s very good,” Bodjé says of the former engineer, adding: “He uses a lot of numbers.”

Asked what his future holds, Mambé says he wants the glory of God to prevail. “Where He will send me after the election, I will go, always to His glory.”

– By Tim Tanton, UMNS; Nashville, Tenn., July 22, 2009. Tanton is director of the Media Group at United Methodist Communications. <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnNlLtH&b=1723955&ct=7227829>

Uganda. Methodist agency urges Uganda not to adopt anti-gay law

NEW YORK – Anti-homosexual legislation pending in the East African country of Uganda is “draconian” and should not be enacted, according to Bishop Joel N. Martinez, head of The United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. [Note: It should be observed that Uganda is the only country in the world other than Cuba, which has forcible quarantine of people with AIDS similar to a leper colony, that has seen a declining percentage of AIDS cases. The president of Uganda is a Christian who is encouraging sexual abstinence before marriage as the national standard. We would do well to follow their example in that regard. – *TCM* – *UMNS*, Dec. 18, 2009

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"Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am" – Isa. 58:9