

Monthly Update

November 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Despite all of the turmoil going on in United Methodist Church, our nation, and across the world, we have reason to rejoice and be thankful. During one particularly troublesome time when events did not work out as I had planned but had taken an unwelcome and potentially dangerous direction, I actually felt a sense of joy inside. I knew I had done all I could do avert the problem, but what I had feared transpired anyway, which served to remind me that God is in control – not I. Therefore, we need to do all we can to deal with what we see as the problems in our denomination and the country – then leave the rest up to God.

This edition of our “Monthly Update” continues with information on annual conference reports, problems, but also an analysis of what needs to be corrected in our church with recommendations for revisions in the structure.

November is when we celebrate Thanksgiving Day, commemorating the original feast held by the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1621. May I offer you an encouraging bit of advice as to how you might spend a few minutes of your time? Consider just sitting down and counting our blessings such as - - -

“Most folks I know have a car in each of their driveways.”

“Most everyone I know has a place to live that is warm, dry, and comfortable.”

“We have a kitchen with food and lots of space for all of our relatives to gather.”

“We have fresh air, safe water, a super community and nice churches where we worship.”

“We have good health, are alive, and can walk outside to enjoy the beautiful world that God has given us and the eyes to see it with.”

“The highways, a couple of miles from our home, lead to anywhere in this country and to Canada and Mexico, too.”

“In America – the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’ – we enjoy more freedoms than most of the people in the world and with my computer I have a great opportunity to learn what I’d care to about the rest of the world from the Internet.”

Yes, we have plenty of reasons to be thankful to God – don’t you think?

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

November 2010 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

Never look down on anybody, unless you're helping them up.

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The Good Stuff

+ An Evangelical Approach to Reform

A report, "Operational Assessment of the Connectional Church," conducted by an independent group Apex Healthcare Group under the direction of the Call to Action Steering Team, has been released. The Call to Action Steering Team has been given the responsibility for making recommendations for a major redirection of The United Methodist Church. The Team will make use of the Apex study as they make recommendations to the Connectional Table for the restructuring and refocusing of The United Methodist Church. The report identifies some major problems with the way The United Methodist Church is presently operating. This Happening article will list some of the findings of the report. Generally speaking, except for the jargon used in such a study, the findings reflect the very things evangelical groups have been concerned about for a number of years. In other words, from an evangelical perspective, if major, decisive action is taken on the recommendations of this report, the future is much brighter for United Methodists.

Among the findings (with additional comments):

1) There is a general lack of trust within the church leading to a loss of connectionalism and an under-functioning of the processes of the church. Another part of the report mentions specifically the general lack of trust within the church in leadership and in boards and agencies. The report further mentions the general lack of accountability on the part of boards and agencies as a reason for the lack of trust. This is precisely one of the major concerns of the several evangelical renewal groups ever since the first of the renewal groups, Good News, was organized 40 years ago. This has been seen in curriculum materials developed without sensitivity to evangelical churches, in the independent ways of the superboards without regard for people in the pews, in the lack of accountability in the seminaries, and in actions of many of the bishops. The agencies often function as if local churches exist to serve the agencies and not the agencies to the church. This is not a problem easily fixed. For beginners there will need to be a new way of thinking and managing and visioning and serving. In other words the church will need to develop a new "corporate culture." (its way of thinking and doing things). Gaining the confidence of the people will take time. But things cannot continue as they have been. For starters, the present structure of the church adopted in 1972 will need a major overhaul.

2) There is within the denomination a loss of mission definition and relevancy and an accompanying sense of loss of identity.

This too has been a major theme of the renewal groups. The stated mission statement of the church should not be difficult to understand: "...to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." But large segments of the church do not relate to this mission statement at all. For example: the support of colleges that have no interest in "making disciples of Jesus Christ," and which are basically secular institutions. For another example: the obsession on the part of many with "inclusivism," which serves as an alternative and sometimes a competing "mission" to the stated mission of the church. Sometimes groups act as if, when they have achieved the proper mix of ethnic groups, age, and gender, they have fulfilled their mission.

3) There is a loss of the Wesleyan theological focus. Another part of the report speaks of a lack of engagement and inability to find common, powerful, uniting beliefs.

This also has been a major theme of the renewal groups. There has been a downplaying, and sometimes outright dismissal of the United Methodist doctrinal standards. There has been a direct challenge to Wesleyan theology in the emphasis on inter-faith dialogue (or an outright denial of Wesleyanism in institutions like Claremont). The challenge to Wesleyanism on the one hand is Reformed theology; on the other hand it is progressive ideology. The church cannot be all things to all people.

4) There is an uncoupling of social holiness and vital piety.

The problem is not just in the uncoupling but in the fact that the church is not doing either social holiness or vital piety very well. We have lost the accountability function of the class meeting. "Social holiness" has frequently been interpreted by progressives to justify an agenda committed to liberal political views.

5) The "big tent" approach to being a church with its emphasis on inclusivity, free expression and diversity--where many different and diverse views exist together--is celebrated, but carries with it many problems, not the least of which is an increasing polarization in beliefs on key issues.

The so-called "big tent" concept of the church, in its extreme form, is incompatible with points 2) and 3)--the loss of identity and loss of theological focus. The church has diluted its doctrinal heritage in order to enlarge the tent to include all persons, even those with a questionable commitment to Jesus Christ. The present emphasis on "no standards" by those who want even to write this into the constitution of the church (amendment to para. IV of the Discipline) can only lead to further polarization. At a time when the church needs boundaries some wish to do away with all boundaries. The proposal that on matters like the practice of homosexuality, we agree to disagree, would lead us not to unity but to division.

6) The church rewards administrative/maintenance behavior instead of visionary, risk-taking leadership. Leaders should model civil and/or difficult dialogue better. Leaders are often not held accountable.

This too has been a theme of evangelical groups from their inception.

– By Dr. Riley Case, The Confessing Movement; received by e-mail.

+ *An Evangelical Approach to Reform (II)*

A report entitled "Operational Assessment of the Connectional Church," prepared by an independent group (Apex Healthcare Group) under the direction of the Call to Action Steering Team, has made some sobering assessments of the present state of The United Methodist Church. This report is in the hands of the Call to Action Steering Committee which will use it as a basis for the recommendations they will make to the denomination's Connectional Table. Eventually, legislation will be proposed to the 2012 General Conference that will (hopefully) reform, restructure and refocus The United Methodist Church for the coming years.

Statistics testify to the need for reform. Ever since the radical and destructive restructuring of 1972 the church has been on a downward spiral (it is recognized there are other reasons besides restructuring that account for the decline, but the way the church reoriented itself as a result of the radical 1960s must be seen as one contributing factor). During that time The United Methodist Church has lost 3.2 million members. In the last 10 years, from 1998 to 2008 alone, membership has declined 7% and attendance 9%. The number of churches has declined by 6%. As a percentage of the population United Methodists have twice as many members over 65 years of age as the general population. At the same time the percentage of United Methodist members in the 18-44 age bracket is half the percentage of the general population in that age range. The average age of a United Methodist member has increased in these last ten years from 49 to 54. Professions of faith have declined 25% in the ten-year period. The number of baptisms has declined 13%. Yet the church continues to do things in the same way year after year, believing, evidently, that what we have been doing for 40 years will eventually work if we just try harder and have better public relations and introduce new programs. It is like if we close our eyes the problems will go away. It is time to acknowledge that there is a sickness at the core of the denomination. Revival and renewal are needed; these will come through a new movement of the Holy Spirit. But first there must be repentance: we have failed to be the church God wants us to be. We have lost our way theologically, morally, spiritually, and organizationally.

The Operational Assessment Report is a good place to begin a discussion on why, when, and where we have lost our way, and what must be done for the future. The last Happenings article mentioned areas such as the lack of trust within the church, the loss of mission definition and denominational identity, the lack of the Wesleyan theological focus, and the failure of the "big tent" approach of trying to be all things to all people.

This article mentions several other areas, summarized below, with some additional observations.

1) The general agencies are judged to be "below average" in almost every area of their operation ("below average" might also be described as "flunking"). Specifically they are "below average" in decision-making and effectiveness of the church's programs and ministry functions in the areas of "making disciples" and the Four Areas of Focus. The agencies do not cooperate or collaborate. They operate independently from the rest of the church. There is much too much "distance" between them and annual conferences and local churches. 60% of all respondents in the study ranked agencies "below average" in accountability for outcomes.

2) A major reason for this "below average" rating is that the church generally (and agencies in particular) has been mismatching its legislative role and its operative (or governance) role. It often seeks management through legislation. The boards and agencies are way too large and do not meet often enough to provide oversight and governance. The General Board of Global Ministries, for example, has 89 members. The cost simply to meet cannot be justified. Most effective non-

profit boards operate with somewhere around 12-14 members. Because of the confusion (and perhaps for other reasons) staff tends to dominate agency activities. Because the agency boards are themselves so tied up with matters like quota systems and other concerns unrelated to the church's mission of making disciples, and because the denomination offers no effective accountability structures, there is a disconnect between the agencies, the annual conferences, and the local churches. And because the agenda of some of the agency staffs is ideologically driven (with a propensity toward liberal causes) there is disenchantment, distrust, and sometimes downright hostility on the part of ordinary church members toward some of the agencies. The agencies need a total refiguring.

3) There is no good reason why the church continues to have Jurisdictional Conferences. Its purposes are unclear; the costs cannot be justified.

4) General Conference is evaluated as "below average" in such areas as decision-making effectiveness, process effectiveness, decision-results effectiveness, and financial stewardship effectiveness. One of its main problems is that conference seeks to manage through legislation. In addition, there is no accepted authority to oversee the actions of General Conference in the four years between General Conferences.

5) Boards of Ordained Ministry and the church's way of recruiting ministers contribute to the problem. The Church does not have "birthing places" for call. The process for ordination is far too long. Boards of ordained ministry have wide variations in practice. Sometimes the boards serve as advocates, sometimes they serve as adversaries.

From an evangelical perspective: the church colleges-or at least many of them-are United Methodist in name only. They once were "birthing places" for call; they are no longer. None of the colleges has any interest in promoting the church's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. The whole meaning of "church-related" needs re-evaluation.

The church's youth ministry was torpedoed in the 1960s and 70s and likewise is not an effective "birthing place" for call. In fact, major responsibility for the church's inability to reach and sustain its youth members lies with the failure of an effective youth ministry. There is no way that "inclusion" of youth as part of the quota system of the church should be seen as related to youth ministry or related to the church's mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. The church should learn from para-church ministries at this point.

The church has many problems. The church would be served better if boards and agencies would be drastically downsized, combined, or, in some cases eliminated.

– By Dr. Riley Case, The Confessing Movement, September 13, 2010; received by e-mail.

Of Interest

+ *UMs Address Mosque Conflicts*

[Note: This reflects an abysmally shallow understanding of Islam itself. If the adherents to this faith believe as delineated in their "holy book" that they are obligated to kill those of us who are not of their faith and refuse to convert to it, then we can rightly decide that these same people have hostile intentions toward our welfare or even survival. – AOM]

Each year, on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Rev. Myrna Bethke has visited the World Trade Center site to remember her brother who perished in the towers that day. The UM pastor does not blame Islam for those attacks or her family's loss. She associates the faith with the Muslims she has joined for interfaith Thanksgiving services and the mosque that welcomes visits from her confirmation students. "This, to me, is Islam," she said, "not the people who got together and decided to hijack the religion as they hijacked the planes." Bethke, pastor of Red Bank UMC in New Jersey, also supports the Islamic cultural center planned near ground zero. She is a member of "September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows," a group of the bereaved that announced its support for the project in May. However, others who lost loved ones that day vehemently oppose the proposal. The proposed Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan won the unanimous approval of New York City zoning authorities. Organizers say their goal is to promote tolerance and community cohesion. However, some critics argue that it is insensitive to those who lost loved ones for Islamic center organizers to build near the World Trade Center site. The controversy has not been limited to the proposed center in lower Manhattan. In recent months, confrontations have broken out over the construction or expansion of mosques across the United States. Resolution 6061 in The Book of Resolutions calls for "better relationships between Christians and Muslims on the basis of informed understanding, critical appreciation and balanced perspective of one another's basic beliefs." Resolution 3128 calls for UMs to denounce discrimination against Muslims and "counter stereotypical and bigoted statements made against Muslims and Islam, Arabs and Arabic culture."

Supporting the right to worship is not just in line with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, said the Rev. Stephen J. Sidorak Jr., general secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. It's

also part of Jesus' command to love our neighbor. A two-year Duke University study on American Muslims and terrorism concluded that mosques might actually be a deterrent to the spread of militant Islam. A strong Muslim community that is part of the mainstream can offer young Muslims the support they need without them turning to radical clerics online, said David Schanzer, an associate professor at Duke and one of the study's authors. The UM bishop for metropolitan New York has announced his support for the building of an Islamic community center and mosque near ground zero. To deny such religious freedom, Bishop Jeremiah Park said Sept. 1, "makes us less as Americans and weaker as a nation."

Addressing the mosque disputes and other issues in UM-Muslim relations is going to take more than a press release of solidarity or conference resolution, interfaith advocates said. Bethke and other UM leaders urge fellow Christians to learn more about Islam and get to know their Muslim neighbors. When you know someone well, she said, you won't judge that person by the worst acts committed in his religion's name.

– Heather Hahn, United Methodist News Service (UMNS); as reported in *UMNewscope*, September 8, 2010.

+ ***Bible Society Offers Qurans to Hospitals, Prisons***

[Note: See note above. This reflects an abysmally shallow understanding of Islam itself. – AOM]

After pledging to replace twofold any Qurans burned on Sept. 11, the Massachusetts Bible Society received 107 donations from 28 states, the United Kingdom and Canada, totaling \$3,071. "It seemed to me like the right thing to do," said the Rev. Anne Robertson, the UM pastor who leads the society. Although Jones abandoned his plans to burn Qurans on Sept. 11, the society will use the funds donated to offer the Islamic holy book to hospitals, prisons and social service centers. More information on the project is available online. – UMNS; as reported in *UMNewscope*, September 22, 2010.

+ ***Church Leaders Denounce Questioning of Obama's Faith***

[Note: People have a right to question one's beliefs that belie actions. This applies to President Obama as well. – AOM]

More than 70 Christian leaders have signed an Aug. 25 letter condemning misrepresentations of President Obama's Christian faith. UM signers included the Rev. Rudy Rasmus, pastor of St. John's Downtown in Houston, and the Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, senior pastor at Windsor Village UMC, also in Houston. "President Obama has been unwavering in confessing Christ as Lord and has spoken often about the importance of his Christian faith," the letter said. The letter and full list of signers can be found online.

– UMNS; as reported in *UMNewscope*, September 8, 2010.

Homosexuality. Foundry UMC Allows Same-sex Marriages

Members of Foundry UMC voted 367 to 8 on Sept. 26 to allow same-gender marriages to be performed in its building. Foundry is among many congregations in Washington, D.C., that have been discussing same-sex marriages since the city passed the Marriage Equality Act last March. The Book of Discipline says it is a chargeable offense for a clergy person to conduct a holy union or marriage for gays and lesbians. Following Foundry's vote, Washington Area Bishop John R. Schol released a statement to clergy and lay leaders in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. "In the midst of these difficult matters of the church," he wrote, "I will do all I can to be fair and compassionate as I work to maintain the unity and witness of the church." But as a bishop, he noted, he is responsible for upholding church law and "will process and follow through with any complaint or charge against a UM clergy person of the Baltimore-Washington Conference who performs a same gender wedding or holy union." More information is available at the website of Foundry UMC.

– UMNS; as reported in *UMNewscope*, October 6, 2010.s

(UM) Judicial Council. Judicial Council Decision 1032 (JD 1032) and Exploiting Ambiguity

The United Methodist Church seems obsessed with the issue of homosexuality. Actually, it is a minority in the church that seems obsessed with homosexuality. Unfortunately, that minority includes persons and groups with some visibility and authority in the church: liberal caucus groups, some agency staff, conference leadership in some conferences, some bishops, and some seminary personnel. The battle (and unfortunately, it often seems like a "battle") over homosexuality is taking place on a number of fronts. One of these has to do with JD 1032. The case involved a pastor, Ed Johnson, of Virginia, who delayed membership to a man who was an open and self-avowed practicing homosexual. The bishop ordered the pastor to receive the man and when the pastor would not defer to the bishop's orders, the pastor was removed from his pulpit (fired) and discontinued as a minister (it is a bit more complicated than that but those are the basic facts). The bishop

argued that the foundational bedrock of United Methodism was inclusivity, referring to Article IV of the Constitution, and that the pastor was required to accept all who were interested in membership.

When the case was referred to the Judicial Council, the council in decision 1032 ruled that the pastor does have authority to determine readiness for membership. Liberals in the church were apoplectic. The fact that, since 1784, the church had always invested the responsibility for membership with the pastor did not seem to matter to people who have made "inclusivity" a new article of faith and believe that history, tradition, and the Discipline itself should be deconstructed to conform to this new interpretation of United Methodism. The Council of Bishops then joined the battle. In action unprecedented in the history of the church in America, the council made a statement defending the bishop of Virginia, implying that the Judicial Council decision was wrong. The bishops followed this with another unprecedented action: they would not renominate for re-election any of the Judicial Council members who voted with the majority in the decision. In 2008 the General Conference elected a new slate of Judicial Council members whose views were more in line with the "progressive" element of the church.

The progressives in this case were wanting to apply Article IV to a situation that was never anticipated when the article was added to the Discipline. When Article IV was approved in the 1960s it was addressed to a very specific matter facing the church, namely, a prevailing racism that would deny membership in some congregations to persons of color, or more specifically, that would deny membership to blacks in some white churches. This amendment stated that persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition were eligible to be received as members. The article did not refer to matters of belief, standards, or moral practices. Even then the pastor was given responsibility to determine readiness for membership. In a number of cases, this pastoral authority was exercised when African-Americans were granted membership in churches where congregations would have denied membership.

No matter, whatever the history. That was in the days before the obsession with homosexuality. Suddenly, within the past several years, Article IV has been called into service in a way never imagined or intended when the amendment was added to the constitution. In a newly discovered "meaning," progressives argued that reference to "persons without regard to race, color, or national origin" also included practicing homosexuals. And, it was not just that practicing homosexuals were eligible to be received as members, the paragraph was further interpreted to mean that "practicing homosexuals" must be received and could not be denied membership. Thus, what progressives in the church were not able to accomplish by legislative means could be accomplished by episcopal fiat backed up by a fanciful interpretation on the part of the Judicial Council. In decision 1032 the Judicial Council refused to be taken in by these developments. Thus the controversy. Decision 1032 did not change the stance of the church in regard to homosexuality or membership at all. All it did was to affirm the pastor's right to determine readiness for membership. Progressives, however, acted as if the evil forces of reactionism had set in. Because of the ruling of 1032, according to progressives, vindictive pastors would deny membership to persons for whatever reason they chose. Progressives predicted witch hunts and personal biases would be the order of the day. All kinds of worthy people would now be turned away from membership.

It needs to be pointed out that the progressive observation about pastors misusing their authority has been 100% wrong. As far as we know there have been no cases where pastors exercised authority in any way other than the way they have always exercised such authority. Whether they exercise it wisely or not, pastors have the responsibility to determine if persons understand the meaning of membership, understand the beliefs of the church, and have truly accepted Jesus Christ as savior. Otherwise, the church would have no standards at all. But progressives were determined not to let the matter rest (thus the comment about obsession). To advance their cause an amendment to Article IV was submitted to the 2008 General Conference and approved (with very little debate) by that body with the necessary two-thirds vote. The amendment sought to remove references to race so that "all persons" meant all persons, regardless of what persons believed or practiced, or even whether they had accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thus, supposedly, in the name of diversity a blow would be struck for the condoning of homosexual practice.

John Wesley would have turned over in his grave. He who emphasized that preachers had "nothing to do but save souls" was now being jettisoned along with everything he taught so that "diversity" would now be inscribed in the constitution as the basis for membership, taking the place of confession in Jesus Christ.

The amendment to article IV, which needed to be ratified by 2/3 of the voting members of annual conferences, failed spectacularly. Needing 2/3 vote in the annual conferences, it failed even to muster a majority. It was, and is, a sharp reminder that the leadership of The United Methodist Church is disconnected with the local church, with the annual conferences, and with the overseas church.

Never mind. Now a new strategy. Several annual conferences now want to put their hopes for de-constructing the traditions of the church on the new Judicial Council. Four different annual conferences passed petitions requesting the Judicial Council to revisit decision 1032. One of these is worth looking at. The North Illinois Annual Conference petitioned the Judicial Council to consider whether Judicial Council decision 1032 is superseded by Para. 225 in the Discipline. Para. 225 states that a member in good standing in any Christian denomination who has been baptized and who desires to be united with The United Methodist Church shall be received as members. The 2008 General Conference added the word shall, again, in an effort to institutionally force "inclusivity."

The question is moot, of course, because decision 1032 was made before the word "shall" in para. 225 was placed in the Discipline. It would only be a relevant question if a similar Ed Johnson case were now presented to the Judicial Council.

But para. 225 illustrates the problem of ambiguity that characterizes so many parts of the Discipline. The same paragraph that uses the word shall also uses the word may (persons may be received). The intent of the paragraph is to recognize the validity of church membership and baptism in other denominations. Is it now to be re-interpreted to mean much more than it was ever intended to mean, that a church or a pastor may inquire into the faith of a person being received by profession of faith, but may not inquire into the faith and beliefs of a possible transfer? And what is a Christian denomination? Do we include Mormons, Unitarians, Seventh-Day Adventists, United Pentecostals (who do not baptize in the name of the triune God)? And what about persons baptized in a name other than the triune God ("Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" would be an example)? And who is a member in good standing? In the actual Ed Johnson case that was an important part of the issue. The person seeking membership was hardly in good standing in the previous church (actually two churches) which basically asked him to leave because he was being disruptive.

The point to be made is that the church is not served well by exploiting the ambiguity of the Discipline. The church has been very intentional and specific about its stand on sexual practice. It has a long-standing tradition of allowing the plain meanings of the Discipline to bind United Methodists together as a church. It can only be understood as obfuscation and divisive when progressives want to argue that these meanings should be negated because words and phrases like "self-avowed" and "practicing" and "status" cannot legally be defined, or when portions of the Discipline are used in ways other than how they were intended. It is no wonder we are presently dealing with a lack of trust in our leadership and in the church as an institution. Integrity seems in short supply.

The Judicial Council will be dealing with the requests of the progressives at its October meeting.

– By Dr. Riley Case, The Confessing Movement; received by e-mail.

Annual Conference Reports

South Carolina. More than 1,800 clergy, laity, spouses and guests gathered June 10–13 in Florence, S.C., “For the Least of These,” the theme of this year’s South Carolina Annual Conference with Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor presiding. Among the significant resolutions passed are a retiree health care liability plan, which gradually reduces the maximum subsidy from the current 70% to 50% by 2020. Other business included resolutions on the sin of racism, on sexual activity among teens, on immigration reform and on government policy to protect vulnerable children. Membership is 237,764, down 1,309.

– Matt Brodie, director of communications; as reported in UMNewscope, September 1, 2010.

Southwest Texas. The 152nd session of the Southwest Texas Annual Conference celebrated the growth of the conference through new church plants, rejoiced in existing churches’ financial health and welcomed and bade goodbye to newly ordained ministers and those who were retiring. About 1,500 clergy and lay delegates met inside the American Bank Center in Corpus Christi June 2–5 for Joe Vasquez, chair of the conference Council on Finance and Administration, said that 89% of the conference churches paid 100 percent of their apportionments. A conference apportionment task force, commissioned last year, reported research findings, which included rejecting a proposed tithing formula. Under the current apportionment formula the more financially capable churches are able to help support the needs of the less financially capable churches, said Task Force chair, Ralph Thompson.

Ellen Ely, from the conference pension board, assured delegates that retirement benefits will not suddenly cease, although the market is volatile.” The Rev. David Seilheimer, secretary and treasurer of the conference, reported that the church membership and worship attendance continue to decrease but that, financially, churches are strong, with assets exceeding liabilities. Membership is 118,783, down 415.

– Rachel L.

Toalson, Southwest Texas Annual Conference

Upper New York. The newest annual conference in The UMC has taken another major step on its journey. The Upper New York Annual Conference was voted into existence on June 19 in a union of four former annual conferences in New York State, with Bishop Marcus Matthews as its first resident episcopal leader. The second gathering of the nearly 2,000 UMs from 940 churches in upstate New York met under the theme “In the Name of Love: We Journey Together.” Surrounded by the pillars lining Empire State Plaza, members gathered for a Service of Remembrance for victims of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks immediately before the daylong session, which included the tolling of the bells to mark the times when the World Trade Center towers were attacked. Business included discussion of the budget with a presentation by conference treasurer and director of administration Sherri Mackey. Following questions from the floor on how emerging ministries will be funded and on how Ministry Shares, or apportionments, will be billed in 2011, members of the Upper New York Annual Conference overwhelmingly adopted the \$10.7 million budget. Membership is 185,000.

– Maidstone Mulenga, Upper New York Ann. Conf. dir. of comm. Forthcomin; *as reported in UMNewscope, September 29, 2010.*

West Ohio. Under the banner “Love in Action: Building Bridges Out of Poverty,” the 41st session of the West Ohio Annual Conference (June 7–10, Lakeside) was presided over by Resident Bishop Bruce R. Ough as we celebrated the multiple ways the congregations of the West Ohio Conference are engaged in ministry with those living in poverty. In a variety of teaching sessions, members learned how to help sisters and brothers build bridges out of poverty. The conference began with much sadness due to the news of storms and tornadoes in Northwest Ohio, resulting in community-wide destruction and the death of one of our student local pastors. Ough’s episcopal address instructed that, “As UMs, we have a particular DNA that guides how we join in God’s work in Christ. We proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns. We proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners. This creative tension defines Methodism.” The most dramatic and visible evidence of inspiring love occurred when nearly 2,000 members in the audience came forward to sign pledge cards on which they committed to find ways to build bridges out of poverty. In addition, the “Love First” Miracle Offering brought nearly \$172,000 for Grace Children’s Hospital in Haiti and the UM Children’s Home in West Ohio, and 20,000 pounds of potatoes for distribution in West Ohio by the Society of St. Andrew. In other conference business members adopted a resolution to support abolishing human trafficking, adopted a resolution to support fair trade, adopted a resolution to revise the Ministerial Sexual Ethics Policy and reviewed a report from the West Ohio Divestment Task Force.

Membership is 205,889, down 6,225. – Lisa Streight, director of communications; *as reported in UMNewscope, August 25, 2010.*

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Think Positively and Never Give Up," – Weeks Parker

Global Outlook

God made a lot of days so you wouldn't try to do every thing at once.

– Seriously, Life is a Laughing Matter, by Tom Mullen, p. 38.

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Africa. African Churches Desire Equal Voice

African UMs desire a greater voice, more sharing of power and the ability to adapt some church rules to local contexts. And a study committee exploring the global nature of the denomination is listening. After meeting with church leaders throughout the continent, the Committee to Study the Worldwide Nature of The UMC decided to work toward goals that include defining the covenant that unites the global church, promoting greater regional connections, exploring how the Book of Discipline can be adapted for local needs and examining the U.S. and international roles of general agencies.

Throughout their visit, committee leaders were encouraged by the church in Africa’s great commitment to and desire to serve The UMC. “We understood over and over again that it was a vision to not only serve the needs of people in this country but also to be engaged in worldwide ministries,” said Bishop Scott Jones, study committee chair.

The committee studying the global nature of the church visited Africa in August as part of its mission to hear representative voices throughout the denomination before it makes its recommendations to the 2012 General Conference. Divided in four groups, study committee members listened to church representatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The committee asked three basic questions:

“How is God at work in your church to accomplish the mission of The UMC?”

What are the things that are working well?
If you could change one thing in The UMC, what would you change?"

The whole committee then met in Abidjan on Aug. 19–22, where members shared their experiences and heard from leaders of the Côte d’Ivoire Annual Conference. After listening to African leaders speak of their desire to be of greater service to the denomination, the study committee assigned four goals to subcommittees: 1) develop a covenant that helps the church express its theology in ways that serve the global church; 2) explore ways to provide greater regional connections; 3) prepare recommendations on adaptations to the Book of Discipline to meet local needs; 4) study whether general agencies are working globally or just for the U.S.

“Coming to Africa to hear the voice of the church is something that we need to celebrate,” Bishop Benjamin Boni of Côte d’Ivoire said in his welcoming words to the committee. That optimism extended throughout the consultation. Bishop John Innis of Liberia, a study committee member, said the African visit promises “great things for the church by the time the committee complete its work.”

“African realities are different from those of Asia or America. The study committee’s concern to hear all parties involved in the global church needs to be praised, all the more so since we all have certain features in common as well as specificities,” Boni said. “We must continue to live the global dimension of the denomination while taking into account our specific characteristics. This is extremely important.”

– Isaac Broune, UM communicator based in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire; as reported in UMNewscope, September 8, 2010.

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No man is obliged to do as much as he can do; a man has to have part of his life to himself.

– Seriously, Life is a Laughing Matter, by Tom Mullen, p. 39