

Monthly Update

September 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This Monthly Update gives brief summaries on the meetings of the 58 Annual Conferences that have been held across our United Methodist Church, both in our country and from around the world. This year each of the summaries contains much less information than we have published in past years because we devoted more attention to Hurricane Harvey that has recently devastated my native state of Texas. I have included some of the Facebook posts that speak to what is going on there and how it relates to some of the turbulence in our society at this time. If you wish to receive more information from what happened in the meeting of your particular Annual Conference, please either call, write, or e-mail that request and I shall print out the complete report and send it to you, either in hard copy (the “old-fashioned way”) by postal mail, facsimile (FAX), or by e-mail. (There are some things that I still prefer to do the “old-fashioned way”.)

With the recent advent of Hurricane Harvey (that is going on even now as I write this), I had posted as “Hurricane Harvey #3” in “The Good Stuff” section of the Update a commentary to the author’s words to clarify the political turmoil: “This really does show the heart of the American people. There are those who are deliberately trying to divide us, cause chaos, and ultimately to engineer the collapse of our country. We need to confront that head-on and continue in the way we have as a country are as a people – in seeing the hearts of others, who they really are, and not letting ourselves be manipulated by those who would turn us against other ethnic groups.”

Recently we have seen the turbulence that went on in Charlottesville, Virginia – the pitting of a “White supremacist group” with a “Black Lives Matter (BLM)/anti-fascist group (Antifa) that resulted in violence. When I heard about that happening, it reminded me of what I had read in history books about the turbulence between the Marxists and fascists in the streets of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s; I remember that some of those “incidents” were fomented by the Nazis to seize control of the control. I learned some interesting things about the Charlottesville episode. Prior to the “march” members of both groups were seen getting off six charter books – together. Another is that one of leader identified of the “White supremacist group” was associated with the “Occupy Wall Street” group that was prominent a few years back, a far-left movement wanting to bring down the free enterprise system. It is alleged that the BLM group is supported by George Soros, the atheistic Hungarian billionaire who has a sordid history all the way back to the 1930s.

It appears that there may be an “unlikely” link between Antifa who are grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideology and Sal Alinsky methodology, the radical Islamic movement, and the radical homosexual movement; all have a desire to bring down America as we know it. Indeed, in one of my books *The Issues @ Hand* I had included a chapter on one of the movements entitled “The Homosexual Activists’ War against Christians”. These movements strive to create turmoil in our society by getting diverse groups to fight each other, that results in chaos; this foments the racial strife we see. Then a crisis point is reached, the “system” of government is overwhelmed, and the social order collapses and descends into anarchy. We need to understand its roots, methodology, and purposes so that we can oppose it. The way that we fight against it is by informing ourselves, informing others, and being on our knees in prayer for what is happening in our country.

One joy we received in July was meeting some of our long-time supporters from Wisconsin at the quadrennial meeting of the General Commission on United Methodist Men in Indianapolis.

Please pray as to how you might support our ministry – as this special couple has; it has been a lean summer financially, especially during this past August.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris, Executive Director

September 2017 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

It does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless, minority; keen to set brush fires in people's minds...

– Samuel Adams

* * * * *

The Good Stuff

+ *Wise words from a wise friend...!* “I was mulling over all this hoopla about the [Confederate] statues being torn down of guys that fought for what they believed in. Then I thought of Jesus and the “statue” he believed in. The Cross.

We have been eliminating God, (Ten Commandments) from the very places that we get the laws. Court houses, government offices and the like. We have eliminated millions of babies, via abortion, that could have contributed to our economic stability. A few of these babies could have grown up and discovered cures for terrible diseases. We have taken God's definition of marriage and perverted it. We have politicians in office that lie and steal our tax dollars.

There is NO discipline within our schools systems all the way through universities. We the people are watching 2 Timothy 3: 1-4 “You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friend, be reckless and puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God.

Take me to the cross.”

– Received from Ms. Linda Von Lindenberg Heath! August 19, 2017

+ *Hurricane Harvey comment #1. The Good Thing Harvey Washed Away* – “There's not much in the world I can truly say I hate. But I hate Harvey. We have been sitting here for more hours than I can begin to count being brutally lashed by his seemingly never ending fury. I would be lying if I said it wasn't scary...terrifying...at times, but we are among the lucky ones. We are safe and dry.

Harvey has taken so much from so many. Homes, lives, hopes, jobs—all washed into the Gulf of Mexico by his relentless anger. As the horrifying images and desperate needs flash across my screen in endless and quick succession, I sit here with tears in my eyes. Where do you begin? I have never felt so helpless. My neighbors are in dire straits and I can't do anything but pray. It's a terrible feeling.

Pregnant women and their toddlers stuck on roofs waiting hours upon hours for help. A friend with seven feet of water in her home swimming for her life to a rescue boat. An elderly couple trapped in their attic with rising water. A man drowned as he clung desperately to a shopping cart return in a parking lot.

Thousands stranded. Thousands homeless. Hundreds in need of rescue. No water. No food. No end in sight.

My own church (Church Project) has taken in tons of evacuees with even more buses on the way, and we (my family) can't even get out to help them because of devastating flooding and road closures all around us. It's a feeling of hopeless, helpless heartbreak that I can't even begin to express.

My heart is bleeding.

Yet, in the deluge, there is also something incredibly beautiful emerging. You see, Harvey has washed away something else—hatred.

Look at these pictures! [Ones that were posted on Facebook] The only color in greater Houston today is red, white, and blue. The only religion on our streets is love. There is no race, no creed, no gender, no socioeconomic classes, no nationality, no sexual orientation, no religion –

There are only people helping people. There are only strangers opening their homes for strangers. There are only men and women risking their precious lives for other precious lives.

Today, no matter who you worship, the color of your skin, where you were born...we are all Texans.

For a stunning moment the world has stopped fighting against each other and started fighting for each other.

It's breathtaking.

Take note world. You don't need to wait for a devastating disaster to love. You don't need to wait until your neighbors are drowning to reach across the color, religious, nationality, political boundaries. This world is suffering a different kind of storm, one far more dangerous than Harvey—a storm of hatred. Let's refuse to let it break us.

Do it now—in honor of Texans, love your neighbor fiercely today, tomorrow, and every day thereafter.

And Texans, I beg you to remember this day every time you gaze upon your neighbor. If you would go to any lengths to save them today, then let's go to every length to love them for endless tomorrows.

Harvey, you can take a lot from us—and you have. But you can't take our spirit. In fact, you have given us a glimmer of something beautiful –

Love.

We are Texas.

Beautifully, heart-brokenly yours,

Angelia”

[Note: These 4 comments were printed without editing. Hurricane Harvey later became a tropical storm (TS). – AOM].

– Facebook post; August 29, 2017

+ ***Hurricane Harvey comment #2.*** “Although the flooding and severe weather conditions are currently ongoing in Houston and the metropolitan area, let's not forget Rockport, Tx; Palacios, Tx; Bay City, Tx; Victoria, Tx; Port Lavaca, Tx; Port Aransas, Tx; and Corpus Christi, Tx. These communities were also devastated when Hurricane Harvey made landfall on Friday night. This post is NOT in any way to take away from what the flood victims in Houston have had to deal with and what recovery is yet to occur, but please remember the families and communities to our south, south east and or south west on the gulf coast. Further, let's not forget Beaumont and the State of Louisiana as TS Harvey makes its way there. The past several days have been exhausting. I have family and friends in each City noted and my heart aches with the thought of the loss of life and property. HOWEVER, I am most encouraged with the outpouring of compassion shown among fellow Texans. The number of volunteers willing to put their lives on hold or to place their life in danger to help their fellow man and the amount of donations made are as unprecedented as the Storm itself. I pray we don't forget. That we don't forget how important it is to always show compassion and love. That we don't forget to show each other respect and concern. That we don't forget to always be willing to help one another, in good times and in difficult times. That we do not forget to treat others as we want to be treated. Until next time.” [Note: I am from Palacios, Texas.– AOM]

+ ***Hurricane Harvey comment #3.*** “Okay. Here we go. I want to say this: WE DO NOT NEED THE OPINION FROM...ANYONE ELSE WHO WANTS TO TWIST THIS HURRICANE INTO BEING PRESIDENT TRUMPS FAULT.

I am so sick and tired of people wanting to drive a wedge between black and white, middle class and upper class, Christian and non Christian.

These pictures [as posted on Facebook] show you how we roll in Texas people. Here is some advise: LEARN FROM US. I have seen black men carrying white and Hispanic children and elderly. I've seen white men carrying black elderly women and children. I saw a white man on a airboat holding a baby of a black woman because the baby was 3 weeks old and she handed the baby to him as she got help getting into the boat.

I've seen police officers grabbing naps in the station because relief couldn't get to them and they needed a nap to recharge and go again.

I've seen those who have money dropping off cases of water, diapers, baby food, food and clothes at both shelters and staging areas.

I've seen white men with their own boats going into prominently black communities pulling people to safety and black men with their boats driving thru areas we know as 'red neck' pulling people to safety.

This, people, is America, this is what I, and my co-workers took the badge and swore to serve (both fire, police and emt). Some gave their lives and others gave the best part of their lives.

Wake up America and learn from the best state in the best country in the world.

I remember Katrina when FEMA was nowhere to be found, yet the churches were there. I saw the floods there and Washington drag their feet to declare it a disaster area for assistance. This administration, whether you voted for them or not, like them or not declared Texas a national disaster and FEMA was here before the blunt of Harvey hit.

It is about time we lock arms together, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, male, female and we form together. TOGETHER! The Bible says one can chase 1000 but 2 can chase 10000. Well guess what there are over 8 million hit by this storm and we will join together, cry together, and help each other, not based on our color, religion, economic status or where we live.

I love all of you first responders and those who gave hours in volunteering to help others. And I love Texas and I love America.

And here is my final point: ONLY WE CAN MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. Stop listening to people who only want division and listen to the one who said love your neighbor as yourself. God Bless Texas."

+ ***Hurricane Harvey comment #4.*** "If anyone doubts why Texas is the greatest state in the union and why we carry our chins so cocky and high, please watch the following weeks in the news. After one of worst hurricane to make landfall on the Texas coast in many years, we won't beg for help. We won't blame the president. We won't ask why me. We won't hang our heads. We won't wait for handouts. There will be no looting and --- sure no riots. We don't have time for that...! We will go to work to help rebuild Corpus, Rockport and everywhere else that needs the help.

What you will see is neighbors helping neighbors. Strangers helping strangers. Business donating every asset they can to help rebuild communities. Millions and millions of dollars and countless volunteer hours logged. People helping others with no personal gain to be had. Texans flocking to the coast with no motive other than to help recover and rebuild people who have lost everything. You will see a unity of people willing to do whatever it takes to help others. But ok to be fair ...We may cuss the insurance companies!" [Note: Written like a true Texan. – AOM]

– As posted by Ginger Shearer Hennig; originally authored by Diana Bickham Moehrig.

+ ***Timeless patriotism.*** Woke up this morning and saw our 96 year old neighbor, WW II Vet raising his flag. I'm sure he thought no one was watching but, before he went back inside, he saluted his country's flag. People like this and those who defended to their death the freedoms we enjoy daily, deserve our honor. And the best way to do that is to not forget their sacrifices and allow ourselves to fall into indifference and entitlement. God bless you and yours.

– Posted on Facebook by Larry Rose

Of Interest. *Pray for Brandon Smalls.* "Prayer warriors--God has set a battle before us that will require all of to use every tool He has given us. Our sweet Brandon found out today he must have 5 more weeks of chemo/radiation combo followed by up to a year of weekly chemo. The news is sad to all of us who love him and want him here stirring things up and being the awesome kid we love. God has called us to pray, to fast, to call upon his name. Please send this prayer request to every prayer partner you know. We must join in this battle and ask the Lord to heal Brandon [15 years old]. Pray for his encouragement, his spirit, his will to fight. Pray for his family to endure and to feel His love. Pray. Fast. And then pray some more." – As posted by Mrs. Tammi Peters, head of Fayetteville Christian School, Fayetteville, NC.

(UM) Men. *The annual Duke Day Football Game Sponsored by the North Carolina United Methodist Men.*

What? Duke Day.

When? Saturday October 21st, 2017

Where? Goodson Chapel – Duke University

Duke vs. Pittsburgh

\$25 per person includes worship at Goodson Chapel (Duke Divinity School) followed by a tailgate lunch of hotdogs and hamburgers with all the sides and fixin's. Then, tickets in hand, we will all venture across to Wallace Wade stadium for a great football game. Local UMM groups are encouraged to seek out underprivileged or other youth to sponsor for this day of sharing our faith, enjoying ACC football and just hangin' out. It's also a great opportunity to sponsor kids from your youth group or spend time with your family.

Worship begins at 10:00am (for a noon or 1:00pm game time) Actual game time is set by the ACC about two weeks before the game. (We will let you know)

The guest speaker will be Mr. John Hammett, head coach Northern Durham High school football and a NC Conference Certified Lay Speaker.

We have 175 tickets and we are ready for business. All tickets must be paid for in advance and there can be no refund for unused tickets. Tickets will be handed out when you arrive at Goodson Chapel. So don't come up short on tickets.

TO ORDER TICKETS CONTACT:

Paul Wilson at: pswilson@nccumc.org. Make checks payable to NCCUMM and mail to Paul at

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It's a sad thing when a man believes that he has the gift of preaching but nobody else has the gift of listening.

– Dr. H. A. Ironside

2017 Annual Conference Reports

Of what value is the grace I profess to receive if it does not dramatically change the way that I live? If it doesn't change the way that I live, it will never change my eternal destiny. – Charles Haddon Spurgeon, famous British preacher

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2017 Annual Conference Reports. Below are reports of the main events and happenings from this year's annual conference sessions around the connection. An equal number of clergy and lay members attend sessions for worship, fellowship, and to conduct business. Sessions include reports of past and ongoing work; adoption of future goals, programs and budgets; ordination of clergy as deacons and elders; and election of delegates to Jurisdictional and General Conferences (every 4 years). The bishop presides over these meetings. [Note: We will not be including much of the information due to a shortage of space, but mainly the location, dates, themes, and statistics. – AOM]

Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference. The Alabama-West Florida Conference met June 4-7, 2017, at Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, with Bishop David Graves presiding. Membership stands at 137,618, down 2,253 or 1 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 61,273, down 2 percent.

Church school attendance 22,011, down seven percent. Professions or reaffirmations were 2,514, down 700.

– Submitted by Mary Catherine Phillips, director of communications

Alaska Annual Conference. The Alaska Conference, a missionary conference, met June 2-3, 2017, at Chugiak United Methodist Church in Chugiak, Alaska. Officiating was Bishop Elaine Stanovsky. She told the conference: "Our why is life and our how is love." [The conference] disavowed the Western Jurisdictional

Conference resolution “The Intersectionality of Justice” in its call for divestment from firms involved oil and gas exploration. The Alaska Conference committed to reducing its environmental impact through energy efficiency, but noted that the state of Alaska is highly dependent on taxes from oil and gas companies. Membership stands at 3,415, down 20 from the previous year.

– Submitted by the Rev. Jim Doepken

Arkansas Annual Conference. The 2017 Arkansas Annual Conference met June 18-21 at the Bank of the Ozarks Arena, Hot Springs, Arkansas. Officiating bishop: Gary E. Mueller. Resolution on Adoption – the annual conference accepted a resolution on adoption and the need for more foster homes and increased adoption rates in Arkansas. The body agreed that every local church in the Arkansas Annual Conference be encouraged to support adoption efforts through the recruitment of potential adoptive parents and the celebration of National Adoption Awareness Month in November 2017.

Membership for 2016 stands at 131,477, down (less than 1 percent) from 132,258 in 2015

– The Rev. Martha Taylor, Marketing and Training, Arkansas Conference.

Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. When Bishop LaTrelle Easterling pronounced the 233rd session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference open, she made history as the first woman to lead the 159,000 members and 1,050 clergy who make up the 628 churches of the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Membership stands at 159,048, down 3 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 56,235, down 5 percent.

– Melissa Lauber and Erik Alsgaard, Communications, Baltimore-Washington Conference

Bulgaria-Romania Provisional Conference. The 65th meeting of Bulgaria-Romania Provisional Conference took place March 30-April 2, 2017, in Pleven, Bulgaria. This year’s annual conference gathering offered valuable insight into the church life in Bulgaria and Romania, summarized by the Rev. Marietjie Odendaal, a delegate of the Switzerland-France-North Africa Annual Conference. She discussed how The United Methodist Church in Bulgaria and Romania reflects on its identity, particularly in regard to worship; how the church is looking for ways to deal with administrative barriers and how both males and females are appreciated and how particularly the contributions of women are valued.

“I heard from both clergy and lay how they invite socially excluded people, particularly Roma, and how they deal with the challenges connected with this ministry,” Odendaal said. She also noted “how hard they work when they start or revive a new church and only have a few co-workers and how ingenious they proceed when it comes to keeping their churches above water.” In his report, Superintendent Daniel Topalski described Biblical literacy, an open and authentic fellowship in the local churches, a new access to Holy Communion and an active prayer life as higher priorities than administrative and financial issues.

A special highlight of the annual conference was the ordination of Vladimir Zhelezov and Milen Stefanov as elders. In addition, Jessica Morris-Ivanova, who is married to a Bulgarian local pastor, was confirmed as pastor on probation.

An annual conference gathering is more than a matter of duty, which one wants to get over and done with as smoothly as possible. Rather, it is an opportunity to experience how diverse the shape and life of The United Methodist Church is. This, Odendaal emphasized, is “an expression of the richness of the kingdom of God.”

– The Rev. Marietjie Odendaal, and Urs Schweizer, assistant to Bishop Patrick Streiff

California-Nevada Annual Conference. The California-Nevada Conference ordained the first Fijian elder in The United Methodist Church and welcomed the president of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma as well as the queen of Tonga at its annual meeting on June 21-24. Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño told the 169th session of the California-Nevada Annual Conference: “Recommit every single day to be fully the Lord’s..” Membership stands at 72,266, down 1,017 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 28,907, down 1,021.

– Larry R. Hygh Jr., for California-Nevada, 370 congregations in Northern California and Northern Nevada.

California-Pacific Conference. Songs of praise and celebration ushered in the Spirit of God and enlivened the hearts of some 1,200 United Methodists gathered at the University of Redlands for the 33rd Annual Session of the California-Pacific Conference of The United Methodist Church. This was Bishop Grant J. Hagiya's first conference session since returning to the California-Pacific Conference as episcopal leader. Membership stands at 69,282, down 3 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 41,978, down 3 percent from 2015.

– James Kang, California-Pacific Conference director of communications

Czech Republic-Slovakia Conference. About 60 members of the Czech Republic-Slovakia Conference met in Prague during Ascension weekend, May 26-28. The conference has for several years limited the number of reports, leaving more time for sharing, discussions and mutual learning. The leaders hope that this will help the members of the conference get new inspiration for their respective ministries in the local churches and that it will also encourage them to support each other. At this year's conference, some selected local churches introduced their ministries. These presentations were received with much appreciation and many questions. The reports were closed with a time of prayer for the ministries at the various places. On Saturday afternoon, there were conversations in small groups focusing on the episcopal address of Central and Southern Europe Area Bishop Patrick Streiff.

The delegates split up to groups dealing with the different questions, which can be found in the episcopal address, and the conversations proved to be so intensive that the groups needed much more time than it was originally planned. The episcopal address can be used in group conversations of different kinds and is already available in several languages.

Two pastors joined The United Methodist Church after having served as pastors in other churches for some years. In Slovakia, the Rev. Patrik Hipp was welcomed and commissioned as pastor on probation. In the past, he had been working as pastor of a Pentecostal-oriented denomination. In the Czech Republic, the Rev. Lev Shults was commissioned as local pastor. Shults originally came from the Russian Baptists and later founded a Russian-speaking Baptist congregation in Plzen, which met in the facilities of The United Methodist Church. When he wanted to start a similar ministry in Prague, The United Methodist Church once again was the only church willing to offer him a room to meet.

Because of this openness, his relationship with The United Methodist Church deepened, and he decided last year to become a United Methodist pastor. Shults is momentarily the chairperson of an interdenominational association of approximately 100 Russian-speaking Protestant churches in the geographical area of the European Union. In Prague alone, there are about 200,000 Russian citizens, and their number is steadily growing.

It was a reason for joy and thankfulness that there are an increasing number of church members willing to be educated and commissioned as lay speakers and lay preachers. In many congregations, lay preachers and speakers are a most valuable support to the various ministries. The number of professing members has remained stable over the past years, which was only possible because of the regular admission of new members.

The conference will meet from May 25 to 27, 2018, in Slovakia.--
Zurich

– Bishop Patrick Streiff,

Dakotas Annual Conference. Over 560 members of the Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church gathered in Bismarck, North Dakota to “Encounter the Spirit: Live Expectantly!” with Bishop Bruce R. Ough, Dakotas-Minnesota Area, presiding. The body also voted on the constitutional amendments from General Conference 2016.

The 2018 budget was approved at the amount of \$4,418,773 was approved, a slight increase of 1.3 percent compared to the 2017 budget total of \$4,361,252. There is a 5.4 percent decrease in the cost to the churches for pensions and insurance in the 2018 budget. The overall budget for 2018 will see an expected decrease of 1.5 percent or \$108,546.

Membership stands at 35,717, down 269 from the previous year.

– Doreen Gosmire, director of communications, Dakotas Conference

Desert Southwest Annual Conference. The 33rd Desert Southwest Annual Conference session was held on June 14-17, at the Phoenix Renaissance Glendale Hotel & Spa in Glendale, Arizona. The officiating bishop was Bishop Robert T. Hoshibata, episcopal leader of the Phoenix Area (Desert Southwest Conference). Moved and touched by the prevalence of gun violence in our nation, Bishop Bob wore an orange stole during the opening of the 2017 Annual Conference session of the Desert Southwest Conference as a symbol of the desire to end gun violence and to bring about sensible ways of making changes not to take away guns but to end gun violence. The stole had a green slash to represent hope.

“It is today my hope that we can do something as a church and as citizens not necessarily to curb our right to bear arms, but to make some decisions that say, some ways of treating one another are not Christ-like. If there is a way we can eliminate the kind of violence we have seen ... Let’s find a way to be more sensible about our gun laws.”

Membership stands at 30,948, down 3.7 percent from the previous year.

– Christina Dillabough, director of communications, Desert Southwest Conference

East Ohio Annual Conference. Bishop Tracy S. Malone presided over her first annual conference when 656 clergy members, and 742 lay members gathered at Lakeside Chautauqua on the shore of Lake Erie. East Ohio Conference statistics: 144,133 – East Ohio Conference membership, down 3,748 from last year. 53,325 – Average weekly worship attendance, down 1,844 from last year. 1,982 – Professions of faith, down seven from last year. Closed Churches:

Beallsville United Methodist Church (Southern Hills District)

Beech Grove United Methodist Church (Southern Hills District)

Branch United Methodist Church (Three Rivers District)

Goodyear Heights United Methodist Church (Canal District)

Guernsey United Methodist Church (Three Rivers District)

Living Hope United Methodist Church (Canal District)

Sand Hill United Methodist Church (Firelands District)

Simpson United Methodist Church (Ohio Valley District).

– Rick Wolcott, director of communications for the East Ohio Conference.

Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference. The Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference met June 15-17, at the Expo Center in Oaks, Pennsylvania. Bishop Peggy Johnson, in her opening sermon, urged members to immerse themselves in fervent, faithful prayer to combat “discouragement,” “distractions” and the “seductive temptation” of excessive “self-determination” that turns our focus away from obediently pursuing our disciple-making, world-changing mission for Jesus Christ. Membership stands at 99,930, down 2,898 from the previous year (102,828).

Worship attendance stands at 35,218, down 1,772 from the previous year (36,990).

Church school attendance stands at 9,880, down 645 from the previous year (10,525).

– John W. Coleman Jr., director of Communications

Florida Annual Conference. The Florida Annual Conference met June 8-10 in Orlando, Florida. Officiating bishop: Kenneth H. Carter. Theme: Revive Us Again. Reduced the number of districts from nine to eight. Voted on constitutional amendments. Discontinued 16 churches. A resolution calling on the state of Florida to give all Florida drivers the opportunity to apply for a driver’s license. Currently, the state requires that immigration status be a determinant of a person’s eligibility to apply for a drivers’ license, which means almost 1 million unlicensed drivers are the roads. The intent of the resolution was to welcome [Note: “Illegal” – AOM] immigrant neighbors and make roads safer for all of God’s children.

- A resolution that the conference commit to work to eliminate racism and violence directed toward newly arriving migrants from all parts of the world and express opposition to any immigration policy that excludes refugees solely on the basis of their religion or national origin. The resolution encouraged all churches to educate and equip its members to provide hospitality and welcome to migrants and refugees in their communities.
- A resolution called for an end to the death penalty in Florida and recommending that individual churches and members support advocacy efforts toward this goal.
- A resolution identifying mass incarceration as a critical human and civil rights issue in the United States because of the disparate impact on and disenfranchisement of people of color, youth, and people with limited economic resources. The resolution reaffirmed the commitment of the Florida Conference to speak and act prophetically to disrupt and abolish the growing prison industrial complex in the United States. The resolution said that the Florida Conference, its Social Justice Ministry and local congregations are encouraged to provide opportunities for education, mobilization, public witness, and advocate for public policies that will advocate against mass incarceration.
- The conference resolved to oppose any state or federal legislation that seeks to restrict the right to address injustice through boycotts, divestment and sanctions and joins the Rabbinical Council of Jewish Voice for Peace in calling on our elected officials “to resist efforts to stifle the movement toward justice for Palestinians through the current wave of ‘anti-BDS’ legislation.” The resolution required the conference secretary to write letters to the U.S. president, the Florida governor, the congressional representatives and the members of the legislature of Florida (a total of 191 letters), informing those elected officials of this resolution and attaching the full text.
- A resolution supporting Black Lives Matter: A Movement for All Methodists by sharing awareness; supporting and encouraging our congregations to be safe spaces and sanctuary for peaceful protesters, participate in and host sacred conversations and dialogue on race relations and inclusion, and be spiritual allies in prayer, for God to enable the pursuit of justice through those who take a stand and lift their voices for justice.
- A resolution combatting the erosion of human dignity, which called on the people and the churches of the conference to speak out about injustice and the erosion of human dignity, committing to doing everything possible to ensure that all persons are afforded their dignity and human rights. The conference treasurer reported that local church membership was 239,000 in 2016, down 7,000 or 2.8 percent from 2015. – Gretchen Hastings, director of Connectional Relations

Great Plains Annual Conference. The Great Plains Annual Conference met June 7-10, in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Officiating bishop: Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. Membership stands at 212,313, down 3,376 from the previous year.
– Todd Seifert, director of communications

Greater New Jersey Conference. The 2017 Greater New Jersey Annual Conference met May 21-23 at The Wildwoods Convention Center, Wildwood, New Jersey. Officiating bishop: Bishop John Schol. Approved a \$900,000 budget cut and a new Shared Ministry formula that will save money for congregations for years to come. Membership stands at 87,692, down 1,542 from the previous year. —Josh Kinney, Greater New Jersey Conference editorial manager

Holston Annual Conference. The Holston Annual Conference gathered June 11-14 with Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor presiding at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Under the theme “Behold,” 1,946 members represented Holston’s 880 congregations in east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, and north Georgia. Membership stands at 162,288, down 1,063 from the previous year. – The Rev. Carol Wilson, Director of Communications

Hungary Provisional Conference. The 2017 meeting of the Hungary Provisional Conference was held April 20 to 23, 2017, in Dombóvár. One day prior to this event, on April 19, 2017, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new church building in Miskolc had been organized. Miskolc United Methodist Church had been planning the construction of a new church building for 15 years. Finally, the long-expected groundbreaking ceremony could take place. The new church building will be constructed on the same property where the old one served the church. This was not the original plan, but after 10 years of unsuccessful attempts to build a church on a new property situated closer to the center of the city (there were too many objections of neighbors), the church leaders decided to remain at the old place.

They discovered that it will be much easier than expected to build a purposeful, beautiful church with sanctuary, group rooms and a pastor's apartment. During the upcoming months, the congregation will gather in the nearby facilities of an Adventist church. Ecumenical guests and a regional TV station were present at the groundbreaking ceremony. According to the plans, the church should be structurally complete by the end of this year. For the completion of the interior, however, the church still needs funds.

One day later, the meeting of Hungary Provisional Annual Conference started. It was the first such conference under the leadership of the new superintendent László Khaled. Against the background of the motto of this year, "To understand what the Lord's will is, Ephesians 5:17," he addressed the challenges and possibilities of a missionary church work on a local level. Besides the church council, there is also a mission council in Hungary, which pools a number of different ministries. This mission council helps the various groups to work on the same themes and to aim at the same target. The conference approved a suggestion from the mission council to official declare Jan. 20 as Spouse's Day. The council wanted to recognize the work of the spouses of pastors who often provide their invaluable support in many regards, but whose faithful and committed service is often not appreciated and esteemed.

In addition to many discussion items related to the specific situation in Hungary, the developments in the worldwide church and the work of the Commission On a Way Forward led to an intensive discussion on homosexuality and the unity of the church.

The change of generations in the church is continuing. At the 2017 Annual Conference meeting, the Rev. Mihály Sztupkai retired and the Rev. Donát Gyurkó was ordained elder. Tamás Szuhánszky was accepted as probationary pastor, and Dániel Vadászi was recommended for theological studies at the Lutheran Faculty in Budapest. This process of passing on the responsibility to a younger generation is shaped by an amazing mutual appreciation.

The next provisional conference meeting will take place April 19-22, 2018.

– Central and Southern Europe Episcopal Area Bishop Patrick Streiff

Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference. The Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference gathered around the theme, "Let's Get Fired Up...for Kids," on June 8-10 at the Peoria Civic Center. The conference centered on prayer as the conference welcomed its new bishop, Frank J. Beard. The Rev. Terry Teykl was the Friday Morning Manna speaker, preached in the clergy session and spoke at Saturday's Community Prayer Breakfast at Peoria Bethel United Methodist Church. Membership stands at 123,810 in 2016, down 3,282 from 2015. Worship attendance stands at 53,560, down 4,114. — Paul Black, director of communications ministries

The Indiana Annual Conference. The Indiana Annual Conference opened with vibrant worship along with a welcome and call to session from Bishop Julius C. Trimble. Membership stands at 189,400 down less than 1 percent from the previous year; average worship attendance stands at 96,530, down 2 percent from the previous year; Christian formation groups, 88,340 down 2 percent; Professions of Faith, 3,105 down 2 percent; Baptisms, 13,748 down 9 percent.

Number of persons engaged in mission 48,813, a 16 percent increase. – Skyler E. Nimmons, Indiana Conference

Iowa Annual Conference. With the theme "Creating Difference Makers," the 2017 Iowa Annual Conference met June 10-12 at the Iowa Events Center in Des Moines. Bishop Laurie Haller resident bishop, presided over

her first annual conference, where 674 clergy and 796 lay members gathered at the center. Membership stands at 158,056, down 2 percent from 2015. Worship attendance stands at an average of 47,691 weekly, down 3 percent from 2015.

– Liz Winders, associate director of communications, Iowa Conference

Kentucky Annual Conference. The 2017 Kentucky Annual Conference took place June 12-14 at the Sloan Convention Center in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Bishop Leonard Fairley officiated. Membership stands at 150,656, down 660 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 50,447, down 1,862. Church school attendance stands at 21,194, down 1,317. Professions and reaffirmations of faith for 2016 1,655, down 299 from 1,954 in 2015.

– Cathy Bruce, associate director of connectional ministries and communications

Louisiana Annual Conference. AC2017: “Bold Imagination” was held June 7-10, with more than 1,000 United Methodists from throughout Louisiana gathered in the Gold Dome at Centenary College in Shreveport. Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey reflected on a tumultuous 2016, which saw police shootings and one of the largest natural disasters to ever hit the state. Current membership stands at 118,259, up from 118,194 last year. Current worship attendance is 37,621, down from 39,124 last year. – Todd Rossnagel, director of Communication Strategies, Louisiana Conference

Memphis Annual Conference. “Sent to Serve: God and Neighbor” was the theme for the 2017 Memphis Annual Conference held June 4-6, in Collierville, Tennessee, with Bishop William T. (Bill) McAlilly presiding. McAlilly is the resident bishop for the Nashville Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church that includes the Memphis (West Tennessee and Western Kentucky) and Tennessee (Middle Tennessee) Conferences. The annual conference approved a budget of \$6,058,671 for mission and ministry in 2018. This is a \$2,075,585 decrease (25.5 percent) from 2017.

Worship attendance stands at 27, 073, down 3 percent from 2015. – Lane Gardner Camp, director of communications

Michigan Annual Conference (Detroit and West Michigan conferences). New location. New bishop. New conference on the horizon. The Michigan Annual Conference promised to make history, and it did during its session in Acme, Michigan, June 1-4, 2017. On June 1, Bishop David A. Bard presided over his first annual conference business session since his appointment to the Michigan Area last July in Peoria, Illinois. Detroit Conference membership stands at 76,786, down 4,268; West Michigan Conference membership stands at 52,848, down 1,968.

– Kay DeMoss, senior editor, Michigan Area

Minnesota Annual Conference. “Here is the gospel truth: When our hearts are filled with the fullness of God... they overflow with love,” Bishop Bruce R. Ough said in his Episcopal Address to members of the 163rd session of the Minnesota Annual Conference, which took place June 20-22 in St. Cloud. “That is what happened at Pentecost. This is what gave rise to the Acts 2 church. This is what fueled the Christ movement. When the God-shaped emptiness that only God can fill is filled with the fullness of God, everything is turned upside-down.” The number of professing church members within the Minnesota Conference as of the end of 2016 was 62,264, down 3 percent from the previous year.

– Christa Meland, director of communications, Minnesota Conference

Missouri Annual Conference. The Missouri Conference met June 9-12 in Springfield, Missouri. Bishop Robert Farr presided. Membership stands at 155,158, down 2,624 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 72,858, down 2,021. Church school attendance stands at 22,676, down 114. – Submitted by Fred Koenig, publications editor

New England Annual Conference. The New England Annual Conference held its session on June 15-17 at the Radisson Hotel, Manchester, New Hampshire, with Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar presiding. The theme was “Vital Conversations: Race,” and guiding Scripture was Psalm 137:4 (NIV): “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

Bishop Devadhar’s Episcopal Address was titled “Let’s Not Throw Away Our Shot,” inspired by lyrics from the musical “Hamilton.” Main actions/resolutions:

Passed the 2018 budget

Opted to send the 2016 Delegation to the 2019 Special Session of General Conference

Supported celebration of Share Your Call Sunday, the 4th Sunday after Easter, in local churches

RS-17-212 Expanding and Supporting Sanctuary: Brought by the Board of Church and Society, this resolutions states, in part: “The New England Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church declares itself in solidarity with individuals and families regardless of their refugee or immigration status or documentation, and those who come to their aid.”

RS – 17 – 209 – Avoid Purchase of Hewlett Packard Products

RS – 17 – 210 – Consider Investing in Wespath’s Equity Social Values Plus Fund (ESVPPF)

RS – 17 – 211 – Protecting the Right to Peacefully Address Injustice Through Boycotts, Divestment, And Sanctions

Membership stands at 81,231 down 3.5 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 27,163, down 4 percent. Church school attendance stands at 5,158, down from 5,550 in 2015

– Beth DiCocco, director of communications for the New England Conference.

New Mexico Annual Conference. The 142nd Session of the New Mexico Annual Conference was held at the Las Cruces Convention Center in Las Cruces, New Mexico from May 31-June 2 with Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe presiding. Membership decreased 1,210 to 31,194 from 2015 to 2016. Professions of faith stood at 429, 54 fewer than last year.

– Alli J. Newsom, New Mexico Conference communications director

New York Annual Conference. The 218th session of the New York Annual Conference was filled with worship, celebration and business for the clergy and laity from New York and Connecticut. Presiding over his first conference as episcopal leader of the New York Area, Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton wasted no time in the “getting down to business” at opening worship on June 7. Membership: 98,408, down from 99,547 in 2015 Average worship attendance: 28,295, down from 29,800 in 2015 – Submitted by Rev. Joanne S. Utley, communications coordinator

North Alabama Conference. The North Alabama Annual Conference gathered at the Von Braun Center in Huntsville, Alabama, on June 4-6. Presiding Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett called the conference to order under the theme of “Singing God’s Song in Tune and Rhythm.” Membership stands at 131,088, down 141 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 62,227, down 2,452. – Danette Clifton, director of communication

North Carolina Conference. The North Carolina Annual Conference gathered June 16-18 at the Greenville Convention Center in Greenville, North Carolina. A total of 1,481 people representing 800 churches within eight districts attended. Bishop Hope Morgan Ward presided over the meeting celebrating the quadrennial theme “Generosity in All Seasons” with an emphasis of “Generosity in All Places.” The worship services and presentations centered on God’s generosity to us and our responding generosity to the world. New this year, parts of the conference were streamed via Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/nccumc/videos/10154696976818997/>

<https://www.facebook.com/nccumc/videos/10154695563128997/>

<https://www.facebook.com/nccumc/videos/10154691141493997/>

In other actions, the conference: Approved four resolutions: An Action on Climate Change, Hurricane Matthew Relief: A Call to Care for the Least of These, Road Conditions in Johnston County, North Carolina, Resolution regarding Senate Bill 594: Family/Child Protection & Accountability Act, et. al. Approved \$21,908,352 for the 2019 annual conference budget, a decrease of 1.86 percent from the approved 2018 budget. Membership stands at 226,323, down 2,288 from 2015. The average worship attendance for 2016 was 73,156, down 1,247 from 2015.

– LeeAnne Thornton, communications strategist, North Carolina Conference

North Georgia Annual Conference. In the church there is no "them." There is only "us."--Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson. The 2017 North Georgia Annual Conference session was held June 13-15 at The Classic Center in Athens, Georgia. The annual conference passed a budget of \$22,020,804 for 2018. Annual conference membership: 360,771. Worship attendance: 112,482. Professions or reaffirmations of faith: 5,422. Each of these numbers is down slightly from 2015.

– Sybil Davidson, conference communicator

Northern Illinois Annual Conference. Nearly 900 clergy and laity gathered together at the 178th Northern Illinois Annual Conference from June 4-6 at the Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles, Illinois, to seek and share how God's light is illuminating through our churches, congregations and ministries. This year's annual conference focused on the theme "Light Shines Through... there are cracks in everything that's how the light gets in," based on lyrics from singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen. "The light shines through cracks all over the Northern Illinois Annual Conference," said Bishop Sally Dyck during her episcopal address. Despite doors closing, financial challenges and a rapidly changing religious landscape, Bishop Dyck encouraged local churches to look for the cracks of hope that let the light in. Doc. 700.01, which called for the Northern Illinois Conference to divest from fossil fuels, was referred for further conversation and to be brought back in 2018. Membership in the Northern Illinois Conference stands at 85,350, up 547 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 30,120, or down 1,366. Sunday school attendance stands at 7,836, down 561. For more information and photos from this year's conference visit: www.umcnic.org/AC2017.

– Anne Marie Gerhardt, director of communications

Northwest Texas Conference. The Northwest Texas Conference met June 8-10 at the Overton Hotel and Conference Center in Lubbock, Texas. Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe presided over the 108th session, with more than 500 clergy and laity in attendance. The conference theme was "Sent" based on John 20:21: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'" Membership: 57,473, down about 1,200 from previous year; Current Worship Attendance: 17,793, up 15 from previous year. Professions/reaffirmations of Faith: 669, down 171 from previous year. – Submitted by Angie Brokaw, digital media specialist for Northwest Texas Conference

Oklahoma Annual Conference. United Methodists made a virtual journey with Bishop Jimmy Nunn — from where his pioneer ancestors settled on the Texas Panhandle's caprock; to a church and a university each more than a century old in Oklahoma City; and on to places as far away as Malaysia and Palestine, through Internet live streaming. The stories told during the May 29-June 1 Oklahoma Annual Conference not only traced historic church pathways but also mapped new ones. Oklahoma Conference Treasurer Norma Quinn reported the 2016 Vital Congregation Statistics: 1,715 professions of faith, down by only 105 from the previous year.

– Holly McCray, Oklahoma Conference Communications Ministry

Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference. The Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference met June 8-11 at the Southeast Region Center in Antlers, Oklahoma. Officiating bishop: Bishop James "Jimmy" Nunn officiated his first annual conference with the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference. The conference is held under an open air tabernacle and whole families come to conference. Membership stands at 6029, down 32 from 2015.

Worship attendance stands at 1880, down 132 from 2015. Church school attendance stands at 864, down 48 from 2015.

– Josephine Deere, director of Interpretation and Programs/Connectional Ministries, Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference

Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference. “Do this and you will live!” These words, taken from Luke 10:26-28, formed the theme for the 49th Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference Session. In an historic first, the Oregon-Idaho and Pacific Northwest Conferences met together in shared session June 14-17. The conferences met in both individual and shared plenaries over the days, allowing them to do conference business, and also share in the celebration of inter-conference ministries for church and leadership development. A delegation from the Alaska Conference joined for the Installation of Bishop JW Stanovsky as Presiding Bishop of the Greater Northwest Area, the largest geographic episcopal area in North America. Recognizing the rich cultural heritage of the meeting site along the Columbia River, the conference began with a welcome from Native American tribal members, and each day began with a native blessing. One of the last events of the conference was a “River Witness” held along the banks of the Columbia to bear witness to the suffering of God’s creation, and to offer thanks for the lifegiving power of the river and all creation.

Oregon-Idaho Conference membership stands at 24,634 down 674 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 12,193 down 143. Professions and reaffirmations of faith stand at 410, down 62 from 2015.

– Greg Nelson, Oregon-Idaho Conference, director of communication

Pacific Northwest Annual Conference. The 144th session of the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference took place at the Red Lion on the River — Jantzen Beach in Portland, Oregon, June 14-17. Bishop Elaine JW Stanovsky of the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area was the officiating bishop. This was the first time in recent memory that an annual conference session was held outside of the conference bounds, though admittedly the location in Portland, Oregon was just minutes from the border of Washington State.

Some data points: For this report we were asked to answer the following question: “Did your clergy session approve any openly gay candidates for ministry? If so, how many?” It is certainly a possibility that our clergy session approved one or more “openly gay candidates” for ministry just as it’s likely that several openly heterosexual candidates may have been recommended. Given that our Board of Ordained Ministry reaffirmed its position to give equal consideration to all ministry candidates irrespective of sexual orientation and gender identity, this is not data we collect.

Membership stands at 39,189, down 1,245 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 17,358, down 603.

– Patrick Scriven, Director of Communications & Young People’s Ministries, Pacific Northwest Conference

Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference. This year, as we went “Down to the River to Pray,” both thematically and literally at the Christina Riverfront, the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference experienced worship in new ways during its 233rd session. The current membership is 75,761, down from 78,284 last year. Worship attendance is up to 30,534, a slight increase from last year. Church school attendance in down this year, 7,559, compared to last year’s 8,409.

– Doug Lanter, communications coordinator

Poland Annual Conference. The Poland Annual Conference gathered from June 22-25, 2017, in Katowice, in the south of the country. At this year’s gathering, some important historical decisions were taken: After longstanding, intense discussions, a vast majority approved a new Internal Law, and a woman was ordained deacon – with the understanding that this was a first step on the journey toward the service as an elder.

The beginning was marked by a certain tension: Both clergy and lay members wondered what decisions would be taken on the two big discussion items of the past years. The United Methodist Church in Poland is recognized by the State, and shortly after the political turnaround in the early ‘90s, an Internal Law was brought

into force, which differed from the Book of Discipline in many regards. As of 2013, there were intense efforts aiming to achieve a practicable compromise. A first vote in March 2016 failed because the required super majority was not achieved. Since then, the draft of the Internal Law was once again revised, and people waited with anticipation what the result of the vote would be. It was a surprise and a great relief when the new Internal Law was approved by a vast majority, with no votes against and a few abstentions only. This was a strong signal that the United Methodist Church in Poland would like to remain an active part of the worldwide denomination and of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe.

According to the previous Internal Law, there is still a double ordination, first to deacon (after a two-year period of probation), then to elder (after a second two-year period of probation). The closed clergy session recommended one person to be ordained elder and two persons to be ordained deacons, among them Monika Zuber. When she originally had applied for the ordained ministry, there were numerous reservations whether a woman in the ordained ministry would be accepted and recognized by the Polish congregations and the society. However, the fruit of Zuber's service was clearly visible, which is why a number of those who originally expressed their objections now supported her ordination to deacon. The last ordination of a woman in the United Methodist Church in Poland took place in 1972, when a trusted lay preacher was ordained right before her retirement. Two further applicants were recommended to start the first two-year period of probation. This is an encouraging sign, because the church needs people willing to accept the call to full-time ministry – this is particularly true against the background that General Superintendent Edward Puslecki will retire in October 2017 and that a number of pastors will follow him over the course of the next few years.

The next Annual Conference meeting will take place June 14-17, 2018. Both the churches in Kraplewo (Mazuria) and Kielce would love to invite the Annual Conference. The church council will evaluate which is the better option in terms of available on site infrastructure. – Submitted by Bishop Patrick Streiff, Zurich/Switzerland

Red Bird Missionary Conference session. Bishop Leonard Fairley convened the 49th annual conference session of the Red Bird Missionary Conference on May 13 at Thousandsticks United Methodist Church in Thousandsticks, Kentucky.

The session opened with a Memorial Service of Holy Communion. Clergy, mission institution employees and volunteers, and conference laity who died this past year were remembered. Bishop Fairley preached the message, and the Red Bird Mission Christian School Cardinal Singers provided the special music for the service.

This year's Harry Denman Award for Evangelism recipients were the Rev. Robert Gross (clergy) and Melody Pitzer (lay). Fourteen of our conference churches and outreach centers were recognized for their Second Mile 5-Star Giving. At the close of the service, Bishop Fairley read the appointments. The conference welcomed the Rev. James Savage, the incoming pastor appointed to the Jack's Creek/Bowen's Creek Charge, who will also serve as assistant conference superintendent. – The Rev. Robert Amundsen, Conference Secretary

Rio Texas Annual Conference. The Rio Texas Conference met in Corpus Christi, Texas, June 7-10, Bishop Robert Schnase presiding. The conference theme was "Focus on Fruitfulness." Membership stands at 115,289, down 4,466 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 43,666, down 1,272 from the previous year.

– Will Rice, Director of Communications and Media Support, Rio Texas Conference.

Rocky Mountain Annual Conference. The 49th session of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church was held June 15-18 at the Denver Marriott Tech Center Hotel in Denver, Colorado. This was the first Rocky Mountain Annual Conference Session for Bishop Karen Oliveto, who oversees the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area.

The quadrennial theme for the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area is "Living into Beloved Community."

Membership: 57,117, down 1,488 from the previous year. Worship attendance: 26,217, down 970 from the previous year.

– Charmaine Robledo, director of communications Mountain Sky Area

Serbia-Macedonia Annual Conference. The Serbia-Macedonia Conference of The United Methodist Church met from April 6-9, 2017, at Murtino United Methodist Church in Murtino, Macedonia. The church near the borders of Bulgaria and Greece had enlarged its facilities to accommodate the 58 conference members and guests from the two districts Serbia and Macedonia, as well as from the mission area Albania and the two guests from Germany and Switzerland.

Wilfried Nausner, superintendent in Albania and Macedonia, reported that it is a challenging time for the church.

“This report is written in a difficult time for Macedonia. Tensions and fears have rekindled. People are worried – and the members and friends of the UMC are affected, as well,” he said, adding that attempts from inside and outside the country to cope with this crisis have not been successful up to now. “The tone is increasingly harsh, and the willingness to compromise, which had not been highly developed anyway, seems to be completely lacking,” Nausner said. “Macedonia needs men and women taking a stand for peace, and prayers are also needed in this difficult time.”

The former Yugoslav republic has been in a political crisis for two years, complicated by a difficult economic situation — including high unemployment and poverty rates —and ethnic tensions. Both Serbia and Macedonia have also faced a refugee crisis, and while the number trying to reach Western Europe through the «Balkan Route» has considerably decreased, Serbia, for instance, is still challenge with the fact that more than 7,000 migrants are living in the country. Superintendent Ana Palik-Kun?ak from Serbia was also rather pessimistic about the current situation. “Adverse circumstances in Serbia lead to the fact that young people leave the country, which reduces the number of people attending the worship services. In addition, our members are increasingly old and ill. This situation is very painful, particularly for the smallest congregation, which is already challenged by questions of survival,” she said.

However, in spite of the many big challenges the church and the people are faced with, she said there is an amazing commitment, awakening and development, encouragement and mutual support and assistance of the worldwide family. She said there is also vitality and hope:

Some examples:

The kindergarten KORAB in Pivnice, Serbia, is challenged by the emigration of whole families. However, it nevertheless remains a part of the church with a very good reputation far beyond The United Methodist Church, not the least because of a good media presence.

In Šid, Serbia, the ministry with migrants resulted in very good contacts to Christian families from Iran; about 15 to 20 people occasionally visit the worship services of The United Methodist Church.

Thanks to a good cooperation with a Slovakian cultural organization in Kisa?, Serbia, there are a number of possibilities to reach out to people not belonging to The United Methodist Church. Particularly on church holidays, it is even possible to celebrate worship services in the Slovakian National House.

The Miss Stone Center in Strumica, Macedonia, is continuously expanding its ministries: in addition to the 160 beneficiaries of the Meals on Wheels program, another 45 people in Radoviš, about 30km from Strumica, regularly receive a hot soup.

An educational project with Roma children in Ohrid, Macedonia, aims to improve the desolate situation of the Roma and to open up hopeful perspectives.

After many years of preparation, The United Methodist Church in Macedonia finally succeeded in publishing a new hymnal.

Music and hymns also played an important role in the evening worship services and particularly in the musical evening on April 8. There was a congregational singing as well as songs of a youth group, of the choirs from Murtino and Strumica, and of the united Yugoslavia choir (consisting of people that regularly met during youth

gatherings decades ago). The music was an invitation to praise God and a colorful expression of the history and culture of the Balkan countries.

In the closing worship service, the Rev. Vladimir Fazekaš of Serbia was ordained elder.

– Stefan Ilg, Adliswil / Urs Schweizer, Assistant to Bishop Patrick Streiff, Zurich

Sierra Leone Annual Conference. Delegates of the 2017 Sierra Leone Annual Conference met March 8-12 in Makeni, northern Sierra Leone. The 2017 conference theme was “The Journey Ahead” with text from Joshua 3:1-17. Resident Bishop John K. Yambasu welcomed clergy and lay delegates to the 137th session of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference, his ninth as bishop. The March 8-12 meeting also addressed the challenging issue of apportionments in the conference where the bishop expressed his dismay over local churches not paying their full apportionments, which in recent times has led to delay in payment of salaries and other conference functions.

“The days of handouts are over,” Yambasu said. “With Africa now accounting for about 40 percent of the entire membership of the global United Methodist Church, ... General Conference is now saying that we must put our money where our mouth is.” He said, for the first time, General Conference has asked all conferences in Africa to contribute to the global apportionments. He explained that the level of apportionment is determined by the total membership of each episcopal area. Accordingly, Sierra Leone has been apportioned \$28,000 for 2017.

Guest speaker, Dr. Olusimbo Ige, director of global health at the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, presented on March 10. Her presentation “Global Health: Challenges and Opportunities for the African Church” was interactive with conference members providing answers to questions she asked. Members were amazed in the end that there is so much people can do as individuals, community and church to determine the level of health they want to live. Ige said the foundation for health begins in homes, schools and neighborhoods and that the circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources. Ige wanted conference members to discover that they had opportunities, strengths, assets, hopes and ideas. Hence, she said, “Before we engage partners, we should stand by asking: What can we do? Things we know who can, Things that we can't and we don't know who can.”

Tough action against some clergy: The Sierra Leone Conference Board of Ordained Ministry has officially informed conference members of the expulsion of the Rev James Fornah last year after his conviction of rape of a minor in his congregation. This is the first time the annual conference is meeting after the action was taken last year. Bishop Yambasu said The United Methodist Church takes a serious stance on gender-based violence. He explained that Fornah was initially suspended when the matter was being investigated. “But once he was found guilty, we have removed him from the ministerial role, which means he is dismissed,” the bishop said. “We cannot get to him right now, but when he is discharged, we will demand of him our certificate.” Yambasu further explained that Fornah lost his wife recently and that by the time of his release from prison, he would be old and there will be no wife to take care of him. The board out of humanitarian feeling, therefore, decided that Fornah's end-of-service benefit would be worked out so that when he leaves prison, he will have something with which to start life.

Also, disciplinary actions — ranging from expulsion to suspension on grounds of immorality and corruption — against four other clergy were announced at the 2017 conference.

Five candidates were ordained as deacons, and three were ordained as elders. Thirteen candidates were presented as ministerial candidates.

Sierra Leone Head of State, President Ernest Bai Koroma, and his wife, Sia Nyama Koroma, worshipped with conference members, observers and guests on March 12. The president said he was impressed when he read Bishop Yambasu's message to annual conference that he had succeeded in at least 70 percent by 2017 of what he envisaged in 2009 to do by 2020. He said the conference theme “The Journey Ahead” was timely but cautioned that the journeys ahead are not always as smooth as one would envision because there are sure to be bumps on the way. Looking at the image accompanying the theme on the conference banner, he said the journey seemed to be very smooth. “That is what everybody would envisage. That is what we envisaged in 2013 as a

government when early in 2014 Ebola struck. So we must expect turbulence. That is a fact of life,” the president said.

Look inwards for support. He said the issue of sexuality mentioned in the bishop’s speech and its potential negative impact was not only limited to the church. These are the realities representing the changing world today, he said. “I hope and pray that at the end of the day, God will provide the direction that will continue to save the church. As a nation, we have to look inwards for support instead of dependence on external support. We have to look inwards and strengthen ourselves. If we don’t strengthen ourselves ... we will not be able to isolate ourselves from these shocks. And the shocks are going to come. They are bound to come,” he said, citing Brexit and the outcome of the 2016 American elections that brought President Donald Trump to power and the pending French and German elections.

“Things will change. And the new people that will take over governance of the world think differently. Their moral values are different. And even as a government now, the donors will come in and if you don’t support gay issues, you will not be given X amount of support or that amount of support. That is an issue that we have to live with. So, for the journey ahead, we have to look inwards,” the president concluded.

– Phileas Jusu, director of communications for The United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone.

South Carolina Annual Conference. Delegates to South Carolina’s 2017 Annual Conference Meeting convened June 4-7, 2017, at the TD Convention Center in Greenville, South Carolina. About 2,000 people gathered for the event. Resident Bishop L. Jonathan Holston presided, assisted by the Rev. Ken Nelson, conference secretary, and the Rev. Tim McClendon, conference parliamentarian. Resolution against the Dakota Access Pipeline in solidarity with Standing Rock. (failed); Resolution for the realignment of the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church and its disaffiliation from the structures of the United Methodist Church. (ruled out of order). Membership for 2016: 226,270, down 1.4 percent from 2015. Worship attendance for 2016: 82,901, down 3.3 percent from 2015.

– Submitted by: Dan O’Mara, communications coordinator

South Georgia Annual Conference. The Jekyll Island Convention Center was filled with red as the South Georgia Annual Conference celebrated Pentecost and convened for its 151st session Sunday, June 4. Meeting under the theme “Alive Together in Christ,” the 2017 Annual Conference session was held June 4 through June 7 at the new, oceanfront locale. Beautiful views, ocean breezes and a new facility gave the conference a casual, relaxed, family friendly atmosphere. Bishop R. Lawson Bryan, presiding over his first annual conference session since becoming South Georgia’s episcopal leader, felt the conference was filled with joy and hopefulness. “I felt a very hopeful spirit that will allow us to impact our communities in a very positive way as people of hope,” he said. Membership stands at 113,498, down 3,227 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 47,944, down 1,463. Church school attendance stands at 18,962, down 1,472.

– By Kara Witherow and Kelly Roberson

Southern Nigeria Annual Conference. The 35th Session of the Southern Nigeria Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church was held from Jan. 8-11 at McBride Magami United Methodist Church in Jalingo, the capital city of Taraba State. Bishop John Wesley Yohanna, the leader of the Nigeria Episcopal Area, declared the session open on Sunday, Jan. 8. The conference session began with a historic opening worship, which witnessed a formal acceptance of the Faith Mission denomination, which has now joined The United Methodist Church. The Faith Mission Church, which has about 250 members and has United Methodist roots, was a registered denomination in Nigeria. The Faith Mission decided to join The United Methodist Church because of the impact United Methodists are making in Nigeria and all over the world. In his address while receiving representatives of the Faith Mission Church, Bishop Yohanna said, “The doors of The United Methodist Church are always open to welcome all people in the household of God.” Yohanna added that The United Methodist Church always brag about “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.” The bishop said that church should always open its doors to all people as they are willing to come in. The Rev. Fasto Shehu, the overseer of Faith Mission

Church, spoke during the acceptance service. “We are happy to be part of The United Methodist Church,” Shehu said. “We believe we are in the right place because Faith Mission Church has United Methodist roots. We decided as a church to join The United Methodist Church because of the clarity we see in its teaching, doctrine, administration and the way it has impacted the church and the society. We are willing to learn more about its doctrine and administration.”

Receiving the congregants on behalf of the laity, the associate lay leader of the conference, Hon. Harry Kanawa, said, “We are happy to receive you into the United Methodist Church, as the bishop said UMC doors are always open to receive all people into fellowship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The newly elected United Methodist bishop of the Liberia Conference, Bishop Samuel Quire, also attended the annual conference session. Quire, addressing the delegates, said he is in Nigeria to visit with Bishop Yohanna with a purpose of building a deeper relationship between the Liberia Conference and the Nigeria Episcopal Area. “This is the first annual conference I have attended since I became a bishop,” Quire said. “I am happy to be part of the 35th session of the Southern Nigeria Annual Conference.” He called on members of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria to support the leadership of Bishop Yohanna and be united in the mission of the church.

In his episcopal address, Bishop Yohanna thanked members of The United Methodist Church for the efforts they put in the last four years in the area of evangelism, leadership development, caring for the poor and comforting the sick ones. The bishop added that in the next four years, the church will continue to centered it attend in the denomination’s four areas of focus. The bishop said his leadership in the next four years would focus on evangelism, opening new places of worship, providing social service to the poor, developing innovative leaders and promoting peace and unity within the church and the community. The bishop further thanked the Women’s Division, the Men’s Division and the Youth Ministry for their active involvement in all church programs. The 35th session of the annual conference also saw the celebration of the new evangelism areas in the Bali and Gashaka local government areas of Taraba State. The conference sent four new evangelists to start mission work in the areas, where previously there was no church presence.

The conference also celebrated the establishment of Yugorobi Elementary School to offer affordable education to children in the Lau local government area of Taraba State. This school offers educational opportunity in an area where previously no school nearby. Now, the children can have qualitative and affordable education through the establishment of the school. During the 35th session, the conference elected it key officials for the quadrennium. Those elected were as follows: Barrister Peter Ngai as the new conference lay leader, Sule Abasu was elected the associate lay leader, Barrister Tanko Ayuba as the conference chancellor, Julius Sylvester as the conference treasurer, the Rev. Ande I. Emmanuel re-elected as the conference secretary, and Dr. Aliyu Mbiko elected as associate conference secretary. Bishop John Wesley Yohanna appointed Honorable Driver Bitrus Jalo as the conference’s new director of connectional ministries. The conference ordained seven pastors to the office of elder and commissioned eight individuals as provisional elders.

The theme for the 35th session of the conference session was “Therefore Go” Matthew 28:19. Speaking on the theme, the speaker of the conference, the Rev. Abel Lamido, reminded the delegates that God has call us to be his ambassadors here on earth. He added that as ambassadors, we have the task of making this world a better place of living for all God’s creation. He further explained that the command to go comes from Jesus Christ, who has send us to uphold human dignity. “God through Jesus Christ has call us as peoples to go into the world as ambassadors to transform the world. We are sent to uphold human dignity by preaching and that of all God’s creation. It is our responsibilities to ensure orderliness in the world. Therefore, we have to go.”

– The Rev. Ande I. Emmanuel, conference secretary

Susquehanna Annual Conference. The Susquehanna Conference meet May 4-6, 2017, at Hershey Lodge in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The officiating bishop was Bishop Jeremiah Park. Membership stands at 142,732, down 4,591 from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 54,946, down 2,602 from the previous year. Church school attendance stands at 17,819, down 1,125 from the previous year.

– Gerald (Jerry) Wolgemuth, director of communications, Susquehanna Conference

Tennessee Annual Conference. The Tennessee Annual Conference met June 11-13 at Brentwood United Methodist Church in Brentwood, Tennessee, with Bishop William “Bill” McAlilly officiating. Membership in the Tennessee Conference stands at 116,740, which is down 0.4 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 44,257, down by 4 percent. Church school attendance stands at 20,500, down 5.06 percent. Adults and young adults in small groups for 2016 was 30,861, down from 2015 by 1.48 percent. Increases in the Tennessee Conference included professions of faith and engagement in mission. Professions of faith for 2016 were at 1,735, which is an increase of 9.33 percent from 2015. Worshipers engaged in mission for 2016 was at 24,891, which is up from 2015 by 11.60 percent.

– Amy J. Hurd, director of communications, Tennessee Conference

Texas Annual Conference.

Location of conference gathering: The Woodlands United Methodist Church, The Woodlands, Texas

Dates of conference gathering: May 28-31, 2017. Officiating bishop: Bishop Scott Jones

Membership stands at 282,116, down from 282,273. Worship attendance stands at 97,913 down from 100,098.

Church school attendance stands at 35,245, down from 35,747.

– Paula Arnold, director of communications

Upper New York Annual Conference. The Upper New York Conference gathered for its eighth session of annual conference June 1-3 at the Oncenter in Syracuse, New York. There were 19 resolutions discussed with the following results: Avoid Purchase of Hewlett Packard Products, supported; Protecting the Right to Peacefully Address Injustice through Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions, supported; Speaking Out for Compassion: Transforming the Context of Hate in the United States, supported; Resolution on Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies, supported; Health Care for All in the United States, supported; Resolution Endorsing Equitable, Just, and Environmentally and Fiscally Responsible Carbon Pricing, in Conjunction with the Removal of Fossil Fuel Subsidies, supported; A new resolution presented by Doug Mackey of Tully United Methodist Church on Maintaining Unity and Not Supporting Division Efforts, was also supported.... – Stephen J. Hustedt, director of communications

Virginia Annual Conference. The theme for the 2017 Virginia Annual Conference, held June 16-18 at the Hampton Roads Convention Center in Hampton, Va., was “A New Thing.” The conference theme was based on Isaiah 43:19, “Behold I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Bishop Sharma D. Lewis presided over her first annual conference, a spirit-filled event with unscripted altar calls and powerful preaching. As of the end of 2016, membership stood at 325,099, down 0.22 percent. Worship attendance stood at 98,938. Reaffirmations of faith were at 3,840.

– Madeline Pillow, Virginia Conference director of communications.

West Ohio Annual Conference. The West Ohio Conference met June 4-7, at Lakeside on the shore of Lake Erie. Bishop Gregory V. Palmer presided over the conference under the theme “Be Not Afraid, Facing the Future!” The conference celebrated the return of Bishop Palmer for his second quadrennium as episcopal leader. Bishop Palmer leads 162,842 members 1,568 clergy in the 1,020 churches within the West Ohio Conference.

The conference celebrated in the commissioning of Missionary Elizabeth Heft. She will serve in Palestine. Gaston and Jeanne Ntambo, missionaries from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, shared lifesaving stories of the Wings of the Morning, an aviation mission supported in large part by the people of the conference. Church and Community Worker, Mariellen Grace continues to serve at the Charitable Pharmacy in Columbus, Ohio.

Membership stands at 162,842, down 3 percent from the previous year. Worship attendance stands at 96,848, down 4 percent. Church school attendance stands at 27,008, down 7 percent. Professions or reaffirmations of

faith for 2016: 3,592, down 3 percent.
Communications, West Ohio Conference.

– Kay Panovec, Director of

West Virginia Annual Conference. The 2017 West Virginia Annual Conference convened June 8-11 at West Virginia Wesleyan College, Buckhannon, West Virginia, under the leadership of Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball, Resident Bishop of the West Virginia Conference. 2,341 new professions of faith were celebrated (with more being added daily as churches report confirmations and new member reception.) New goal of 2,400+. This represents 2,400 Professions of Faith and 2,400 new people in an intentional discipleship formation experience.

Passed a resolution encouraging the conference to pray for the Commission on A Way Forward and for our General Conference delegation. The resolution requests that the delegation hold listening events within each district.

Circles of Grace: Listening sessions were held with trained moderators in groups of five-10 people focusing on conversations around the Commission on a Way Forward, diversity and white privilege.

– The Rev. Deborah Coble, Director of Communications, West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church

Western North Carolina Annual Conference. The Western North Carolina Conference met June 23-25, 2017 at Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Presiding over the conference was Bishop Paul L. Leeland, resident bishop of the Charlotte Area. The theme for the conference was: Go and Baptize the World (Matthew 28:16-20). Membership stands at 282,618. Worship attendance stands at 104,557.

– Michael Rich, director of communications

Western Pennsylvania Conference. Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, presiding at her first Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference session June 8-11 at Grove City College, told the more than 1,400 clergy and laity to put aside their anxiety, fear and disagreements and declared the campus “A Love Zone.” The annual conference theme was “WPA Chic: Dressed in Love,” taken from Colossians 3:12-17. Membership stands at 161,578 down 3,565 from the previous year. Average worship attendance stands at 50,296, down 1,697 from the previous year. Church school attendance was 13,783, down 692. – Jackie Campbell, Western Pennsylvania Conference communications director

Wisconsin Annual Conference. The Wisconsin Annual Conference celebrated the first theme of the new quadrennium, “One With Christ,” on June 16-19 at the Madison Marriott West. Guest speakers included Adam Hamilton, founding pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas; the Rev. Marcia McFee; the Rev. Steve Zekoff, Wisconsin Conference benefits officer; the Rev. Amy Valdez Barker, Connectional Table executive secretary; and Bishop Heon Young Choi, resident bishop of Dongbu (Eastern Region) Conference of the Korean Methodist Church.

Bishop Heon Young Choi preached during opening worship, beginning by presenting a colorful rainbow stole as a gift to Bishop Hee-Soo Jung. Bishop Choi thanked the Wisconsin Conference for welcoming his delegation of visitors, and for being in a sister partnership with the Dongbu Conference for the last 13 years. During his sermon, Bishop Choi reflected on the relationship between the two conferences. He said, “I think God wanted us to come together to combine our strengths in order to fulfill God’s work. By walking together and working together for God’s glory, our sister relationship can do more valuable work and fulfill God’s will.” – Michele Virnig, Wisconsin Conference director of communications

Yellowstone Annual Conference. The 2017 Yellowstone Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church was held June 8-10 at the Double Tree Hotel in Billings, Montana. This was the first annual conference session for Bishop Karen Oliveto, who oversees the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area. The quadrennial theme for the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area is “Living into Beloved Community.” At the 2017 Yellowstone Annual

Conference, delegates responded prayerfully and robustly to the conference's financial situation. A campaign called the Harvest Time Fund was set up to re-energize our mission share giving. The nearly 200 delegates and guests in attendance gave about \$40,000 in gifts and pledges. The goal is to raise \$300,000 by the end of 2018. The campaign is named after "Harvest Time," a song long associated with Brother Van (William Wesley Van Orsdel), who is the spiritual father of the Yellowstone Conference.

In 2018, the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone annual conference will hold a joint annual conference session in Ogden, Utah, from June 7-10. – Charmaine Robledo, director of communications, Mountain Sky Area.

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Consensus is the absence of Leadership! – As quoted by Jack Ramsey