Monthly Update

July 2011

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In this Monthly Update we are continuing to present information on what is happening at the various annual conferences in our United Methodist Church as well as other news of interest from the public sector.

Now we have it. We wondered why it seemed that those "on the other side" were so quiet and not very active in pushing petitions that would overturn our church's position on homosexuality. We have Kansas Bishop Scott J. Jones, chair of the 20-member Committee to Study the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church, who was quoted as saying, "We think that the defeat of the constitutional amendments was not the end of the story. . . . What we heard during the constitutional-amendment discussion is that people want more details..." Jones was referring to the voting in 2009 and early 2010 when voters at annual conferences around the world rejected constitutional amendments that would have formed similar regional structures.

It almost seems as if we are in the proverbial society author George Orwell narrated in his classic book *1984* when a whole new language was used to mean something different from, and often opposite to, what we would ordinarily mean. It would have appeared to those of us in Concerned Methodists that twenty-three of those amendments to the constitution of our United Methodist Church that we had dubbed the "separation amendments" were soundly defeated because most clear-thinking Methodists around the world rejected the subtle attempt to divide our worldwide connection into regional entities – thereby breaking our connection. This in turn would have laid the basis of organizational structure of the church in the United States that would have created a dramatic shift in the balance of power toward those who would normalize various aspects of homosexual practice.

Bishops Jones' conclusion as to the outcome of those historic votes (which we worked hard to ensure a favorable decision) were not rejection of what they would have done but "merely a signal that we needed more information" about what they might portend. I believe that it was Albert Einstein who said, "A repetition of the same actions expecting a different outcome is a sign of insanity." Does this statement by Bishop Jones fit that category? We would hope not, but it would appear so.

Please continue to pray for us as we "contend for the faith" as He has called us to do. Above everything else, we want to "be about our Father's business" in all of our actions. We pray that each of you will have a memorable, fun-filled Fourth of July as we celebrate the birth of our country.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris Executive Director

July 2011 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, But to make us comforters. -2 Corinthians 1:3-7

The Good Stuff.

+ Below are the remarks of Governor Rick Perry in Longview, Texas

In 1977, I had left the Air Force and moved home. I'll be real honest with you – I was a bit lost spiritually, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. So I moved in with my mother and father. Now that's a real trip! I had been an aircraft commander, traveling all around the world, seeing amazing places that a boy from Paint Creek, Texas, had never even dreamed were out there before. I had this great epiphany during my mid-20s. As I lived in Europe & South America & the Middle East, I saw all these countries with different forms of government...: dictatorships, theocracies, monarchies, democratic states, etc.

I started making the connection between how those people lived and the form of government they had. It was most interesting for me, as I'd never really given that much attention to our form of government in America. I'd taken for granted this extraordinary country we live in, but I came to realize that America is really a special place. I also made the calculation that inside that really cool place was this incredible place called Texas!

At twenty-five, twenty-six years old, it dawned on me what an incredible country we live in, and that the vast majority of the people take it for granted. They abuse the privilege of living in a free country. They don't realize how so many other people live around the world. But with that knowledge, I went home and lived with my mom and dad. I moved back into my old room. At eighteen years old, I left to go to my beloved Texas A&M University. Nine years later, I came back into my old room. I swear to God, I know mother cleaned it, but it looked exactly like it did the day I left. It had my football number on the door, and it had the all-star football game program still stuck on the bulletin board. It was an eerie moment for me to move back home. My dad was pretty sure I was the same stupid eighteen-year-old that had left. I was pretty sure he hadn't gotten any smarter either. So we went through this really brutal period of time of finding our comfort zone.

But God was dealing with me. At 27 years old, I knew that I'd been called to the ministry. I've just always been really stunned by how big a pulpit I was gonna have!... I truly believe with all my heart that God has put me in this place at this time to do His will.

On Aug the 6th of this year, 2011, we are going to have a day of prayer and fasting. And it's going to be the real deal. It's not going to be some program where we line up a dozen political figures to come in and talk. It's going to be people standing on that stage, projecting and proclaiming Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior at Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas. Let me tell you, that's a big stadium and there will be a lot of people. But it's going to send a powerful message across this country!

Our country's broke. Well, actually, Washington's broke; our country's going to be just fine. But we've got to have men and women who are willing to stand up to proclaim the values that this country was based upon.

In 1774, at the Continental Congress when they got together and penned that first document, they talked about "life" and "liberty." Interestingly, the third thing they talked about was "property." A couple of years later, when they actually wrote the Declaration, they changed that "property" to "the pursuit of happiness." I just signed a piece of legislation today, the immanent domain legislation. I tell people, that "personal property" and the ownership of that personal property is crucial to our way of life. Our founding fathers understood that it was a very important part of the pursuit of happiness. Being able to own things that are your own is one of the things that makes America unique. But I happen to think that it's in jeopardy.

It's in jeopardy because of taxes; it's in jeopardy because of regulation; it's in jeopardy because of a legal system that's run amuck. And I think it's time for us to just hand it over to God and say, "God, You're going to have to fix this." (I think it was Herman Cain who stood up the other day and said, "How's that 'Hope and Change' thing working out for you?") I think it's time for us to use our wisdom and our influence and really put it in God's hands. That's what I'm going to do, and I hope you'll join me. I hope you'll join us in Houston on the 6th ay of August and really start a revival across this country.

Here's what I want to leave you with. I know from time to time, people will say something like, "There goes Perry. He wants to secede." But I love this country. We're a special place. We were created by God-fearing individuals who understood those biblical values and how powerful they could be and would be in the future. And I suggest that for our country, our best days are ahead if we'll get on our knees and ask God to take over and give us wisdom. I may wear the Lord out every day in prayer. I pray for this country. I pray for restoration for this country. I pray for our president every day. I pray that God turns buckets of wisdom out on his head, that God will open his eyes. We can change this country, but it requires our giving it to Him and letting Him guide us.

- Transcribed speech by Governor Rick Perry at Longview, Texas; May 23, 2011.

+ Mississippi Shows How You Handle Westboro Folks. On Saturday, April 16, 2011 USMC Staff Sgt. Jason Rogers, who was killed in action in Afghanistan April 7, was buried in Brandon, Mississippi...Why weren't there protestors? Planning ahead by locals,.

One of them (the Westboro Church protestors who are known to demonstrate at funerals condemning those servicemen killed in Iraq or Afghanistan) talked too much at a Brandon, Mississippi gas station and got himself waxed. Police were called and the beaten man

could not give much of a description of who beat him. When they canvassed the station and spoke to the large crowd that had gathered around, no one seemed to remember anything about what had happened.

Rankin County handled this thing perfectly. There were many things that were put into place that most will never know about and at great expense to the county. Most of the Westboro Church members never made it out of their hotel parking lot. It seems that certain Rankin county pickup trucks were parked directly behind any car that had Kansas plates in the hotel parking lot and the drivers mysteriously disappeared until after the funeral was over. Police were called but their wrecker service was running behind and it was going to be a few hours before they could tow the trucks so the Kansas plated cars could get out. A few of the Westboro Church members made it to the funeral but were ushered away to be questioned about a crime they might have possibly been involved in. Turns out, after a few hours of questioning, that they were not involved and they were allowed to go on about their business.

- From an Ole Miss sports message board, a tidbit of information; Received by e-mail. April 21, 2011

Of Interest

+ Panel Report: Church Is Too U.S.-centric. An international panel of UM leaders is offering three ways to make the denomination less U.S.-centric and strengthen its worldwide connection. The 20-member Committee to Study the Worldwide Nature of The UMC plans to release a full report in July ahead of the 2012 General Conference. "We believe that living more fully into our worldwide nature is a long process," said Kansas Area Bishop Scott J. Jones, committee chair. "We [want] to help the church take the next steps." The Council of Bishops and Connectional Table named the committee in 2009 to study changing demographics and take recommendations to General Conference. Since then, the committee has been holding listening sessions with UMs around the world. Committee members have learned that UMs in most regions have no desire to be autonomous. "They want to belong to a worldwide church," said the Rev. Forbes Matonga, a committee member in Harare, Zimbabwe. "That was very clear. But it was clear also that the current structure gives domination to the U.S. part of the church over other regions." That needs to change, Matonga said.

In 2012, the committee's main emphasis will be the General Conference's adoption of "A Covenant for the Church as a Worldwide Church" as a statement of intent. Such adoption will require a majority vote by delegates. "UM churches throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission," the committee declares in the covenant's current draft. "Through a worldwide covenant relationship, we also carry out our missional calling beyond national and regional boundaries."

Jones said the petition to streamline the Book of Discipline is more of a clarification than a dramatic change at this point: "The crucial question here is what questions belong to the unity of the church and must be kept at the General Conference level and what things are appropriately decided by regions or annual conferences."

The committee's third proposal regarding church restructuring will be familiar to many UMs. The group calls for church members to discuss creating "Continental Conferences," new regional bodies in North America, Africa, Asia and Europe/Eurasia to focus on regional church issues. Under such restructuring, General Conference would still meet every four years, but its role would narrow to include only issues of global relevance. In 2009 and early 2010, voters at annual conferences rejected constitutional amendments that would have formed similar regional structures. Jones said, "We think that the defeat of the constitutional amendments was not the end of the story. . . . What we heard during the constitutional-amendment discussion is that people want more details. The Book of Discipline legislation provides more details." The committee does not expect action on restructuring until at least 2016. Restructuring is something the church will need to consider strongly as it prepares for the next century, Matonga said, adding, "The center of Christianity is shifting from the Western world to the so-called Third World. Therefore, if we want to be sensitive to the future of Christianity, we will have to recognize the shift, especially to the African continent."

[Note: Those who are pushing homosexual normalization in the UMC are trying to get their agenda through by another tack. They were defeated on the constitutional amendments in 2009 and are now making another run at it. We remember Bishop Jones as one of the proponents of this measure before. It would seem that now perhaps we should examine constitutional amendments designed to either curb the power of bishops, or eliminate that office altogether. – AOM]

- Heather Hahn, UMNS, as reported in NewScope, June 8, 2011

+ Denomination faces sizable budget cuts

[Note: Given the information in the preceding section that the "powers that be" on the other side of the homosexuality issue are trying again to work their will, is it any wonder that we as a denomination are facing economic decline? This is something (the economic decline) that we had predicted three years ago. Will they never learn? – AOM]

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – United Methodists are engaging in a yearlong effort to craft denominational budgets for the years 2013 to 2016. The 40-member General Council on Finance and Administration and the 60-member Connectional Table quickly accepted proposed "realistic" overall budget reductions of 6.04 percent presented by a GCFA committee and line-item recommendations for denominational agencies worked out by their top staff executives. The two bodies voted to reduce World Service, the fund that supports the ministries of the general agencies, by 6.6 percent. After the two bodies approved the provisional budget of \$603 million

for all seven general apportionments, they agreed to meet again July 27-29 in Nashville to review the budgets before sending them to the 2012 General Conference, the top legislative body of the 12 million-member denomination. In the meantime—in consultation with agency executives—three GCFA members and three Connectional Table members will consider the financial implications of proposals expected from the Interim Operations Team and the impact on provisional budgets approved at the May meeting in Nashville.

Reduced funds

Reductions in the number of members in U.S. congregations and declining revenue already have forced general agencies to eliminate some staff positions and programs. The number of staff positions in 13 general agencies has decreased every year, from 3,139 in 1971 to 1,384 in 2010. While budgets for the agencies have increased over previous years, the income has not kept pace with inflation. Now, for the first time in the history of the denomination, even the best-case budget projection called for a reduction in the actual dollars available for the seven general church apportionments for the 2013-16 quadrennium.

Agency staffers were asked to prepare detailed budgets for pessimistic, realistic and optimistic amounts.

Factors that go into budget projections include: church membership, inflation, per-capita disposable income, "giving elasticity" (percent of giving from increased revenue), net spending and the U.S. gross domestic product. During the previous week, a finance committee of the Council of Bishops proposed asking GCFA and the Connectional Table to recommend the most pessimistic projection calling for a 14.8 percent reduction in World Service monies. Some bishops, who struggle to get their churches to pay 100 percent of their apportionments, favored the lower budgets. ...The proposal was defeated. There were also recommendations at the GCFA and Connectional Table meeting to propose the 14.8 percent reduction and to save the balance for emerging ministries. With the understanding that the proposed budget will again be reviewed in July, those recommendations were defeated by a sizeable margin.

Some agencies have already agreed to reduce future costs by: 1) sharing finance and human resources personnel; 2) freezing salaries; 3) reducing staff and programs; 4) asking staff to pay a higher percentage of health-care insurance; 5) holding virtual board meetings; 6) publishing electronic newsletters; 7) printing only on demand; and 8) utilizing online tools and websites.

UM Fund proposal

An apportionment structure study group asked the two organizations to consider recommending a single United Methodist Fund to replace the present seven apportionments. The group proposes listing all agencies and ministries supported by the one fund and their percentage of the total. "Giving to multiple funds does not increase transparency or lead to better payouts," said the Rev. Andy Langford, secretary of the study group and pastor of Central United Methodist Church in Concord, N.C.

The group also recommends that GCFA be asked to work with other agencies to emphasize "generous financial stewardship" and drop the word "apportionment" in favor of establishing a specific percentage of current income of a local congregation. "This income-based model shifts the discussion from the budget of the general church to the percentage of income coming from each local congregation," Mr. Langford said. Perhaps the most far-reaching proposal from the study group calls for the right of General Conference to empower a unit of the denomination to make budget adjustments between conference sessions. At present, after General Conference adjourns, no entity can make changes to the allocated budgets. "The current system cannot adapt to provide flexibility in ministry and mission," Mr. Langford said. This proposal requires two constitutional amendments that must be approved by a 2/3 vote of General Conference delegates and ratification by 2/3 of all voting members of all annual conferences.

In other business, the Connectional Table and GCFA:

- Allocated \$170,500 from the World Service Contingency Fund to the Global AIDS Fund.
- Learned that the Worldwide Nature of the Church Study Committee will ask the 2012 General Conference to provide one hour for delegates in four geographical areas (Africa, Asia, Europe and Eurasia, and North America) to meet. The committee uses the name "continental conferences" for these gatherings.
- Learned that the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters will recommend the establishment of a fourth episcopal area in the Congo Central Conference.

- Rich Peck, United Methodist News Service (UMNS); May 20, 2011.

Homosexuality.

+ Ohio church's billboard supports gays

A small Toledo, Ohio, church has made a giant statement sure to stir debate with a billboard that declares: "Being Gay is a Gift from God." The digital billboard, which flashes Central UMC's message among a rotation of ads, stands at a major intersection in the city, the *Toledo Blade* reports. "What we're saying is that (sexual orientation) is part of who God made us to be ... and we need to celebrate that," said Dan Rutt, a member of the church's lead team. "It's like being a man or a woman, our race or ethnicity, or whether we're left-handed or right-handed. All of these are things God created us to be, and we should live into those...offer all of that back to God."

[Note: This is a theme that has been around for years – but has no factual basis. One is bordering on blasphemy when he imputes to God traits or actions that He does not condone. I would not want to be in this situation and face Him. – AOM]

Thirty-six retired bishops signed a statement in February urging the denomination to end its ban on gay clergy. United Methodists on both sides of the ordination dispute have issued strong responses. Bishops are not allowed to vote at General Conference, but when they speak, church members often listen.

"With most of the groups I talk to, both sides have a love for the church," said the Rev. Chet Harris, senior pastor of Dueber UMC in Canton, about a three-hour drive from Toledo in the East Ohio Conference. Still, Harris and many other UMs are unequivocal in their belief that homosexual behavior is a sin condemned in both the Old and New testaments. "It's a sin among many sins, and I am not about to separate sins and have everybody hold up their hand for their individual sins on Sunday morning," said Harris, a former board member of an unofficial evangelical renewal caucus in the denomination. "The church has not done a good job at addressing the issue of sin among heterosexuals, and yet we try to lift up the sin of homosexuality. I think we have to approach it on an even plain so that we can begin to talk about the fact that we are all fallen, we are all sinners and we are all in need of a Savior."

- By Heather Hahn, A UMNS Report; ST. SIMONS ISLAND, Ga.; May 4, 2011.

+ Update on Amy DeLong Trial

The trial court in the Amy DeLong case returned its verdicts late this afternoon. She was found "not guilty" by a vote of 12 to 1 on the charge of being a "self avowed, practicing homosexual." This was basically getting off on a technicality because Conference officials involved in the supervisory and investigation responses failed to ask her if she was involved in "genital sexual behavior" and because she refused to answer the question when asked directly by Church Counsel, Tom Lambrecht. The Church may not appeal this verdict and Amy may not be recharged on this particular evidence. She was found "guilty" by a vote of 13 to 0 on the charge of performing a same-sex union. The trial court will decide on an appropriate penalty after hearing final arguments... Defense witnesses are recommending a light penalty based on a number of complicated arguments.

All people on the Church team have done stellar jobs. Tom Lambrecht and Keith Boyette have argued well and covered all the bases. Bishop Clay Lee has set a tone of respect and calmness that has been absent at other trials. And even though the majority of attendees have been on Amy's side, they have been well behaved and respectful. I've had several interesting conversations, though no one's mind has been changed.

I am personally weary after two days and last night was inclined to despair. But the day before, the Lord led me to Psalm 37 during my devotional time. Three times in the first half-dozen verses, David reminds us not to "fret" when it seems that evil prevails, and to rest in Him, do good, be still, wait patiently, and refrain from anger. And verse 6 promises "He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noon day."

I'm trusting in that. Regardless of what happens tomorrow, His grace and truth will ultimately prevail.

Thanks for your prayers and support!

- Karen Booth of Transforming Congregations; transcong@aol.com; www.transcong.org

+ Presbyterian Church

LOUISVILLE: A majority of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s 173 presbyteries have ratified an amendment to the church's constitution that removes a provision flatly prohibiting the ordination of sexually active unmarried Presbyterians as church officers. The 87th vote in favor of the measure dubbed Amendment 10-A after it was approved by the PC(USA)'s 219th General Assembly last summer was cast today (May 10) by the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area. The unofficial tally now stands at 87-62, with 24 presbyteries still to vote. The change takes effect July 10 one year from the adjournment of the 219th Assembly.

- Source: http://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/11/pcusa-relaxes-constitutional-prohibition-gay-and-l/; May 11, 2011

(UM) Judicial Council.

DETROIT – The United Methodist Church's top court says it is not obliged to respond to every request for reconsideration of a 2005 decision related to whether a pastor can deny local church membership to a gay or lesbian person. In Memorandum 1187, related to a petition from the denomination's California-Pacific Annual (regional) Conference, the Judicial Council noted that it has received numerous requests to reconsider Decision 1032 "on its own motion" but is not required to do so. That petition was among those on the docket for the council's April 27-29 meeting in Detroit. Other reconsiderations under discussion included another look at an October ruling on due process for a clergy member in the Baltimore-Washington Conference and a request related to procedures in the Philippines Central Conference. Judicial Council Decision No. 1032 related to the case of the Rev. Ed Johnson, the senior pastor at South Hill (Va.) United Methodist Church, who was placed on an involuntary leave of absence by the Virginia Annual (regional) Conference after refusing to admit a self-avowed, practicing gay man into membership in the church. When the council ruled that the pastor in charge of a local church has authority to determine a layperson's readiness for member-ship, some groups and annual conferences protested, and opposition has continued to the present. However, legislation filed in response to the case did not pass when General Conference, the denomination's top legislative body, met in 2008.

In response to the California-Pacific petition, Judicial Council pointed out that changes in the church's constitution and Book of Discipline since 2004 make any reconsideration of Decision 1032 "moot and irrelevant" in regard to language about transfer of membership from another denomination. "Notwithstanding the apparent eagerness of The United Methodist Church to continue

discussing the topics that were at issue in Decision 1032, reconsideration of the decision itself is moot," the council wrote. "We cannot make a determination about the constitutionality or legitimacy of legislative language on which the 2008 Discipline is silent."

In a concurring opinion, Jon R. Gray, a Judicial Council member, noted that the court has been asked to review the decision at least 10 times. "In many instances, the requests were presented without factual context and without the prerequisites necessary to confer jurisdiction," he said. The council has no power "to rewrite portions of the Discipline at the request of anyone who prefers different provisions," he pointed out. "Under our system of checks and balances, the General Conference is the only appropriate body authorized to fix and define the conditions, privileges, and duties of church membership." Angela Brown, Susan Henry-Crowe and Katherine Austin Mahle joined Gray in his concurrence.

Due process reconsideration. Officials from the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference asked for reconsideration of Judicial Council Decision 1156, in which the council ruled the conference had violated due process rights of the Rev. Helen Steiner Smith, one of its clergy members. Conference officials cited several errors of fact in the decision. Smith had been suspended from her position as pastor of Benevola United Methodist Church in Boonsboro, Md., in May 2009 after allegedly failing to carry out pastoral duties by not fully disclosing her husband's status as a registered child sex offender. At issue was whether the conference had followed proper procedures, as outlined in the Book of Discipline, in suspending Smith. In oral hearings at both the October and April meetings, Washington Area Bishop John Schol and other conference representatives, along with Smith and her advocate, the Rev. Laura Easto, made presentations to the council. In its reconsideration of the case, Decision 1189, the Judicial Council noted that it does not make findings of facts nor "resolve disputed factual issues," and it could only base its judgments on the official Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference minutes. Actions by the 2008 General Conference "made significant changes in the leave processes governing changes in conference relations," and the council found that Schol did not refer an administrative complaint regarding Smith to the conference board of ordained ministry, as required. The conference was instructed to comply fully with the terms of the council's previous decision. "Deviations from disciplinary process fall below acceptable standards of fair process, even when undertaken in good faith or for the sake of convenience or efficiency," the decision said.

In a concurring opinion, Gray noted that the "candid admissions" made by conference officials during the reconsideration "are worthy of respect" but not a substitute "for adherence to disciplinary process." The 2008 Book of Discipline allows the bishop and district superintendents to request an involuntary leave of absence without the consent of a clergy member by presenting the member and the conference's board of ordained ministry with specific reasons for the request in writing. The involuntary leave can be requested when a written or signed complaint is not resolved within 120 days and is referred by the bishop as an administrative complaint, the council said. Since Judicial Council issued Decision 1156, it "has become painfully apparent" that some members in the church superintendency are not making the required referral of an administrative complaint, the new decision said.

The court is encouraging all annual conferences and boards of ordained ministry to review such cases since 2008, to "ensure that full and fair process" was followed.

Philippines reconsideration. The Judicial Council denied several requests for reconsideration of previous decisions related to the handling of a complaint against a bishop in the Philippines Central Conference and questions regarding the 2010 session of the Middle Philippines Annual Conference. One of the requests concerned Decision 1162, which asked for a reconsideration of a previous ruling, in which the council affirmed a decision of law by Bishop Daniel Arichea upholding the validity of the Feb. 22-25, 2010, Middle Philippines Annual Conference session at Wesleyan University in the Philippines. A concurring opinion in Memorandum 1183 on the denial of reconsideration of Decision 1162 voiced concern over the fact Bishop Lito Tangonan has been suspended six times since December 2009 during an internal dispute within the Philippines church. "We do not have a complete record of all of the matters in regard to those suspensions, but from the information we have requested and received, it is not clear that fair process has been adequately provided," the opinion said. Because of "the lack of a complete record in regard to the suspensions," the Judicial Council does not "have authority to address this matter any further," the opinion stated.

Six council members signed the concurring opinion: Henry-Crowe, Brown, Mahle, Beth Capen, William B. Lawrence and Jay Arthur Garrison, lay alternate.

Other decisions.

- + In other decisions made at the April meeting, the Judicial Council said in Memorandum 1186 that it had no jurisdiction in a matter related to the process of discontinuing a member of the California-Pacific Conference.
- + In Memorandum 1188, the council reviewed two decisions of law related to the Rev. Edward Paup regarding the constitutional right of a clergy person to trial. The decisions, made by Denver Area Bishop Elaine Stanovsky during the 2010 Rocky Mountain Annual Conference, were vacated.

– By Linda Bloom, UMNS, May 3, 2011. Bloom is a UMNS multimedia reporter based in New York.

Annual Conference Reports

<u>Alabama-West Florida</u>. The 2011 Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference was held June 5–8 in Montgomery, with the theme "Living the Mission." Bishop Paul L. Leeland, presiding over his third annual conference session, welcomed clergy and lay members to Frazer Memorial UMC. Prior to this year's conference, Bishop Leeland urged the churches of the conference to receive a

special offering for new church development. The people of the AWF Conference responded by contributing over \$32,000. Membership is 146,752, down 2,051 from the previous year. — Danette Clifton, North Alabama Conference, as reported in *NewScope*, June 15, 2011.

<u>Alaska</u>. The Alaska Annual Conference, one of The UMC's missionary conferences, was held June 3-5 in Homer, Alaska, nestled on the shore of Katchemak Bay off Cook Inlet. The theme for this year's conference was "Come to the Edge." Much of the conference business dealt with facing economic realities. The conference continues to try to do more ministry with fewer resources and do some collective "belt tightening" toward organizational restructuring. Lay delegate elected to General Conference: Jo Anne Hayden (head of delegation, Juneau). Clergy delegate: Jon Disburg (Anchorage). Lay delegate elected to Jurisdictional Conference: Lonnie Brooks (Anchorage). Clergy delegate: Peter Perry (Anchorage). Membership is 3,733, down 132.

- Jim Doepken, Alaska UM Conference, as reported in NewScope, June 15, 2011; www.alaskaumc.org

Arkansas. The ninth session of the Arkansas Annual Conference gathered in Hot Springs, Ark., June 5 - 8. None of the resolutions proposing petitions to General Conference passed. Proposed petitions dealt with deleting from the Book of Discipline statements related to homosexuality and with holding General Conference only in states or municipalities that do not support the death penalty. Membership is 135,682, down 0.4 percent from 2009 (136,223).

- Amy Forbus, Arkansas Conference, as reported in *NewScope*, June 22, 2011.

Florida. More than 1,600 members of the Florida Annual Conference met in the Tampa Convention Center June 1– 4. The meeting was considered a trial run for the 2012 UM General Conference, which will be held in the same venue. The conference also celebrated covenant partnerships with Methodist churches in Cuba, East Angola and Haiti. Bishop Ricardo Pereira of the Methodist Church in Cuba preached at a service of Word and Table. Pereira reported that the Cuban church has experienced great revival, growing from 9,000 to more than 30,000 members in the last 10 years....due to evangelistic fervor and more freedom granted by the government. Offerings of about \$45,000 were divided among partner churches in Cuba, East Angola and Haiti. Florida Conference membership is 294,497, down from 303,161 in 2009.

— Cary McMullen, Florida Conference, as reported in NewScope, June 22, 2011.

Illinois-Great Rivers. The Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference (IGRC) was held in Peoria, Ill., June 1–4, under the theme "Intentional Faith Development: Growing Up to the Full Measure of Jesus Christ." Membership is 138,732, down 1.3 percent from 2009.

— Paul E. Black, IGRC, as reported in *NewScope*, June 15, 2011.

Louisiana. More than 1,000 Louisiana UMs gathered at Centenary College in Shreveport June 5–8 for the 2011 Louisiana UM Annual Conference. "With the Poor" was the theme for this year's event, supporting "Ministry with the Poor." Galatians 2:10 served as the scripture. Concern for the elimination of worldwide poverty was woven throughout the conference, particularly as delegates reflected on the May 14 conference-wide "Day of Caring," which coincided with the "Change the World" initiative. Membership is 120,910, up 257 from the previous year. — Betty Backstrom, Louisiana Annual Conf., as reported in *NewScope*, June 22, 2011; www.la-umc.org.

Memphis. "Risk-taking Mission and Service" was the theme for the 2011Memphis Annual Conference held June 5–8 in Paducah, Ky. Delegates and attendees representing 427 churches in West Tennessee and western Kentucky gathered for worship, preaching, music, business, annual reporting, elections and awards. Membership at the end of 2010 was 83,249, down 1,266.

- Lane Gardner Camp, Memphis Conference, as reported in NewScope, June 22, 2011

Minnesota. At the Minnesota Annual Conference (June 1–3, Saint Cloud), Bishop Sally Dyck gave the nearly 800 members of the conference a challenge: to interview someone who is not a church participant. "Increasingly, younger people are not joining churches," Bishop Dyck said in her episcopal address. "They are joining the fastest growing religious group in the country: the 'nones.'" Members passed a 2012 budget of \$6,367,332, which is \$175,000 lower than the 2011 budget. Membership is 72,284, down 2,435 from the previous year.

—Victoria Rebeck, Minnesota Annual Conf., as reported in NewScope, June 15, 2011.

North Alabama. Methodism first entered the North Alabama area through the Tennessee Valley, and for the first time in 58 years the conference returned to the Huntsville area as the 2011 North Alabama Conference met June 2–4, at Asbury UMC under the theme "Healthy Congregations." Bishop William H. Willimon presided. Membership is 143, 470, down 3,927 from the previous year.

- Danette Clifton, North Alabama Conference, as reported in NewScope, June 15, 2011.

<u>Oklahoma</u>. The Oklahoma Annual Conference was held May 29-June 1 in Oklahoma City (OKC), at St. Luke's UMC and Oklahoma City University. Theme was "The Plan-A Bridge to the Future." Eugene Lowry was guest preacher. Presiding bishop

Robert Hayes Jr. said bridge-builders in the Oklahoma Conference began implementing a Strategic Plan three years ago, similar to the Call to Action plan issued in 2010. Membership is 236,689, down 1,009 from the previous year.

- Holly McCray, Oklahoma Conference, as reported in NewScope, June 22, 2011.

Poland. The 90th Annual Conference in Poland, which took place June 3–5 in Warsaw under the theme "Remembering and Dreaming," was characterized by remembrance of the past and an outlook into the future. The outlook into the future found expression in discussions about the financial situation. The Church Council presented suggestions for local churches to encourage members to increase the local giving through offerings and donations. At present there are considerable regional differences in this regard. English-language schools have experienced a continuous decline in the number of students. On the other hand, the conference expressed thankfulness for the ongoing, faithful support from The UMC in Switzerland, particularly for the pastors' salaries. At the suggestion of one of the superintendents, General Superintendent Edward Puslecki was elected clergy delegate to General Conference 2012 (reserve delegate: Andrzej Malicki). Olgierd Benedyktowicz was elected lay delegate (reserve delegate: Agatha Kulanowska). The elections for Central Conference 2013 will take place next year.

- Office of Bishop Patrick Streiff, Zurich/Switzerland, as reported in NewScope, June 15, 2011.

South Georgia. More than 1,200 UMs felt God's presence during the 2011 South Georgia Annual Conference session, held June 5–9 in Tifton, Ga. Whether it was through warm greetings and friendly smiles, in the bright sun and blistering heat, or through the blinding dust storm and power outage, one thing was for certain: they were never alone. "In God's kingdom, no one is alone," said Bishop James R. King Jr., episcopal leader of the South Georgia area. "In God's Kingdom everyone deserves to be loved." With a theme of "Never Alone," Bishop King proclaimed that there is "no place to hide in the kingdom of God; there is no place to hide in true fellowship." Membership is 130,906, down 2,451 from the previous year.

- Kara Witherow and Kelly Roberson, as reported in *NewScope*, June 22, 2011.

Life's a pond. We are all pebbles. Never underestimate the difference one pebble can make.