



The United Methodist NEWSCOPE

Volume 32, No. 34/August 13, 2004

THE WEEKLY NEWSLETTER FOR UNITED METHODIST LEADERS

UM Worship and Attendance Figures Continue to Drop

Based on reports submitted by conference communicators and other reporters, the UMC in the United States is continuing its slow decline in membership and worship attendance. With 62 of 63 conferences reporting, **membership at the end of 2003 has declined by approximately 60,000 persons, or 0.7%, from the year before. Average attendance at the principal worship service declined by about 60,000 persons, or 2%** (61 conferences reporting). Numbers were provided by reporters in their annual conference reports printed in NEWSCOPE and are un-audited. Fifteen conferences reported a growth in membership, with North Georgia Conference reporting a 1.64% increase, or 5,399 persons, though worship attendance within the conference declined by 0.05%. No other annual conference reported a membership growth of more than one percent.

The largest percentage decline in membership (6.05% or 3,895 persons) was reported by the Wyoming Conference, covering parts of New York and Pennsylvania, though it reported no change in attendance. No other annual conference reported a decline in membership greater than 3%. In order of total membership, the top three conferences are Virginia (342,106), North Georgia (333,664), and Florida (329,018). However, Florida reported the largest worship attendance (161,375). West Ohio, with a 6,767-member drop to 243,888, slipped a notch to seventh in membership, behind Oklahoma (248,364). Kansas East Conference did not report membership or attendance information, while Tennessee Conference did not provide attendance statistics.

Only one annual conference reported both an increase in membership and an increase in worship attendance. The Mississippi Conference reported a 0.25%, or 483-person, increase in membership and a 0.57%, or 439-person, increase in attendance. Six other conferences reported an increase in worship attendance. West Ohio had the largest increase, with 2.34%, or 2,887 persons. The only other conferences to report an attendance growth greater than one percent were Peninsula-Delaware (1.61%) and Desert Southwest (1.52%, based on the 2002 figure reported in the *General Minutes*). The other conferences reporting attendance growth in order of percentage were Mississippi, Pacific Northwest, North Alabama, and South Georgia. The largest decline in attendance was reported by the New York Conference. The 15.58%, or 6,428-person, decrease in 2003 follows a 6.3%, or 2,653-person, growth in attendance during 2002, as reported in the *General Minutes*. New York did report a membership growth in 2003 of 802 persons, or 0.62%. Four other conferences reported a decrease of attendance greater than 5%: Red Bird Missionary, 7.78%; Rocky Mountain, 6.27%; East Ohio, 6.13%; and Nebraska, 5.40%.

Protestants Losing Majority, Study Suggests

A long-standing feature of U.S. religious life—a Protestant majority—may become a thing of the past, a new survey has concluded. Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, based at the University of Chicago, the survey found that “since colonial times, the United States has been a Protestant nation. But perhaps as early as this year (2004), the country will for the first time no longer have a Protestant majority.” **The number of those identifying themselves as Protestant, already declining in recent years, is expected to drop below 50% if present trends continue.** The survey results were announced on July 20. A Protestant majority may have already vanished in the two years since the survey was conducted. “The recent Protestant decline comes in large part from the loss of younger adherents and a related drop in the retention rate,” the survey stated. It added

***A concise, late-deadline report compiled and edited by the staff
of The United Methodist Publishing House***

that a number of factors “indicate that the Protestant share of the population will continue to shrink, and they will soon lose their majority position in American society.”

The survey of more than 2,650 respondents in 2002 found the number of those identifying themselves as Protestant dropped from 63% to 52% between 1993 and 2002. **At the same time, those saying they had no formal religious ties or identification increased from 9% to nearly 14%.** Other factors cited in the study for the decline of Protestant identification included increased numbers of immigrants from non-Protestant countries and the fact that fewer people in the United States are being raised as Protestants. The so-called “retention rate” for Protestants has also been dropping. From 1973 to 1993, nine out of ten Protestants raised in a Protestant home remained Protestant; however, now less than 83% remain Protestant as adults. Although Protestants have been a majority in the United States, Roman Catholics have constituted the nation’s biggest single denominational affiliation. — *Chris Herlinger, ENI*

Religious Leaders Condemn Iraq Church Bombings

UMs and other religious leaders have condemned the targeted attacks on Iraq’s Christian minority. In what appeared to be coordinated car bombings, explosions occurred at five churches during the customary period of Sunday evening mass on Aug. 1, killing at least ten people and wounding about 47 others. **R. Randy Day, general secretary of the UM General Board of Global Ministries,** expressed deep grief for the innocent children and adults killed and noted that both Christians and Muslims were among the victims of the bombings. “All of the people of Iraq are God’s children and we at the General Board of Global Ministries mourn the loss of each and every life,” he said. “We continue to condemn, in the strongest terms, all acts of violence, by individuals and institutions both domestic and foreign, in Iraq, a country that has suffered far too much to date.”

According to various news sources, the targeted churches included the Armenian Catholic Church in the Karrada District of central Baghdad; the Syrian Catholic Church at Saydat Al Najat, about a half mile away; the Korkis Chaldean Church in Doura, a neighborhood in southern Baghdad; an Assyrian church in the New Baghdad District; and the Mar Boulos Chaldean Church in Mosul.

Larry Pickens, general secretary of the UM General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, also condemned the bombings. “The direct attack upon people of faith in the holy sites does not in any way further any agenda other than the fostering of hatred and disunity,” he said. “It is our hope that an environment of greater tolerance will prevail and that those who are responsible for this targeted violence would cease these senseless acts.”

Robert Edgar, a UM pastor and general secretary of the U.S. National Council of Churches, has visited churches and met with church leaders in Iraq. “These communities trace their heritage in Iraq two thousand years, and during much of that time, both they and their Muslim neighbors have lived peacefully side by side,” he said. “This destructive action against the churches by extremists betrays that history of coexistence.” Edgar said the NCC has worked with the World Conference of Religions for Peace, whose moderator has met with Iraqi religious leaders forming an interreligious council. In an Aug. 2 statement, **Prince Hassan bin Talal, the Religions for Peace moderator,** called the church attacks “a new escalation in the extremists’ effort to incite a religious

Editor: Andrew J. Schleicher
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Publisher: Neil M. Alexander
NEWSCOPE, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202; ISSN 1073-4910.
For subscription concerns, call 1-800-672-1789.
To place a Positions Available announcement, send the information via e-mail to: umnewscope@umpublishing.org or fax: 615-749-6512.
For editorial matters, call: 615-749-6320; fax: 615-749-6512; e-mail: umnewscope@umpublishing.org; web page: <http://www.umph.com>.

NEWSCOPE © 2004 (USPS 961-360) is supported by subscription income and published by The United Methodist Publishing House. It is issued weekly except for the third and fourth weeks of December.
Subscription: \$22.00 (periodical class), \$28.00 (first class), \$38.00 (foreign), or \$16.00 (electronic mail) a year. Single copy: 50 cents.
Permission to quote granted to newsletters and media of The United Methodist Church, with credit. Periodical postage paid at Nashville, Tenn.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: United Methodist NEWSCOPE, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.

war” and “a particularly obscene blasphemy against the spirit of Islam and the character of Iraq.” He pointed out that Iraqis had never attacked a church before. Leaders from nearly every major Muslim group in Iraq spoke out forcefully against the bombings, according to an Aug. 3 article in *The New York Times*.

In an Aug. 2 statement, **the Middle East Council of Churches** called upon Iraq’s authorities “to cooperate intensively in order to prevent intercommunal discord and to frustrate the machinations of the evil ones who want to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims who have long lived together as one people.” Middle Eastern Christian leaders attending a **World Council of Churches** meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, also condemned the attacks.

Day said his agency would continue to support “the vital work” of the Middle East Council of Churches—whose own offices near the Armenian Catholic Church were damaged—as well as work with others on humanitarian relief efforts and Christian-Muslim dialogue in Iraq. Some humanitarian workers are beginning to return to Baghdad despite the ongoing violence, according to **Rick Augsburg, director of emergency programs for Church World Service**. CWS and the All My Children Campaign have supplied aid to children there by working with local Iraqis to deliver supplies and services. Since the campaign started 14 months ago, its projects have directly benefited more than 200,000 children through assistance to clinics, hospitals, a children’s theater project, and safe water supply projects. **The UM Committee on Relief** has been a participant in the campaign.
— *Linda Bloom, UMNS*

NCC, GBCS Join Call for Overhaul of Healthcare System

A coalition of close to 100 groups, including the U.S. National Council of Churches and the UM General Board of Church and Society, is asking the nation’s policymakers to overhaul the healthcare system. **The nonpartisan National Coalition on Health Care**, www.nchc.org, released specifications for system-wide reforms to help frame a renewed national debate about the healthcare system. The coalition is calling for political leaders to act immediately and to persist regardless of the outcome of the November election. The group, which includes businesses, religious groups, unions, insurers, consumer organizations, and providers, urged comprehensive reforms that would provide all persons access to healthcare, control rapidly rising health costs, and dramatically improve quality and patient safety measures.

“Without question, access to healthcare should be available to all people,” said James Winkler, GBCS general secretary, who spoke at the July 20 press conference on behalf of the 36-denomination NCC. “We simply cannot exclude people who cannot afford or who receive substandard healthcare,” added Winkler, who is a member of the NCC’s Justice and Advocacy Commission. “To do so is immoral, unfair, and just plain wrong.”

Recommendations of the National Coalition on Health Care are outlined in the report “Building a Better Health Care System: Specifications for Reform.” They call for: 1) requiring healthcare coverage for all in the United States within two to three years after the enactment of legislation; 2) bringing cost increases for healthcare in line with increases in other parts of the economy within five years; 3) launching a nationwide effort to improve dramatically the quality, safety, and value of care; 4) making the financing of healthcare more equitable; and 5) simplifying and modernizing the administration of healthcare. — *Leslie Tune, NCC*

Short Takes

- In June, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Mich., approved a \$978,800 grant to Africa University and named the institution a “local facilitating agency” for its program in the Chimanimani District. The district, located 56 miles south of Mutare, along Zimbabwe’s border

with Mozambique, has been a project of the university since 2000, following the devastation of Cyclone Eline. In this role, the university has direct involvement in projects aimed at helping Chimanimani residents to improve food security and community health; increase family incomes; grow stronger, more effective institutions and leaders; and safeguard and promote local arts and culture. — *Andra Stevens (UMNS)*

- For the first time in 43 years, an Anglican archbishop of Canterbury spoke to the British Methodist Conference. Recalling the recent signing of an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, Rowan Williams said on June 28, “I hope we become more than just friends.” In response to the view that the mainstream church is in decline and decay, Williams said, “A church that is deeply anxious and depressed about itself is a very poor evangelist.” He continued, “The answer to that is not to send round happiness patrols to try and cheer people up into a false sense of security; it is to encourage ourselves and each other to turn our eyes to the God who calls.” — *The Methodist Church*
- Bishop Vashti McKenzie, the first female bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, recently became president of the denomination’s Council of Bishops. This year, the church elected two additional women to the episcopacy. Sarah Frances Davis of San Antonio earned a Doctor of Ministry degree at UM-related Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. She will lead the AME Church’s 18th District, which includes the nations of Botswana, Lesotho, and Mozambique. Carolyn Tyler Guidry of Los Angeles was the other woman elected. She was assigned to the 16th District, which includes the Caribbean.
- The American Baptist Churches USA may reduce its missionary staff by up to 20%, according to a report by the Associated Baptist Press. A memo sent by the head of International Ministries to the missionaries stated that the agency needed to raise \$1.5 million in order to maintain its 150 missionary positions. The agency had already cut in half a \$3 million deficit by cutting back on mission programs, operations, and U.S.-based staff, the ABP reported. Charles Jones, acting executive director, said in his July 13 memo that the deficit is projected to increase in the next few years.
- The Washington-based Women’s Edge Coalition—a coalition of more than 40 organizations, including the UM Women—launched the Million Women Challenge for a Better, Safer World on July 20 in Washington. The campaign seeks to motivate a million U.S. women to urge their elected officials and political candidates to make women’s issues a priority in U.S. national security and foreign policies. The coalition produced a citizens’ action guide, “A Safer, Better World Begins with Women,” which highlights 12 pressing international issues, ranging from education and health to rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan to nuclear weapons and non-military alternatives. — *Shanta Bryant Gyan, UMNS*

Positions Available

Director of African American ministries. Contact: Maria James, General Board of Discipleship, P.O. Box 340003, Nashville, TN; phone: 877-899-2780, ext. 7100; fax: 615-340-7565; e-mail: recruit@gbod.org..... Vice president for academic affairs and academic dean. Contact: Human Resources Department, United Theological Seminary, 1810 Harvard Blvd., Dayton, OH 45406; e-mail: RMacGregor@united.edu; Web site: www.united.edu..... Vice president of pastoral care. Contact: Methodist Healthcare System, San Antonio, Texas; e-mail: michele.benoit@mhshealth.com; Web site: www.SAHealth.com..... Part-time choir director. Contact: Fourth Avenue UMC, 318 West St. Catherine Street, Louisville, KY 40203..... Youth minister. Contact: First UMC, Hueytown, Ala.; phone: 205-491-3421 (day-time) or 205-491-8833 (evening); e-mail: hfumc@bellsouth.net..... Director of field education. Contact: Sharon Mahon, The Divinity School, 101 New Divinity, Box 90968, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0968; e-mail: smahon@div.duke.edu; Web site: www.hr.duke.edu.

Personalia

Kwasi Kena will be joining the General Board of Discipleship/Discipleship Ministries staff as the director of evangelism, effective Sept. 1. For the past two years, Kwasi served as the field services director of the General Commission on UM Men.