

United Methodists Invade Pittsburgh for General Conference

Days before the opening gavel of United Methodism's top legislative body, some meetings had already begun, and other preparations were underway. As this issue of NEWSSCOPE went to press, delegates, bishops, and other participants and observers were gathering together for the General Conference's opening worship.

Entering Pittsburgh on the heels of the National Rifle Association's annual meeting, 998 delegates and thousands of UM advocates from around the world filed into area hotels and lined up to register in the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. With its grand opening last year, the center was built to be the largest certified green building in the world.

As soon as the convention center was accessible for those setting up, preparations began inside the building. Risers were erected, tables were laid out, cords were drawn out and taped down, and plenty of "pipe and drape" was hung to designate working space.

Bishops Issue Pastoral Letter in Advance of Conference

Meeting prior to the opening of General Conference, the **Council of Bishops agreed to a pastoral letter expressing a call for Christian conferencing.** The letter referred to a number of issues that have arisen in the months leading up to this conference. First, bishops mentioned the difficulties faced by many delegates from outside the United States, primarily related to the challenge of obtaining visas necessary for travel to the States. The council also named the tension of financial and mission needs as well as the recent church trial in the Pacific Northwest Conference.

The bishops did not go into specifics on any of these contentious issues but described themselves as a family. "That means we love each other, we listen to each other, and sometimes we vigorously disagree with each other," the bishops said in their letter. "On some issues, including human sexuality, we are not of one opinion. At the same time, we are united in our commitment to Jesus Christ. We are united in our commitment to practice and advocate unity. We are united in our commitment to uphold *The Book of Discipline*. We are united in our conviction that the critical issues will not be ultimately resolved with legislation. We will find the answers in Christ-like love, expressed in dialogue, mutual respect, and a humble search for the mind of God. Schism is not a part of God's plan for the church. . . . We pray that the General Conference will do its work in the same spirit of mutual respect and unity."

Study: Clergy Delegates Are Mostly Men with Greater Income

Clergy delegates are more likely to be men with a higher household income than lay delegates, according to a survey conducted by the Office of Research and Planning, General Council on Ministries. In October 2003 the office distributed 800 surveys to U.S. delegates. Approximately 300 clergy and 300 lay delegates responded. **While lay delegates are nearly evenly split between male and female persons, 65% of the responding clergy delegates were men.** Lay delegates were more likely to have never been married, though 90% of all delegates are married, widowed, or divorced.

U.S. clergy delegates have a higher income than lay delegates. While approximately the same percentage of clergy and laity have a household income of greater than \$100,000, **31% of clergy household income is in the \$75,000–\$99,999 range. Of the lay delegates responding, 15% have household income in the same range.** Of the lay delegates, 55% are employed full-time, part-time, or are self-employed. Another 30% are retired. Of the clergy, 42% of the delegates responded as being a senior pastor, while 30% are district superintendents. Another 7% listed themselves as being the sole pastor or in an extension ministry within conference bounds.

The survey also asked delegates about what they thought the top issues were for the 2004 General Conference. Homosexuality, church finances, restructuring, and membership have remained among the top issues since 1988. Other top issues this year include war and violence, racism, poverty, “engaging a changing world,” and “diversity and inclusivity.”

UM-related Publications Named Best of Christian Press

Three UM-related publications received four awards of excellence from the Associated Church Press on April 20, possibly resulting in their work appearing in a new compilation of the best of the Christian press. *The United Methodist Reporter* received two awards of excellence, one for editorial courage and one for a newspaper theme issue (“John Wesley Three Hundred Years”). *Zion’s Herald* received an award of excellence for Scott Campbell’s magazine column.

The award for best-in-class Web site went to www.MethodX.org. MethodX is a site developed for young adults by The Upper Room (www.UpperRoom.org also received an award of merit). UM-related publications also received numerous other awards and honorable mentions. In a new cooperative venture between the ACP and Church Publishing Inc., many of the award recipients will be featured in a book to be published by spring of 2005.

March for Women’s Lives Brings Million, Including UMW

An estimated 1.15 million people, including 50–100 under the banner of the UM Women’s Division, marched April 25 in a Washington, D.C., rally that has been labeled as **an abortion-rights march. With the rally officially titled the March for Women’s Lives, the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries said the rally is addressing more issues than just abortion.** Women’s Division president Genie Bank was among the marchers. According to Julie A. Taylor, executive secretary with the Women’s Division, “it’s important for the church to be a visible presence in this march so that we can say, ‘We’re a safe sanctuary for you if you need counseling, to help with your decision, or to be a supportive shoulder for you in your time of struggle.’”

“As women of faith, we need to be there to encourage common understanding and respect among women. Hurtful rhetoric on either side of the issue can lead to the escalation of violence against women and their health providers,” Bank said. “Reproductive choice is much more complex than the simple rhetoric.” According to a *USA Today* report, the rally was peaceful, though 17 anti-abortion protesters were arrested for demonstrating without a permit.

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Division directors voted last fall to become one of the numerous cosponsors of the march, which is designed as a public demonstration in support of reproductive freedom and other justice issues for women. **The UM General Board of Church and Society also is a cosponsor**, said Linda Bales, program director of the board's Louise & Hugh Moore Population Project. Other religious cosponsors of the April 25 march include the American Friends Service Committee, Catholics for a Free Choice, Episcopal Church USA, General Synod, United Church of Christ, Unitarian-Universalist Association of Congregations, Union for Reform Judaism, and National Council of Jewish Women.

Principal organizers of the March for Women's Lives are the American Civil Liberties Union, Black Women's Health Imperative, Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, National Organization for Women, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

HIPAA Regulations Bring Confusion, Guidelines

New federal regulations meant to protect patient privacy have prompted clergy to re-examine privacy concerns in their congregations. The regulations, part of the **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act**, are so vast and new that they have caused widespread confusion.

The law was enacted in 1996 to address health insurance issues. Its privacy regulations direct health plans and providers—not clergy—in how to share patient information. **They do not prohibit clergy from visiting patients or praying for them with their congregations. The new rules do prohibit clergy from sharing patient information without consent when clergy are employed by hospitals as chaplains or churches that provide mental health services.** Traditional pastoral counseling provided at no charge does not make a church a health provider subject to HIPAA's privacy regulations.

HIPAA is not the only law regulating the disclosure of private information. In general, less information is better when sharing prayer requests with congregations. When possible, it is best to get consent from parishioners before sharing anything about them. More information is available online at <http://answers.hhs.gov> and www.gcfa.org. — *Amy Green (UMNS)*

Church World Service Launches New Africa Campaign

The new board of directors of Church World Service has approved plans for a multi-year Africa Initiative. The program is intended to help Africa's at-risk populations—children, people with HIV/AIDS, and all those "uprooted" by war, disaster, or turmoil, including refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons. CWS also will give special attention to the needs and rights of African women and girls.

A presence in Africa for 50 years, the global humanitarian agency will continue its current programs across the continent, said John L. McCullough, executive director of CWS and a UM clergyman, but the new initiative "will add distinctive new programs that grow out of the critical role that Africans will play in constructing their future." **The programs are Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution, Durable Solutions for the Displaced, Hunger and Poverty Alleviation, Water for Life, and HIV/AIDS.**

CWS efforts will be concentrated in the West African countries of the Mano River region—Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea—as well as Angola, Sudan, and Tanzania. Those countries were chosen after consultations with African leaders. McCullough said CWS is "joining with the All-Africa Conference of Churches, African regional councils of churches, U.S. churches, the United

Nations, humanitarian agencies, and civil society institutions” in committing funds and resources to the effort. — *Ann Walle, CWS*

Short Takes

- R. Randy Day, general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries, called the 2004 General Conference a world mission event. “Some 200 of the voting delegates come from Europe, Africa, and the Philippines,” Day said in an April 20 statement. “They represent conferences that in large part have emerged from mission initiatives across the decades. They are living testaments to the global nature of the church and its mission.” Last year GBGM indefinitely postponed its Global Gathering event and produced a mission fundraising telethon.
- As the 2004 General Conference begins, nearly 3,000 hours of work toward the *Daily Christian Advocate* have already been put in by more than 60 employees of the UM Publishing House. Beginning when general agency reports first started arriving in August 2003, Marvin Cropsey, DCA editor, and Norma Bates, associate editor for the Advance Edition, together put in 1,600 hours for the production of the Advance Edition. A total of 4,000 English editions were printed and are available at www.Cokesbury.com.
- While the number of General Conference delegates without visas is not final, delegations from some Central Conferences may need to rely on reserves, if they are available. There also may be empty seats. The Council of Bishops was expected to issue a statement as *NEWSCOPE* was going to press. In the statement, bishops cited their “deep concern and outrage regarding the lack of hospitality extended to these delegates.” They pledged to work with various general agencies and the Commission on General Conference to address the problems. — *Tom Slack, DCA*
- Salomon Cabezas Almeida was consecrated April 4 as the first Methodist bishop of Ecuador. The ceremony was officiated by Bishop Ricardo Pereira from the Methodist Church of Cuba and Bishop Juan Vera from the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. Cabezas Almeida was the first president of the United Evangelical Methodist Church of Ecuador. — *Manuel Quintero*
- The United Church of Canada announced April 23 that it has been granted the right to intervene in the Canadian Supreme Court proceedings on same-sex marriage scheduled for October. In its request to appear, the United Church argued that as one of only three Christian churches that perform same-sex marriages, it had a direct interest in the issues being raised. The United Church came about as the result of a 1925 merger of the Methodist Church, Canada; Congregational Union of Canada; and 70% of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.
- President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya said the roles of the church and state were complementary in the socio-economic development of the country. Kibaki was speaking April 14 when he held discussions with an ecumenical delegation led by Sam Kobia, general secretary of the World Council of Churches and a clergyman in the Methodist Church of Kenya. Kibaki encouraged the church to be more proactive in providing directions on the way forward.

Personalia

Capt. Karen Meeker, a UM chaplain, received on April 22 the Military Chaplain Association’s Distinguished Service Award for 2004, the highest honor presented to clergy serving in the U.S. Army. Meeker serves at Fort Bragg, N.C., and is the first female chaplain assigned to the Army Special Operations Command..... **Bishop Marion M. Edwards** (Raleigh Area) will join UM-related LaGrange College, LaGrange, Ga., as bishop-in-residence after his retirement from the episcopacy this summer..... **Sally Dyck** of the East Ohio Conference was endorsed for the episcopacy by the Northern Illinois Conference delegation to general and jurisdictional conferences.