

Daily wrap-up: United Methodists begin legislative marathon

April 23, 2008

NOTE: Photographs and video are available with this report at www.gc2008.org.

*By J. Richard Peck**

FORT WORTH, Texas (UMNS) — Meeting once every four years, 992 delegates from United Methodist churches in the United States, Africa, Asia and Europe, opened their 10-day legislative sessions with the singing of “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” and “Are We Yet Alive.”

Some 5,500 visitors, conference officials and choir members observed the pageantry from the galleries of the Fort Worth Convention Center.

The two-hour service featured praise bands, a full orchestra, choirs, music, prayers and Scripture in many tongues, and symbols of the Christian faith using ordinary elements of glass, wood, bread, fruit of the vine and water.

On the 40th anniversary to the day when the Evangelical United Brethren Church united with the Methodist Church to create The United Methodist Church, and within 40 miles of where it happened, delegates from 129 annual conferences and 50 countries met to establish policies for the 11.5 million-member denomination and to declare positions on social justice issues.

Focused on the theme “A Future with Hope: Making Disciples for the Transformation of the World,” delegates gathered about a Communion table made from trees salvaged from Gulfside Assembly in Waveland, Miss. Destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, the trees also provided the material for the altar rail, baptismal font and lectern. Gulfside served as a retreat center and meeting place for African Americans before the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Iowa Area Bishop Gregory Palmer and Houston Area Bishop Janice Riggle Huie officiated at the Communion service.

Bishop Huie’s sermon sounded a clear call that, even in the midst of a world filled with AIDS, malaria, violence, global climate change and fear, United Methodists are called to live a life with hope – resurrection hope.

Bishop Huie said that the word “hope” was becoming a “marshmallow word. It sounds soft. It looks sweet and appealing. Get it close to the fire, and hope melts off the stick and drips on the ground.

“Resurrection hope transforms lives and changes the future,” the bishop said. “Tonight, through us, the people of The United Methodist Church gather around this table filled with resurrection hope.”

Following the opening Communion service, the assembly adopted the rules of order delegates would be following for the next nine days. Some 1,500 petitions will first be considered in 13 legislative committees before they are brought to the full plenary sessions for final action. Those committees will begin work tomorrow.

Council of Bishops

The Council of Bishops met prior to the opening of General Conference and elected Alabama-West Florida Area Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster as president of the council effective in 2010. Iowa Bishop Gregory Palmer was elected last November to serve a two-year term as council president following Houston Area Bishop Janice Riggle Huie, who leaves office at the close of General Conference.

Forty-four of the bishops spoke in various churches in the Fort Worth area on Sunday, April 20.

During the bishops' meeting, Seattle Area Bishop Ed Paup formally tendered his resignation from the council to become the top staff executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. He was elected to that post last March and is scheduled to assume his new duties in September. The election and resignation to assume a post with a United Methodist agency was a first in the 40-year history of the denomination.

Orientation sessions

Opening day activities included orientation sessions for women, ethnic and racial minorities and delegates from nations outside the United States.

International delegates to General Conference receive translations through headsets. Sessions are translated into German, French, Portuguese, Swahili and Spanish.

Caroline Njuki, an executive with the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries' Africa office, reminded international delegates that they were free to participate in any meals or events sponsored by church agencies and caucus groups without feeling obligated to vote a certain way.

“You will be invited to breakfast, lunch and dinner, and the people who invite you will want to influence your vote,” Njuki told the overseas delegates. “You are free to partake of their food, and nobody will be looking at you when you vote.”

For the ninth time, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, co-sponsored an orientation for women. Participants received information about legislation related to both groups.

More than 55 of the 71 youth and young adult delegates, including first reserves, were given an opportunity to meet one another during the orientation for delegates under 30.

One youth, Marshall Bailey, 17, a delegate from the Virginia Annual Conference, scanned the 1,560-page [Advance Daily Christian Advocate](#) and turned it into a PDF file to be used on

computers of youth and young adult delegates. The three-volume edition includes all the legislation to be considered during the gathering.

In the orientation for racial and ethnic minority delegates, David Maldonado, chairman of the Inter-Ethnic Strategy Development Group, said, "We are here to support a very important vision and future for people of color in The United Methodist Church."

An exhibit area includes displays from various United Methodist agencies. The United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race sponsors a "Journey to Inclusiveness" exhibit that includes a "Human Race Machine," which enables white people to view computer images of their faces as they would look if they were African American.

AIDS Conference

Pre-General Conference activities included an April 22 conference on AIDS, sponsored by the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund Committee.

Four years ago, General Conference set a goal of \$1 per member for the nearly 8 million members of the denomination in the United States. The Rev. Donald Messer, executive director of an ecumenical global AIDS action network, reported that only \$2.5 million had been raised toward that \$8 million goal. He said raising funds has been hampered by fear, theological taboos and stigma surrounding the epidemic.

Bike riders concluded a 238-mile, four-day bike ride to raise money for Nothing But Nets. Finishing at the convention center on April 23, the group raised \$156,144 for mosquito nets to protect African families from malaria.

The first two days of the conference are filled with major addresses and worship services. During the following eight days, delegates will be knee-deep in parliamentary procedures offering amendments and substitute motions to proposals from individuals, churches, annual conferences and churchwide agencies.

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