



2008

## Lay Member Summary

It's been more than 200 years since the founding of Methodism in the United States, but the practices of reaching and making disciples of Jesus Christ established by John and Charles Wesley are still very much at the heart of United Methodism today. This year's Florida Annual Conference Event focused on those roots and challenged members to live the Methodist Way of being and making disciples "for the transformation of the world."

**Embracing the church's Wesleyan roots:** More than 1,600 lay and clergy members and guests gathered May 29-31 at the Lakeland Center under the theme "Living The United Methodist Way," reflecting the church's Wesleyan heritage of disciple-making. The theme is one of several emphases established by the United Methodist Council of Bishops for all congregations, and it's part of the broader denominational mission of "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World."

**Learning to live 'The Methodist Way':** The Council of Bishops proposed seven "vision pathways" that represent the major work of the church in fulfilling its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, including teaching the Wesleyan model of disciple-making. This year's event supported that pathway through workshops on the five practices of The Methodist Way, a modern expression of Wesleyan practices considered fundamental to reaching and making disciples. More than 700 members and guests arrived at the Lakeland Center May 28, a day before the conference officially began, to participate in classes on passionate worship, radical hospitality, intentional discipling, "salty" service and extravagant generosity.

**Considering the work of the whole church:** Members heard a report from Florida Conference delegation leaders Bill Walker, out-going conference lay leader, and the Rev. Jorge Acevedo, pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, about action taken at the 2008 General Conference, the church's top lawmaking body, April 23-May 2 in Fort Worth, Texas. Among the recommendations the 992 delegates from 50 countries approved were four areas of emphasis for the denomination based on several of the bishops' vision pathways: developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world, starting new congregations and revitalizing existing ones, engaging in ministry with the poor, and fighting diseases of poverty, such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. General Conference delegates also approved a denominational budget of \$642 million for the next four years that was developed around the four focus areas, with the church's general agencies aligning their work and budget requests with those emphases. Several recommendations from General Conference must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the aggregate of all annual conferences and will be considered at a future Florida Conference session, including 23 constitutional amendments that would make it possible for the church in the United States to be structured more like a regional or central conference, fitting into a more uniform global structure that is less U.S.-focused when issues and business of the denomination as a whole are being considered.

### Addressing the four focus areas:

- **Launching new communities of faith:** New Church Development reported 17 new churches and missions have begun since 2005. The goal for 2008 and 2009 is to launch 19 and 16 communities of faith, respectively. Of the slightly more than \$1 million members approved for new churches and missions, 75 percent is for ethnic congregations — Hispanic, Haitian, Korean and Chinese.
- **Revitalizing and helping congregations remain vital:**
  - Congregational Transformation reported that 70 of the conference's churches were among the top 10 percent experiencing significant numbers of professions of faith and average worship attendance in 2007, gauged in terms of highest numbers and greatest numeric and percentage increases. Professions of faith and average weekly worship attendance are considered two of the most missionally significant measurements of a congregation's effectiveness.
  - Based on its review of the African-American Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted at the 2007 conference session, the African-American Task Team recommended funding a director of African-American Congregational Development. That recommendation was approved. The director will work in consultation with the director of Congregational Transformation to provide

resources and development assistance for African-American churches. Of the conference's 722 churches, approximately 75 or 9.6 percent are African-American.

- **Ensuring the health of our communities' youngest members:** At last year's conference event members approved an initiative to make children the top social witness priority of the conference, with an emphasis on ending childhood hunger. Members of the newly-formed Florida Conference Children's Advocacy and Ministry Coalition reported that since the 2007 session a training to help churches start day camps for children with no place to go during the summer months was held, United Methodists participated in Children's Week at the state's capitol to advocate on behalf of children's issues and planning has begun for a training session to help churches become summer feeding centers. Coalition members also gave each conference member a CD toolkit that includes resources and information on ways churches can help end childhood hunger.

**Passing the mantle:** Members elected Sharon Luther, a member of Cypress Lake United Methodist Church in Fort Myers and associate lay leader in the South West District, as the new conference lay leader, succeeding Bill Walker, a long-time member of First United Methodist Church, Winter Park.

**Strengthening ministries:** Churches gave an offering of \$70,143 at the communion service May 29 in support of three conference ministries: 60 percent will be directed to the East Angola/Florida Partnership, 20 percent will support the legal immigration counseling ministry in Central Florida and 20 percent will strengthen Florida children's ministries with the Council of Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty.

**Celebrating ongoing ministries:** Members celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the Florida United Methodist Children's Home and the denomination's United Methodist Men's ministry. They also celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Advance for Christ and His Church, created as a ministry of spiritual and physical relief in response to the devastation of World War II. Since its inception, more than \$1.3 billion has been channeled through The Advance as "second-mile" giving.

**Making a place for the next generations:** Following on the heels of a first-ever young people's delegation of 100 youth and young adults at last year's event, 22 youth and 41 young adults attended this year's conference. The drop in attendance was attributed to some schools still being in session and the conference session starting earlier this year. Leaders of the Florida Conference Network of Ministries of Young People, which includes separate "tables" for youth, young adults and workers with young people and was formally approved at last year's annual conference event, reported on accomplishments of the network since its inception. The youth table is planning a training weekend for student leadership teams in October; the young adult table is providing training for young adults currently in the church and finding new ways to reach non-churched young adults; and the adult workers table has crafted a three-year plan concentrating on connecting and networking in 2008, training in 2009 and resourcing in 2010.

**Considering the financial health of the conference:**

- The conference statistician reported membership in the Florida Conference in 2007 was 310,711, a decline of 7,005 or 2 percent from 2006. Average weekly worship attendance was 151,354, a decline of 3,827 or 2 percent. Professions of faith totaled 6,897, a decline of 796 or 10 percent.
- The Ministry Protection committee reported there has been a decrease of 22 percent in the cost of property, casualty and workers' compensation insurance premiums — the first premium reduction in many years — saving the conference more than \$4 million on insurance in 2008.
- The Council on Finance and Administration reported apportionment giving totaled nearly \$15.3 million or 81.7 percent, down from nearly \$16.8 million and 87.2 percent in 2006 and below the recent five-year average of 86.3 percent. Property and casualty premiums increased from nearly \$15 million in 2006 to \$18.3 million in 2007. A drop in operating expenses and little storm activity in 2007 offset the reduction in apportionment giving, strengthening the financial condition of the conference. Conference members approved a 2009 budget of nearly \$18.5 million — an increase of slightly more than \$1.04 million or 6.04 percent over the 2008 budget.

**Celebrating partners in ministry:** Conference members celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of 30 clergypersons' ordination and the retirement of 26 clergy. A total of 46 people were licensed, commissioned, ordained and had their orders recognized.