Announcements and deadlines for Annual Conference 2008

Special offerings
Churches are asked to collect offerings to send with their conference members for Liberia, for scholarships for Africa University, for the Tom Brown Scholarship at Wiley College, the ordinands’ mission trip and the Global AIDS Fund.

In addition, the Midwest Mission Distribution Center will be collecting flood buckets and flood bucket supplies to replenish their stock after hundreds of buckets were sent to the Watseka and Pontiac areas this spring. The list of materials for the flood buckets are found at the MMDC website: http://www/midwestmissiondc.org/index.cfm?go=GetPage&id=143.

Memorial service names
The memorial service includes both clergy and lay members to annual conference who have died in the last year. Names of lay members to annual conference can be submitted to Conference Lay Leader Rhonda Whitaker whitakers@mchs.com for inclusion in the service.

Housing registration
Each person is responsible for securing their own housing. A chart of hotels that have reserved blocks of rooms for the conference will be available in Exhibit Hall D as well as the Ordination service on Friday. Wireless internet access will be available in Exhibit Halls B and C with displays and places in which persons can eat. Materials for the flood buckets are found at the Midwest Mission Distribution Center.

Display space
Officially-recognized groups who wish to reserve display space must do so prior to May 15 in order to get the block rate. Contact Nancy Patton at npatton@igrc.org if you need phone numbers, room rates or a map showing locations. These materials were previously mailed to each member.

Bishop issues second appeal for funds
By Paul Black
Widespread flooding in southern Illinois has prompted Bishop Sharon A. Brown Christopher to issue a second special appeal for disaster relief.

Bishop Christopher issued a request for a $10,000 grant from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to assist flooding in southern Illinois. In addition, she is calling on IGRC congregations to take up a second special offering for funding the Conference Disaster Assistance Fund.

Congregations need to note the designation for “Conference Disaster Assistance Fund #6800 and the notation Southern Illinois Great Rivers Conference” for inclusion in the service.

Illinois Great Rivers Conference is available. Reservations must be made prior to May 15 in order to get the block rate. Contact Nancy Patton at npatton@igrc.org if you need phone numbers, room rates or a map showing locations. These materials were previously mailed to each member.

Bishop Ough to speak at Annual Conference
By Paul Black
Bishop Bruce Ough will be the guest speaker at the 2008 Annual Conference session June 4-7 in Peoria, Bishop Sharon A Brown Christopher has announced.

Ough, who is episcopal leader of the West Ohio Conference, will address the conference Thursday and Friday mornings as lay and clergy members gather for the 12th annual conference session. Elected to the episcopacy in 2000, Ough is completing his second term in West Ohio after serving as superintendent, Council on Ministries director and local church pastor in Iowa.

The theme of the 2008 annual conference will be “Living the United Methodist Way and will focus on the General Rules established by John Wesley. These guidelines, which retired Bishop Reuben Job has called Three Simple Rules are: Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God.

The three-day conference will have several new features as additional space at the Peoria Civic Center, the site of the conference, has been opened for use.
A Weekend with Marcus Borg set for April 4-6

Theological and biblical scholar Marcus Borg, one of the nation’s foremost interpreters of progressive Christianity, will be in Evanston April 4-6 to deliver four lectures and preach a Sunday sermon at First United Methodist Church.

A Weekend with Marcus Borg at the Evanston church, located at 516 Church St. near downtown Evanston, will begin at 7 p.m. Friday, April 4 with a free lecture, “Two Visions of Christianity Today.” On Sunday, April 6, he will give the Virginia Bailey Memorial sermon during the 154-year-old congregation’s regular 10:30 a.m. worship service.

Under the theme, Being Christian in the 21st Century, Borg will deliver three lectures on Saturday, April 5 when time has been built in for audience response. His presentations are titled:

9 to 10:30 a.m. “Beyond Literalism to Reconciliation and Christian Language.”
11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. “Beyond Christian Convention to Intention and Practice.”
1:15 p.m. “Beyond Cultural Convention to Alternative Values and Community.”

There is a $40 registration fee that covers all three Saturday lectures and lunch for those who preregister. For students, the fee is $25. Funds are available for scholarships. Hotel information and registration forms are online at http://firs-tume-evanston.org/New/Marcus.html.

Since the publication of the best-seller Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time in 1984, Borg has built a coast-to-coast reputation as a professor and author with solid academic credentials who is able to connect with popular audiences of laypeople and spiritual seekers. Borg was one of the original participants in the Jesus Seminar, a cluster of biblical scholars dedicated to determining the historical authenticity of Jesus’ sayings in the Christian gospels. His other popular books include Reading the Bible Again for the First Time and The Heart of Christianity.

Denman, Cartwright deadlines extended

Deadline for the Denman Evangelism Award and the Peter Cartwright Lifetime Evangelism Award have been extended to Sunday, April 6.

Those eligible for the Denman awards are persons who are effective in developing true disciples of Jesus Christ. Three awards are given annually – clergy, laity and youth. This can involve personal witnessing, speaking and inspiring individual persons or the local church to be actively involved in effective evangelism and outreach.

The Peter Cartwright Evangelism Award of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference is awarded to someone who has exceptional leadership qualities to help our conference in making disciples of Jesus Christ. This person’s lifetime example challenges pastors and lay people to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. Where the Denman award is given for a period of work the Peter Cartwright Lifetime Evangelism Award is given to a retired pastor who has reflected this work throughout their ministry.

The Denman Evangelism Awards were begun in 1980 to honor a United Methodist lay adult, youth and clergy person in each annual conference who exhibited unusual and outstanding efforts for work in Christian evangelism by faithfully carrying out the mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ.”

The award is named for the late Dr. Harry Denman, distinguished Methodist lay evangelist. The awards are made possible by The Foundation for Evangelism, which was founded in 1949 by Dr. Denman.

Application forms are online at the www.igr.org Click on “Downloads” in the right-hand column, select “Ministries” in the left-hand column and “Evangelism.” The respective forms are located for both Denman and Cartwright awards.

For more information, contact the IGRC Evangelism Committee chair Rev. Dr. Troy Benitone by emailing TDB30@aol.com or by calling 217-625-4381. The selection process is administered by the IGRC Evangelism Committee.

New Horizon to host small groups conference

Champaign New Horizon UMC will be hosting its Seventh Annual Small Groups Conference on Saturday, April 19.

Keynote speaker for the event is Dr. Steve Cordle, founding and senior pastor of Crossroads UMC in Pittsburgh, Pa. Cordle has authored the book, The Church in Many Houses: Reaching Your Community through Cell-Based Ministry (Abingdon Press). Since its inception in 1990, Crossroads used small group ministry to spawn 68 cell groups and an average worship attendance of 1,100 at three worship locations.

The conference will include main sessions with Cordle on the topics, Growing and Sustaining Group Leaders and Catalyzing a Small Group Movement. Breakout sessions on Coaching Group Leaders, Getting Small Groups off the Ground, Critical Issues that Help Groups Grow and Loving All Who Attend Your Small Group will also be a part of the morning and afternoon schedule.

Registration is available online at www.newhorizonchurch.org or by contacting Deb Wonderlich at deb@newhorizonchurch.org or by calling 217-359-8909. Early bird registration and group discounts apply for registrations received prior to April 10.

Peoria Interfaith Alliance to host storytelling festival

The Peoria Interfaith Alliance, in cooperation with Seven Circles Cultural Heritage Society, Prairie Folklore Theatre, The United Methodist Church, the Peoria Prairie Tellers and Twin City Tale Spinners will host the Pimiteoui Storytelling Festival Saturday, April 5, from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. at the Peoria Public Library.

The event will include a two-hour morning workshop, Learning to Tell Our Story and two sessions will be conducted concurrently. A multi-cultural feast, in which local restaurants will provide one of their favorite dishes and each host a specific theme for persons to discuss their favorite stories. An evening concert, featuring storyteller, author, and educator Brian “Fox” Ellis and WEEK morning news anchor Garry Moore will culminate the day’s festivities.

Persons may pre-register by calling 309-689-8000. There is no charge for the event. For more information, contact Ellis at 309-696-1017 or Carol Lakota Eastin at: nacarloa@mtcno.com or by calling 309-397-5957.

The event is made possible in part by a grant from Peoria’s Community Foundation and the United Methodist Church’s General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

Steinke to speak at Connectional Table

Nationally-known presenter and congregational consultant Peter Steinke will be speaking at the IGRC Connectional Table learning event on Thursday, April 10 at the Conference Center from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Steinke will be speaking on Growing a Healthy Conference System, which will draw upon systems theory to examine how conferences function, how dysfunction can occur and how leaders can be equipped to promote healthy systems.

Registration deadline is April 3. Cost for the day is $15 which includes lunch. Contact Sandy Freiheit in the Area Office by emailing sfreiheit@igr.org or by calling 217-529-3820. A registration form is available for download on the IGRC website.

UMW’s September getaway steeped in chocolate

How sweet it is! Join the IGRC UMW as they indulge at Chocolate Boutique: Where women taste and see that the Lord is good. The theme retreat will lavish participants as they connect the extravagance of chocolate with the extravagance of God’s love and grace.

The Getaway will be held at The Chateau Hotel and Conference Center in Bloomington and begins with indulgent desserts of the chocolate variety (with sugar free selections as well) at 6 p.m. Friday, Sept. 19 and will finish by 3:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 20.

Cost of this event covers Friday’s dessert, Saturday’s breakfast buffet, lunch, snacks, very comfortable lodging (with access to the Chateau’s pool and hot tub), and of course, all of the sweet, faithful, fun found in the Chocolate Boutique stations and group sessions.

For more information, contact Julie Cunningham at 309-820-9827 or Claire Brucker at 309-667-3451. A blog site for the event has been created at http://chocolateboutique.blogspot.com.

A registration form is available on the IGRC website.

United Methodist Day at the ballpark June 14

The IGRC United Methodist Men will host United Methodist Day at Busch Stadium in St. Louis Saturday, June 14, when the Cardinals play the Philadelphia Phillies. Game time is 2:55 p.m.

Tickets may be reserved between now and June 6. A total of 500 outfield box seats are available for $30 each. A block of 800 infield terrace reserved seats are $10 each. All proceeds going to the IGRC United Methodist Men. Tickets will be handled on a first-come, first-served basis and will be mailed to the church’s ticket coordinator.

A ticket order form is available on the IGRC website. For more information, email Tom Correnti at: UMMBalls@swell.net or call 314-631-3994.

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70 years of marriage

Wilbur and Mary Kahl celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary Feb. 24 at the Shipman UMC. Wilbur and Mary were married Feb. 26, 1938, at the Lutheran Church parsonage in St. Charles, Mo. Both Wilbur and Mary have lived their entire lives in Shipman, where he was employed at the Shipman Elevator and worked as a salesman for F.S. Petroleum where he retired in 1980. He remains active in the Lions Club. The couple has three children and are still active in Shipman UMC.

Shook honored with LillyforLife Award

In consultation with the Cabinet of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, Bishop Sharon A. Brown Christopher appoints the following pastors: Mark Horn to Collinsville: First, Mississippi River District, effective July 1. Allen Wayne Miller to Fairview Heights: Christ Associate, Mississippi River District, effective July 1. Steve Pichaske to Rushville: First, LaMoine River District, effective July 1. Roger S. Ross to Springfield: First, Sangamon River District, effective March 9. Sally Swaim to Middlefork, Iroquois River District, effective Jan. 1. Note: This is a change in appointment from half-time to three-quarters time. Randy McGeehon to Elwin, Sangamon River District, effective July 1. Dennis Smith to Salt Creek Parish, Iroquois River District, effective July 1, 2008.

Appointments

Rev. Robert Shook, pastor of Petersburg UMC, was one of eight recipients who received the LillyforLifeTM 50-year Insulin Award. The award was given by Eli Lilly and Company in recognition of people with diabetes who have been on insulin for at least 50 years. Prior to the Award presentation Feb. 27, Michael Bliss presented a short historical perspective of the discovery of insulin and the diabetic patient. Prior to insulin’s discovery in 1921, a diabetic diagnosis was imminent death, a reality for 2 percent of the population.

The medical profession knew very well the symptoms but there was no real life sustaining treatment. At best a diabetic’s life could be extended only from months to a year or more by a therapy of starvation. The treatment was water with only 350 to 800 calories per day with fast days, days with fluid only. Mr. Bliss’s presentation included pictures of diabetic youth who looked like the victims of the holocaust. Mr. Bliss closed his presentation sharing from Ezekiel’s Valley of dry bones. In his book The Discovery of Insulin, Bliss quotes that Joslin, a practicing doctor of diabetes committed in the winter of 1921 that “…I had witness so many near resurrections that I (Joslin) realized I was seeing enacted before my very eyes Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones.”

Rev. Shook gives thanksgiving to God for His mercy. That mercy comes in the insulin he has used for 58 years, the care and support from his doctors, his mother, wife and family and the health care of the IGRC. He says “The Lord’s mercy saved me from a premature death and I have been given the opportunity to share the Lord’s love for all.”

Paup elected as GBGM general secretary

He will assume his new position on September 1, 2008, and at that time will resign from the episcopacy, retaining his status as an ordained elder (clergy) in the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference. At the mission agency, Paup will succeed Bishop Selton E. May, who was named interim general secretary in October 2007.

May has served as interim general secretary since last fall when the GBGM voted not to re-appoint Illinois native Randy Day for another term as general secretary.

The general secretary-elect has been a director of Global Ministries since 2004. He currently chairs the Health and Relief unit, which incorporates the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) and the Health and Welfare Unit. He was the unanimous nominee of a 19-member search committee chaired by Bishop Joel N. Martinez of San Antonio.

In accepting the election, Bishop Paup spoke of his strong call to mission and his commitment to proclaim and bear witness in multiple ways to the transforming love of God. “All are called into mission,” he said, “and we must be prepared as a mission board to receive all of the gifts [talents] that people bring to mission.”
**Local Church News**

**Couple feels call to go to Liberia**

**Skills in working with the deaf, international law will be used**

By Paul Black

NORMAL – Aaron and Tricia Lauter’s business card says they are volunteers for peace and education. However, a more careful examination reveals a young couple committed to making a difference in their world.

The Lauters have decided to use their college education by first giving back in volunteer service and serving a two-month summer stint in Liberia.

Tricia, who is currently completing her senior year at Illinois State University with a degree in special education with an emphasis in deaf education, will be working at the United Methodist-related Hope School for the Deaf in Monrovia with United Methodist missionary David Worlobah.

Aaron, who graduated from ISU in May 2007, is planning to enter law school in the fall where he will continue his studies in international relations and human rights law. Aaron is hoping to work with Bishop Arthur Kulatha and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is working to bring peace to Liberia by bringing together former enemy combatants and victims.

Aaron has studied the South African experience of *ubuntu*, which was used to bring reconciliation following years of apartheid rule.

“The chief conflicts facing wartorn countries is how you deal with your past history,” Aaron said. “One of my professors was a Peruvian Catholic who has said the key to reconciliation is forgiveness and truth – two concepts in which Christians should be well-versed.”

The Lauters’ decision to travel to Liberia was a combination of “wanting to see the world and wanting to make a difference.”

“We have grown up with a great deal of material success and yet it isn’t enough,” Aaron said. “We’ve noticed the disparity. The 90’s brought us everything we could want but globalization has also made the world a smaller place and the need is so apparent.”

Tricia Lauter is the daughter of Rev. Sharon Monroe, pastor of the Mansfield UMC. Aaron Lauter, a native of Mattoon, did not grow up United Methodist but was attracted to it because of its emphasis not only on evangelism, but also its focus on mission, feeding and advocating for the less fortunate.

“I started attending at Hudson UMC because Tricia was a deaf interpreter for their services,” Aaron said. “By the time you get to college, you become aware of those around you.”

The couple has already started fundraising to raise funds for their trip. While Tricia does student teaching in Colorado from March to May, Aaron keeps a blog and works on fundraising for their trip.

IGRC Missions Coordinator Bunny Wolfe has assisted the couple with placement and housing for their missionary stint. While in Liberia, the couple will be staying with a missionary from Burundi at the United Methodist mission compound in Monrovia.

To read more about the Lauters, visit: [http://liberia2008.blogspot.com](http://liberia2008.blogspot.com) or you can email aaronl.85@gmail.com

**Neighborhood House provides pillar in unstable community**

By Tonya Hasenstab

Elise had her first child when she was 14½ years old. At 17, she is now pregnant with her third. Elise lives with her two children, her mother and father, and six brothers and sisters.

For 10 years, the family lived in a house ‘almost big enough’. One day, after a dispute with a neighbor, they were evicted. Large houses are hard to find through public housing. The family then moved into a two-bedroom house down the street from Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House. That’s two adults, seven children, and 2½ grandchildren living in a two-bedroom house with an attic and a basement.

Neighborhood House has been there for this entire family for a long time in different ways. This time, hygiene products were needed because daycare called Denita Jacox, who is part of the individual family support team at Neighborhood House, and told her the children were coming to daycare dirty. If they were not clean the next morning, the authorities would have to be called.

Elise is trying to do her best for her kids. She is a good mom, just lacking resources. Jacox gave her the soap, shampoo, diapers and wipes along with other much-needed toiletries and talked to her about the importance of good hygiene and bathing the kids regularly.

“The 90’s brought us everything we could want but globalization has also made the world a smaller place and the need is so apparent.”

— Aaron Lauter

This gloomy cloud has a silver lining! In the past century, Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House has been a pillar in an unstable community. Continuing to be that pillar is a mission that this area cannot afford to lose. The United Methodist Church along with the United Methodist Women have given us the tools the ministry needs to provide for the community.

Those tools are passed along to participants so that they may provide for their families.

For more information about how you can be part of the mission in an impoverished community, please visit: [www.lessiebatedavis.org](http://www.lessiebatedavis.org)

Ryan Roach of Mt. Olive UMC; Jeff Nail of Troy UMC and Justin Aymer of Columbia Bethany UMC perform a skit during the Light Kids Conference held at Washington Crossroads UMC March 1. About 200 children from first to fifth grade along with adult sponsors gathered for the daylong conference which included an illusionist, skits and praise music. The conference is hosted by Harvest Ministry Team from Troy UMC.

Other Light Kids Conferences were held Feb. 9 at Marion Aldersgate UMC and March 8 in White House, Tenn. A final conference will be held March 29 at Troy UMC.
**Pekin Grace hosts winter ‘dome’ event**

PEKIN — Nearly 400 United Methodists from the two United Methodist congregations in Pekin joined together to kick the winter blahs with an old-fashioned church picnic Feb. 1 with the help of a 70-foot high bubble dome.

Pekin Grace UMC hosted its third annual mid-winter outing inside The Dragon’s Dome, an enclosed recreational facility with a full-sized artificial turf soccer field. Early in planning for the 2008 event by Grace’s hospitality work area, the group extended the invitation to its sister congregation, Pekin First UMC.

Beginning with a catered picnic dinner, the schedule included traditional games such as a three-legged race, scavenger hunt, and team relays. Youngsters enjoyed a “Children’s Carnival” including an inflatable dinosaur “jumper”. Older participants played table games, bingo, dominos, as well as time visiting and cheering on the youth.

**Trenton First raises funds for chicken**

The children’s Sunday School classes and the congregation of Trenton First UMC raised $1,300 for 65 flocks of chickens. The chickens will be purchased through Heifer International for the poor. Each flock contains 20 chickens which will feed about 100 families living on just pennies a day. These families, in turn, will share eggs and meat provided by the flocks with others in their communities.

**Cunningham Home hosts Mission Day**

Cunningham Home is hosting a Mission Day April 19 as an opportunity for local congregations to show its youth a United Methodist mission up close.

The day’s activities will include hands-on experiences for youth groups, confirmation classes and adult leaders from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Participants will learn:

- What happens daily to help hurting, troubled kids and teens
- The importance of faith for healing
- The involvement of United Methodists

**Year-end appeal helps New Baden UMC to meet its financial obligations**

By Michael Witte
Lay Leader, New Baden UMC

It was an announcement I wasn’t looking forward to making.

I had been a member of our church’s finance committee for a couple of years, first as trustee chairman and now as lay leader. New Baden UMC, is a small congregation in the Mississippi River District with an average attendance of 65.

This past year (2007) brought with it a pastoral change with its related stresses and expenses, including the replacement of part of the parsonage’s 16 year-old carpet and the entire roof. We took out a loan to pay for the carpet and managed to pay off the roof partly through an estate bequest and partly by emptying our maintenance and reserve accounts. That unfortunately left us with no way to pay our October through December apportionments, nearly $3000.

I had made an appeal to the congregation in the middle of November, supporting our conference claims and connectional giving. I tried to explain how our apportionments touched millions of people throughout the world, not just the conference offices and staff in Springfield. I also told the congregation that our finance committee didn’t believe we would be able to meet all of our apportionments unless they considered giving more.

This brings me to the Sunday before Christmas, Dec. 23 and the appeal I was making again for more giving. My pastor urged me to give it one last try, and gave me some very helpful suggestions, specifically to remind them of all the challenges we’d faced this year, (pastoral moving, general fund was almost $10,000 that morning from 61 people! It was enough to meet our conference claims, fund our VBS and start 2008 with a financial cushion. By the way, that mother’s folded check by itself was enough for us to meet our conference obligations. I couldn’t believe it! She wasn’t even a member. She was a visitor! I had to stop counting. I got up, walked around, and prayed, thanking God for using me. I hadn’t believed, … but God used me anyway. Praise God!

**Chaddock retains EAGLE accreditation**

QUINCY — The United Methodist Association of Health and Welfare Ministries (UMA), a national network of health and welfare-related organizations announced that Chaddock has successfully retained its EAGLE accreditation.

The Educational Assessment Guidelines Leading toward Excellence (EAGLE) accreditation is a quality enhancement program offered to faith-based organizations providing care to older adults, children, youth and families, community services, ministries and hospitals and health systems.

“The reviewers specifically made note of the exceptional culture here, saying it is clear that all that we do is centered on the children we serve, and that we truly live out our faith-based mission, vision and values,” said Debbie Reed, Chaddock President/CEO. “They were extremely impressed by the teamwork displayed throughout the agency, and the obvious quality and dedication of our staff.”

Chaddock will be recognized for their accomplishments at the annual EAGLE Gala on Friday, March 28, at the 68th Annual UMA National Convention in Orlando, Fla.
Fairview Heights Christ builds church, relationships in the Philippines

By Paul Black

FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS – A lunchtime conversation two years ago has spawned a strong relationship between Fairview Heights Christ UMC and a sister church in the Philippines.

In February, a delegation from Christ UMC visited the Philippines and took part in the dedication of the new facility which was built as part of the Fairview Heights’ congregation’s own building expansion.

Two years ago, Rev. Shane Bishop and his group were meeting over lunch, discussing a vision for building a church in the Philippines.

“The group was very clear that we needed to find a place that had an outstanding leader,” Bishop said. “We realize that a building cannot be the answer in and of itself. There has to be leadership as well.”

Bishop, who had formed several relationships with Philippine pastors during the 2004 General Conference, recalled meeting Rev. Manny Rapisura, who was serving a two-point charge in Mindiniao, one of the country’s southern islands.

The smaller of the two congregations was located in a rice village and Rapisura’s son, who is an engineer, drew up the plans for a church that would seat 100. He estimated the cost of the church to be $50,000.

As plans developed, Bishop said “the project kept getting bigger and bigger.” By the time the plans were complete, the size of the church had doubled and included space for an on-site office for the pastor.

The mission congregation opened the new facilities Jan. 19 and Bishop preached at the service of dedication Feb. 17. The new facility, which is considered the most beautiful United Methodist church in the Philippines seats 175 to 250 with lots of children attending.

“The church building was given as a gift to the glory of God with no strings attached,” Bishop said, noting that Rapisura has said all of the Philippine pastors now want to pastor the new church.

The recent building, however, is only part of the Christ UMC relationship with the Philippines.

In 2000, Bishop attended General Conference and heard of the needs of the church in the Philippines.

With the help of Dr. Cosme Kagas, a retired pediatrician from the Christ congregation, the congregation began its first partnership.

“Dr. Kagas is from the Philippines and has done a great deal of humanitarian work building artisan wells there,” Bishop said. “He advised that we needed to invest in the children and their education.”

Using contacts Dr. Kagas had developed, Christ UMC started with five scholarships and now the congregation is responsible for 139 students.

“We don’t just send money; we’re building relationships with these children,” Bishop said. “We receive photos and copies of their grades.

Bishop said a conscious decision was made to assist students that are on a professional track – as nurses, politicians or other technical professions.

“While the Methodist church in the Philippines is dwarfed by the Roman Catholic Church, Methodist congregations are growing because of the scholarships,” Bishop said. “We are investing in the church member of tomorrow, knowing that a small investment can leverage great change.”

Bishop said in the churches visited in January, only one had music and members are still using the 1964 United Methodist hymnal in English even though it is a second language to them.

The education fund reflects the Bishop’s great interest in improving the lives of Liberian children and her emphasis on life-long learning and formation of Christian leaders.

Funds may be sent to the Conference treasurer marked “Sharon Brown Christopher Lberian Education Fund, Fund #6995.”

Bishop Christopher has served as bishop of the Illinois Area for the past 12 years and will be concluding a 20-year ministry as a episcopal leader in both Minnesota and Illinois.

IMT expanding in conference

Several IGRC congregations are forming partnerships in the former communist nations of Eastern Europe and the Balkans and partners are needed for congregations in Serbia, Slovakia, Macedonia and Hungary.

Mission Together is a partnership designed to assist congregations in the United States to be in mission with United Methodist congregations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The Iroquois River District has been an IMT partner with the Mikulov charge in the Czech Republic since 2002. Monticello UMC has also established a partnership with the Trebon UMC in the Czech Republic.

Recently, Alton Main Street UMC has established a partnership with the Dr. Long UMC in Sofia, Bulgaria and O’Fallon First UMC has a partnership with the Keilic UMC in Sofia.

IMT partnerships include pastoral support, IMT teams, cultural exchanges, and a host of other connections. There is hope of extending the work into Croatia and Albania.

For more information about IMT partnerships, please contact Dr. Kenneth Hutchens at 217-684-2422 or BroKenHutchens@gmail.com.

Annual Conference

Continued from page 1

March 28 Groups must be recognized by and related to The United Methodist Church. Contact Nancy Patton at npatton@igrc.org to reserve one or more spaces.

Special meals

Requests for special meals must be made by March 28 through Nancy Patton at npatton@igrc.org. The special meals will be listed on the Conference Registration Form which will be mailed out on or before April 21. Ticket sales will be handled by the Conference office. The Conference office can handle ticket sales for offsite meals but the request must be made prior to March 28 to get listed on the Registration Form.

Promotion of events

Promotions for special meals, special guests must be submitted by Friday, April 4 to Paul Black, Director of Communication Ministries at pblack@igrc.org. Information will be used in the May and June issues of The Current as well as posted to the conference website.

Media/Advertising information

The Daily Current will be distributed each day at the Annual Conference session. On Wednesday, June 4, the June issue of The Current will be available with information on the annual conference. Subsequent issues will be published on June 5, 6 and 7.

Persons may purchase space for a black-and-white ad in the June 4 issue. Payment and copy (text/graphics) must be received no later than May 9 for inclusion. Graphics should be submitted as jpg with a minimum resolution of 300 dpi. Send email or requests for additional information to Michele Willson at mwillson@igrc.org.

The ad rate is $20 per column inch, $240 for a ½-page ad or $480 for a ¾-page ad. These ads will also be posted to the IGRC website.

Bishop Ough

Continued from page 1

night. Rev. Jim Bortell, retired pastor, will deliver the memorial sermon at 1:30 p.m. Thursday.

A recognition of 23 retiring pastors will be held at 4 p.m. Thursday with a video presentation recognizing each member of the class.

Christopher will be honored for her 12 years of ministry in the Illinois Area with a dinner at 6 p.m. Thursday.

Friday’s agenda will include reports from the Board of Ordained Ministry and the initial presentation of both the 2009 conference budget and the nominations report in the morning. Electronic voting pads will be used for the first time Friday afternoon as members will consider reports and resolutions that have been filed.

Saturday’s agenda will include a service for churches completing their mission, a report on the conference’s Liberia Partnership; a report from the General Conference delegation; approval of the 2009 budget and the service of giving and receiving appointments.

Annual Conference

Continued from page 1

ment dinner at the 2008 annual conference. Bishop Christopher has requested that she would prefer the establishment of an education fund for scholarships and school construction instead of a gift for herself.

The committee has set as a goal of $150,000 to endow the Sharon A. Brown Christopher education fund. The amount is roughly $1 per member. Funds could be invested and the interest from the fund would be used to provide scholarships for 100 children each year into perpetuity or
Illinois State University students take part in 24/7 prayer vigil to the Harrisburg First UMC. Flooding was not as widespread in Eldorado, although roads were closed around the community due to flooding.

The village of Karnak has been without running water since the flood as town officials feared a contamination of the water supply and shut down the water distribution system.

Karnak UMC, which opened its doors during the two ice storms in February, became a community center following the flooding, serving bottled water and providing food and assistance to volunteers that were sandbagging the community.

At Ullin, rising waters came within inches of the doors of Crossroads UMC but water did not enter the church.

At least one pastor and spouse were stranded by the flood. Deb Pollex and her husband were stranded in their rural Stonefort home. The water line to their house washed out with part of the road. Pollex is an associate pastor at Marion First UMC.

At press time, river levels to appear to be subsiding, although the Wabash, Ohio and Mississippi rivers had not crested.

Two at least two deaths were flood-related.

Steven Healy, 35, of McLeansboro and Shannon C. Allen, 20, of Mt. Vernon were killed when they were swept from their pickup truck by flood waters north of Walloveille. Allen was a passenger in the vehicle driven by Healy along with Nicole Asberry of Mt. Vernon. Asberry survived the accident.

Illinois floods.”

“While we do not have hard numbers, the need is great and will be long-term,” said Reverend Jennifer Edwards Bertrand, ISU campus pastor, said the ISU prayer vigil was part of an effort that began in the United Kingdom in 1999. The story is detailed at the website: **www.24-7prayer.org**

In September 1999, a group of students got together and decided to pray non-stop for a month. “God turned up and they couldn’t stop until Christmas!” the website said.

The movement has spread internationally and are linked through the internet across denominations, age groups and cultures. The British Methodist Church is one of the active participants.

The three dimensions to the movement are:

- A network of prayer rooms determined to pray like it all depends upon them and live like it all depends upon God until the tide is turned in the present generation
- A missions movement has arisen out of the prayer rooms as requests have been made to take teams to “high places” in youth culture
- Boiler rooms – houses of continual prayer – similar to Gen X monasteries

The ISU Wesley Foundation used the prayer room as a prelude to a week-long mission trip to Brevard County, Fla., to participate in a Habitat for Humanity build.

“There was a different feeling this year than any year before,” Edwards said. “The students had experienced something holy and they carried that with them in doing God’s work in mission.”

**Ilinois State University students take part in 24/7 prayer vigil**

**By Paul Black**

NORMAL – Walking into the room that served as a prayer room, a feeling of the sacred was apparent.

Two weeks had passed since the 24 hour, seven day a week prayer vigil was held and yet the remnants of the week of Feb. 27 to March 5 were still very strong and real.

ISU Wesley Foundation took part in holding a 168-hour prayer vigil. Student organized and student-led, what seemed to be a daunting challenge turned into a spiritual pilgrimage that deeply touched the students’ lives.

“My church has done 24 hour prayer vigils,” said freshman student coordinator Roxy Twaddle, a member of Washington Crossroads UMC. “When the concept was first mentioned in prayer groups, I thought it would be a challenge. But once they experienced it, they didn’t want to leave.”

Critical to the execution of the prayer vigil was securing 14 persons who would remain on call in case someone did not show up at the appointed time. Then the hour-long slots were listed on a signup sheet.

A simple sign on the door gave four instructions:

- Remove your shoes
- Go in at the appointed hour and relieve the person who is there
- Light a candle to symbolize receiving God’s light
- Pray in your own way

The room featured four walls – a worship wall; a wailing wall complete with an area to enter; a worship and real.

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The room featured four walls – a worship wall; a wailing wall complete with an area to enter; a worship
Assistants serve as retired pastor and spouse’s pastor

By Paul Black

Two new familiar faces and a familiar third face will be part of the team preachers will join Rev. Ralph Totten as a three-person pastoral care team and serve as assistants to PAS Executive Director Keith Anderson in fulfilling the organization’s mission of providing a quality of life for retired pastors and their spouses.

“We the assistants’ work will be to be a pastor to the retired pastors and their spouses,” Anderson explained. “In the past, this role has been tied to the Benefits office and we will continue to be good partners with them in providing service. We hope to keep retirees connected to the conference and find different ways to express our thanks for their service. We’ll work with a group of others from the Wesley Foundation at shelter for spring in Springfield, will cover the central part of the conference and include the LaMoine, Sangamon and Iroquois districts. Davis, who retired in 2006 and is based in Bloomington, will cover the northern end of the conference, including the Vermilion, Illinois and Spoon River districts.

By Judy Doyle

The group heard about the United Methodist Program in New York and Washington, D.C., and the group voted to go to D.C., Lindstrom said.

Sarah Holman, a junior music major, said she decided to go on the trip because “You can tell they were just happy that you were there.”

Buell said the visit changed her perception of homelessness. “I am just so glad that our conference has people keeping in touch,” Blackard said, noting that his 18 years of serving on annual conference page with his wife, Bobbi enables him to “know practically everyone already.”

Brightening spring break

EIU Wesley Foundation works at shelter for spring

By Sara Cuadrado

Campus Reporter, The Daily Eastern News

Mandy Buell wanted to make her spring break worthwhile.

Buell, a senior management major, went on a mission trip to Washington, D.C., with a group of others from the Wesley Foundation to talk to U.S. representatives about homelessness and poverty. The Wesley Foundation hosts a mission trip every spring break, said Pat Lindstrom, a sophomore sociology major.

This year they decided to go to an urban setting for the mission trip, he said.

The group heard about the United Methodist Program in New York and Washington, D.C., and the group voted to go to D.C., Lindstrom said.

Sarah Holman, a junior music major, said she decided to go on the trip because she wanted to have an effect on important matters.

Holman and the others spent the first two days learning about mental illnesses and poverty. By the third day, everyone put their knowledge into action by speaking to representatives of Senator Barack Obama and Senator Dick Durbin, Holman said.

The group did not get to speak with the senators directly because Illinois has important representation with Durbin as the Assistant Majority Leader, and Obama is running for president.

The students instead talked to the senators’ interns about the homeless and issues surrounding affordable housing.

The group then spent a day working at the Community for Creative Non-Violence which reports to house nearly 1,300 homeless people each night. We also provide clothing to our residents. Donors, including stores, contribute thousands of pounds of clothing and shoes to CCNV’s residents each year. Surplus food is sold in a store called Thrift Store when so designated by donors. Since 1984, more than 5 million meals have been served with more than 150 tons of food being donated by restaurants, wholesale food distributors and franchises.

CCNV is located in Washington, D.C. and has successfully led the effort to reduce the drug use in the nation’s capital.

Buell said she knew she had an impact on the people in the homeless shelter. “You can tell they were just happy that we were talking to them,” Buell said. “A lot of people go to go talk to them for research, but we just went to talk.”

Lindstrom said they thinks they had a positive impact on the homeless people because the homeless kept telling the students they were brightening their day.

He said after visiting them he realized that he shouldn’t take anything for granted because anyone could become homeless. He said he recalled one man who owned a restaurant and became homeless after he developed schizophrenia.

Buell said the visit changed her perception of homeless people. She said she used to think they were just lazy, but most of the people at the shelter See Spring Break on page 14 . . .

Disaster response training April 11-12

By Judy Doyle

Chair, Conference Disaster Response Team

The Conference Disaster Response team will host a training event on April 11-12 at Chatham UMC.

The training event will help answer the following questions for local congregations in how to develop a disaster response plan. Does your church and your family have a disaster response plan? What would you do if you or your community is faced with a major tornado or flooding damage? What service could you or your church provide for those in need?

Rev. Mary E. Hughes Gaudreau, UM Commission on Disaster Response, will be leading the discussion on local church preparedness.

Simultaneously, Barbara Tripp, also an UMCOR consultant, will be teaching sessions on Early Response Training. Both sessions begin at 6 p.m. April 11.

On Saturday, April 12, beginning at 8:30 a.m., Tripp will continue teaching on Early Response Training and Gaudreau will be leading sessions on Spiritual, Emotional Care following a disaster.

According to The National Weather Service (NWS) in Lincoln, “the peak of our severe weather season extends from March 20th through September 3rd.” The NWS also reports, “of the top 15 counties with the most tornadoes in the state, 10 are in central or eastern Illinois” and “since 2003, 81% of all severe weather events (damaging winds, tornadoes, and large hail) in central and southeast Illinois had advance warning by the NWS in Lincoln, with an average lead time of 17 minutes.” These statistics are reminders that we should be prepared.

Registrations can be made by contact administrator Christy Blickensderfer at chlickensd@igrc.org or by calling 217-529-2473. Registration for the event is $15, which includes materials and a lunch on Saturday. If you are in need of lodging, rooms are available at the Baymont Inn. Please call 217-529-6655 to make reservations.

IGRC hosts Weaving a Web of Connections

Do you want to develop or expand a Web presence for your local church, district or conference organization? Are you interested in the latest Internet technology for Churches? The United Methodist Communications, in cooperation with the Communication Ministries Team, will host Weaving a Web of Connections May 16-17 at the Conference Center in Springfield. Local church, district, and conference volunteers, staff, webmasters/servers, communicators, editors, and pastors will gather for a Friday evening to Saturday afternoon face-to-face training event. Through presentations, panel discussions, workshops, and vendor exhibits, you will be able to choose variety of options for “Weaving a Web of Connections” by using Internet technology for effective ministry.

Cost of the event is $125 per person, excluding overnight accommodations. More information and online registration is available at: http://web.umcom.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=12494
Panama woman’s faith inspires her congregation to build Liberia church

By Pastor Dave Trover
Panama UMC

PANAMA — Before her death in July 2007, Edna Tomevi was considered the matriarch of Panama UMC.

Canadian born, Edna had moved to Panama with her family in 1922. At age 18, she joined the Panama UMC and two years later, married her husband Henry — a union that would last for 70 years.

A heart attack had left the 92-year-old wondering why God hadn’t taken her home when she was sure ready to go. Confined to a nursing home, I told her that perhaps God wasn’t finished with her yet; perhaps someone still needed her. She found out the reason when a Liberia conference staff person paid her a visit.

Just a month earlier, Waterson Bomsossee, director of youth and young adult ministries for the Liberia Annual Conference, visited Epworth Camp in Louisville. Hearing his story, the Panama church invited Waterson to preach at their church.

It was during his stay in Panama that Waterson shared his dream about building a church in his home town of Buelqueleh. He said he then hoped to retire from his current conference staff position and return to Buelqueleh to minister to his people.

Using labor within the community, the cost of the entire project was $4,000 American.

Construction began on the Edna Tomevi UMC in Buelqueleh … Completion and dedication of the church is anticipated in the next few weeks, according to Wealah District Superintendent Paye Mondolo.

District superintendents receive training on computer, digital cameras

By Rev. David Estep
El Paso UMC

How many computer geeks does it take to train a District Superintendent?

Well, in the case of the 20 District Superintendents from the Liberia Annual Conference, it took three. Rev. David Estep, David Denney, and Alex Brooker from the El Paso UMC made a unique, first of its kind, mission trip to Liberia. They spent three intense days training the LAC superintendents on the basics of Windows XP, word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations.

They also provided training on the use of digital cameras and color printers. The three computer geeks took a laptop computer, digital camera, and color printer for each of the 20 superintendents, along with a 200-page training manual that they developed.

One of the major obstacles to overcome was the fact that most of the superintendents had little to no computer experience or keyboard experience. This made the basic request to type a word very difficult for many of the superintendents.

The first two days of training were done in the Bishop’s conference room, adjacent to the bishop’s office. On the third day, the training had to be moved to the bottom floor of the St. John UMC because the generator would not start. Another issue was to the people she served in her district. She thanked us for the invaluable training she had received.

The training was painstaking, but the superintendents of the Liberia Annual Conference now have equipment and basic skills that will be invaluable to their conference and themselves.

Upcoming trips to Liberia

- Oct. 21 to Nov. 3: IGRC Work Team. Project: an elementary school in Kakata Farmington District.

Cost for each trip: $3,700, but project funds of $10,000 to $15,000 will be needed for each project. Cost includes airfare, travel insurance, Liberia visa, meals, lodging and transportation in Liberia. Airfare is subject to fuel surcharge increase, which may raise the total cost of the trip if necessary to meet all expenses while in Liberia.

Inquiries should be directed to Bunny Wolfe at bwolfe@igrc.org. A total of 15 to 20 seats have already been reserved on airlines for each of the above projects. If interested, people need to register and send a $500 deposit (non refundable) as soon as possible. These seats will fill up quickly. If additional people wish to participate, the cost will be adjusted according to the new flight prices at the time of registration.

Construction began on the Edna Tomevi UMC in Buelqueleh. A celebration was held Feb. 21 when Pastor Dave and Linda Trover were part of a delegation from the IGRC who had gone to Liberia on a work mission trip. Completion and dedication of the church is anticipated in the next few weeks, according to Wealah District Superintendent Paye Mondolo.
A journey of hope

“They killed our folks but they couldn’t take our faith or hope.”
— The people of Liberia, talking about the 14-year civil war.
Reflections on Liberia

By Randy Robinson
LaMoine River District
Superintendent

On Wednesday evening, Feb. 13, I unpacked my suitcase on floor number 2, room number 2 of the Anderson Guest House in downtown Harper, Maryland County, Liberia.

I had finally reached my destination—five days after leaving Jacksonville, Ill. Two of those days were spent waiting for the United Nations mission in Liberia to decide if and when our team from Illinois would be flown by UN helicopters 250 miles from Monrovia, the capital, to Harper, the site of the Liberia annual conference.

As I unpacked, I was not amused. In fact, I was disappointed and disgusted. The other members of my team arrived a day earlier and were safely lodged together in a suite. My room was on the opposite side of the guest house, and I was alone in this Third World hotel. As I examined the room, I realized my bed sheet was covered with little black gnats. I quickly hung my mosquito net above the bed as a precaution against malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

The room and bath without running water was located at the end of the hall. I would share the facilities with three total strangers. On the floor in the bathroom stood four giant buckets filled with water—one for each of us. That water was to be used for both for bathing and flushing. (If you’ve never bathed using the dip and pour method, you have a real treat in store!)

I didn’t sleep very well that first night in Harper. I was awakened just before sunrise by the sound of a rooster. As I peered out the window of my room curious about the neighborhood, I was unprepared for the sight that met my eyes.

I could see the rooftops of several other buildings in the neighborhood. Two buildings over, a man, very thin and frail, skin and bones, was beginning to stir. He had bedded down on that rooftop for the night, exposed to the elements. On another rooftop, dwell a family under a tarp held up by clothes lines. On the street below a naked little boy wandered aimlessly, his belly distended from hunger and his navel protruded several inches away from his body, no doubt a testament to the adverse conditions under which he was born. A bare-chested girl—maybe 12 or 13 years old—balanced a large plastic container on her head. It appeared to be filled with donuts. Was she taking them to her family or selling them as a means of income?

Through all these sights, God spoke to my heart. “Now Randy, tell me, just how bad off are you? Just how sorry do you want to feel for yourself this morning? You brought more “necessities” in one suitcase from America than these people may see in their life time. But Randy, these are my beloved children, too. I am their Creator and I have stamped my image and likeness upon each one of them. They, too, are precious in my sight. But last night, they didn’t sleep on a firm mattress with a pillow, under a protective mosquito net, out of the elements, as you did. They didn’t have someone carry a heavy bucket of water to them as you did. They’re not even assured of their next meal, as you are. Randy Robinson, who do you think you are?”

God spoke to me that first morning in Harper. God upbraided me.

Do I need to say I didn’t do much complaining after that? Once again, Liberia began to transform my soul. That soul-transformation continued as again I listened to stories of survival during their brutal and bloody 14-year civil war.

Samuel Quarshie is a bright, articulate 24-year old who aspires to become a United Methodist minister in Liberia. He’s currently enrolled at the Gbarnga School of Theology. He walks to school from the mission compound where he lives and works, into the heart of downtown Monrovia where he studies.

Samuel was only 9 years old when rebels invaded his family’s fishing village, forcing everyone into the gymnasium of the government school building: men into one area, women and children into another. The rebels lined their victims up, counted off every tenth person, and sent that one away with soldiers. The villagers wondered if they were being marched off to work as slaves for these rebels. They had no idea they were being systematically executed, until one of their number managed to escape and discovered a pile of bodies—friends, neighbors, family members who had been shot by the rebels.

Young Samuel, only 9 years old, fled with his mother. They moved from house to house in their village, trying to escape. A female soldier had her eye on young Samuel and realized he and his mother were missing. She began a house to house search. At one point, Samuel heard her say, “Where is that brave boy? When I find him, I’ll kill him.”

Samuel spotted a pile of bed mats on the floor of one house; he rolled himself up in a mat and stood himself against the wall beside other mats. The soldier entered the very room where he was hiding, but didn’t realize Samuel was there. His life was spared.

See Reflections on page 12...
Reflections
Continued from page 11

In that moment, at only 9 years of age, he said to God, “I give you my life.” Now at age 24, he asks, “Was that a real promise to God, at age 9, with my life at risk?” He’s decided that was in fact a promise to God that he must keep. His life belongs to God because God spared him. Now he’s studying for the ministry and says, “I want to serve where ever God can use me.”

I have no doubt that God will use Samuel’s life and testimony to transform Liberia and the world.

Then there’s the story of Dr. Frank Horton. Frank’s retired now and lives near Nashville, Tenn. But before Liberia’s civil war, Frank was professor of preaching at the Gumma School of Theology, a teacher of preachers.

When rebels detained Frank during the war, they put him under house arrest, because he was known to be a person of influence, and the rebels weren’t sure just how Frank would use his influence. So he was confined to home.

Every morning, the local unit of United Methodist Women would come by, surround the house where Frank was being held, and they would join hands and pray. They prayed for Frank’s well-being, they prayed he would be released. They prayed and prayed and prayed, every day.

While the women were outside praying, Frank was inside praying. He shared the good news of Jesus Christ with his rebel captors, and one by one they began to accept Christ. Frank would baptize them into the church.

Once again, Liberian Christians are transforming the world!

I suppose what strikes me most about the Liberian Christians I met is that they have so little yet are willing to sacrifice what little they have in order to build the church. As a result, God is abundantly blessing the little they have to offer, and the church is growing by leaps and bounds. God is blessing the Liberian church because they put God first, above all else.

God does not have to compete with “stuff”—with a culture of materialism and consumerism and narcissism. In the words of the hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness, which they also sing, God is their “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,” and they are able to add, “blessings all mine with ten thousand beside.”

Another striking feature of the UMC in Liberia is this: to speak of Christ is to speak of the church, and to speak of the church is to speak of Christ. Christ and church joined seamlessly by a spiritual bond which is never separated and cannot be broken. The Liberians would not understand the title of a popular book here in the U.S. which states, They like Jesus, But Not The Church.

I ask myself, Why can’t we in the U.S. understand our faith in this way? Why can’t we believe that we are truly the Body of Christ upon earth? Why can’t we understand this deep, profound spiritual bond between Jesus Christ, the head of the church, and us, the living members of Christ’s body upon the earth? What difference could it make for us to embrace this spiritual truth as living reality?

I believe we need to understand this profound spiritual connection between Christ and the church, we understand that Jesus’ ministry is our ministry, and our ministry is Jesus’ ministry.

Although the church in Liberia has little, it is NOT little. They know from hard experience the truth of another gospel song they love to sing, “Little is much when God is in it.”

My invitation to you is simple: pray, give, go. Pray that God will continue to bless the ministry of Jesus Christ through our church in Liberia. Give from the abundance God has entrusted to you. In Liberia, a little goes a long way! And go. God may be calling you to go with a mission team from the Illinois Great Rivers Conference to help our church in Liberia rebuild the nation.

I can assure you that if you pray, or give, or go, God will use you to transform the world, and in the process, you yourself will be transformed!

Liberia Update

“...we’re going to build a school! No need to bring your work clothes, however, because the school is in Monrovia, Liberia.”

Rhonda Whitaker

Lay leader challenges laity to build a school at 2008 annual conference session

By Rhonda Whitaker
Conference Lay Leader

Let’s build a school at the Laity Session of Annual Conference in June. Yes, that’s right – we’re going to build a school! No need to bring your work clothes, however, because the school is in Monrovia, Liberia.

In February, 18 of us went to Liberia to attend the Liberian Annual Conference, to work on two building projects, and to see some of the many projects funded by Illinois Great Rivers Conference. To say I was outside my comfort zone is an understatement! To say we were blessed is also an understatement!

Why did I go? I asked myself that question many times, both before we went and certainly after I got there! In Peoria at our Annual Conference last year as I listened to Rudolph Merah, the Lay Leader of the Liberian Annual Conference, God laid on my heart that a representative of the laity of IGRC should attend Liberian Annual Conference to demonstrate that we the laity are as committed to Liberia as our Bishop and Cabinet, that we care about the people of Liberia as much as our staff does.

And that is exactly the message that the Liberian Annual Conference received, but with greater impact than I ever could have foreseen – all because of a gift in our transportation. Although six of us were transported to the Annual Conference in Harper on the far eastern coast via UN helicopter (Plan A), the other 12 had to travel by Plan B – via 4-wheel drive vans and trucks over an impassable road. In Liberia we could have had our vans traversed in less than a day, but in Liberia it meant a two-day trip with one excrecizing 18-hour stretch. When I say impassible, I mean a road so bad that one pot-hole had become a trench (or a holler as we say in Neoga) into which the vehicles descended then climbed out! In fact, one of our vans tipped over onto its side with several of our team in it!

But, you see, almost all of the 1,200 Liberians assembled for Annual Conference had come over that same bad road and knew well the hardship that our team was facing. They understood that these Americans cared so much about them that they were willing to travel the hard road to Harper the hard way. And I’m sure they retold that story to their local congregations when they returned home, giving hope to United Methodists all over Liberia.

OK, back to building a school in Monrovia. After we returned to Monrovia from the Annual Conference in Harper, we were privileged to attend special services at several new churches funded by IGRC congregations – in Beuquelleh sponsored by the Pochahontas and Panama UMCs, in Blamein donated by the Herrin UMC, and in Payneville funded by Belleville Union UMC. We saw the new school built by Decatur Grace UMC in Wealah and the new hospital wings at the Ganta Mission donated by Peoria First UMC. These projects have given hope to many people in those towns and villages.

However, in Monrovia we visited a “school” located in the John Kofi Asmah Memorial UMC which is in West Point, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of the city. Over 700 children attend school in the sanctuary of that church, half in the morning and half in the afternoon! The students greeted us with cheers and music, smiles and handshakes – they really touched our hearts. We were told that the congregation of that church has scraped enough funds together to purchase a plot of land a few blocks away where they hope to soon build a “real” school.

Then again God laid a thought on my heart – the Laity Session of IGRC Annual Conference could build this school. With about 1000 Lay Members of Annual Conference, an offering at Laity Session could easily raise at least $20,000 which would be a great start on a new school building. What a small price tag to give hope to the children of the West Point area of Monrovia! Because of the generosity of those of you who donated to may trip, I have more than $3,000 left over to begin our Monrovia school fund – thank you so much for your support!

Hope – that’s the lesson I was taught by the United Methodists of Liberia – hope and faith. They may have lost their homes, their loved ones, their way of life during the civil war but they didn’t lose their faith. In fact, they thank God every morning for one more day of life, knowing that they are alive only because of his grace and mercy, knowing that when everything is stripped away, God is all we really need and gives us the hope to carry on. They pray to him as “Papa God” and walk closely with him day by day. Those are lessons that we American United Methodists could learn from our Liberian brothers and sisters.
Whose job is discipleship?

By Beth Fender
Coordinator of
New Streams

In the fall of last year, IGRC churches were asked to take a survey about the practice of spiritual disciplines among those in attendance. The survey asked about such practices as setting aside time for personal devotions, reading the scriptures, attending worship, participating in the Lord’s Supper, tithing (giving at least 10 percent of one’s income to the church), and serving in ministry both inside and outside the church. Obviously, some of these practices are carried out with others in the context of the church family, while others are personal practices engaged in solitude or with one’s family.

The results of this survey were very interesting. While most churches completed the survey, it is evident that people opted out of answering some of the questions. For instance, the total number of responses to the questions about fasting, tithing, and following John Wesley’s General Rule seem to be lower than the total number of responses to the other questions. A few churches even refused to compile the responses to some or all of the survey questions, saying that this information is private and not appropriate to share or discuss.

This response raises a significant question: whose job is it to ensure that people grow as disciples of Jesus Christ? Discipleship is such a consuming and important task that there is plenty of responsibility to share. Individuals clearly have a role to play in their own discipleship—no one can practice spiritual disciplines in place of another person. The conference plays a part by providing resources and connections for ministries that make disciplines. The General Board of Discipleship also participates by producing resources and offering training opportunities. Of course, it is God that ultimately brings growth through the power of the Holy Spirit.

_The Book of Discipline_ (2004) reminds us that “the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs” (¶ 120). “The ongoing growth of a disciple of Jesus Christ relies on the commitment of the community of faith to actively offer guidance and direction for the journey,” says Patty Johansen, pastor of Tuscola UMC and co-author of _Charting the Course of Christian Discipleship_. If disciple-making is the mission of the church, and if local churches are on the front lines of that effort, then it seems that there should be a lot more conversation in local churches around the practice of the specific disciplines that enable people to grow as disciples. According to Cheryl Cain, co-director of lay speaking for the Kaskaskia River District, “if we cannot provide guidance to the members of our churches on spiritual development then we are in trouble.”

One term for such guidance is “accountability.” “Accountability is a really hard thing for people in our culture,” Johansen notes. “We’ve been taught to value the independent spirit, the self-made person. We’ve learned to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. And the idea that the church should offer guidance in the practice of our personal spiritual disciplines is, to some, a no-brainer.”

_See Fender on page 14._

Roast duck and getting things done

By Bishop Robert Schnase
Missouri Area
UMC

As I was enjoying dinner with some lay members of the conference the other day, one of them asked about some of my hopes and plans for the future of Missouri United Methodism. I outlined what I have repeated so many times before, including a special emphasis on new church starts, creating a culture of learning, and a focus on reaching younger generations. I became a little more specific about some of what this might require in order for us to do these things with excellence.

One of the laypersons quoted what he called an old Chinese proverb: “The person who only sits with his mouth open will have to wait a long time for a roast duck to come in.”

The message was perfectly clear. These things will not come about by sitting and waiting for something to happen. Enjoying roast duck requires a great deal of planning, preparation, learning and work! And so does congregational fruitfulness.

As it happens, this conversation took place one day after I had spent a whole morning and afternoon driving around one of our larger cities to see once again the settings and neighborhoods of several of our churches. I’ve visited all these before, but I was aware of a disturbing pattern—the churches are getting smaller and weaker in communities that are getting larger and stronger. Hmnn…..

The most significant difference

_See Schnase on page 14._

Upcoming events

New Streams Regional Training Conference
April 4-5
Friday: 6:30 to 9 p.m.
Saturday: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Rantoul UMC
Cost: $20 per person (includes Saturday lunch and a New Streams workbook) – participants are responsible for their own lodging arrangements.
Congregations are encouraged to bring a pastor and two or more laypeople. For more information, see the brochure at www.igrc.org (click on Downloads, then Ministries, then New Streams – the file is called “New Streams flyer”)
Contact Christy Blickensderfer at 217-529-2473 or cblickensderfer@igrc.org.

New Streams Informational Meeting
Hennepin UMC (Vermilion River District)
Sunday, April 20
6:30 to 8 p.m.
Cost: Free! (Copies of the New Streams workbook will be available to purchase for $5 each)
Anyone who wants to learn more about New Streams is invited to attend.
For more information, contact Beth Fender at 217-529-2611 or bfender@igrc.org.

Spring Into Christian Education
What it is: An opportunity to discover new materials and ideas for growing disciples
Who should come: EVERYONE involved in Christian education ministries with children, youth and adults
Included topics: Leadership essentials; matching curriculum with the needs of learners and your church; workshops specific to teaching children, tweens, youth, and adults
Dates and Locations:
Friday, April 11: Bloomington Wesley UMC and Salem Grace UMC
Saturday, April 12: Champaign Faith UMC and Marion Aldersgate UMC
Time: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (Registration begins at 9:30 a.m.)
Cost: Free! (A donation is suggested for lunch)
Registration: A registration form is available at www.igrc.org (click on “downloads,” then “ministries,” then “CEF”). Advance registration will ensure that we have enough materials and lunch for everyone.
This event is made possible by the IGRC chapter of Christian Educators Fellowship, the Christian Education Sunday offering, the IGRC Equipping and Connecting Team, and the United Methodist Publishing House.

Church planting specialist moves to Virginia to start a new congregation

(EDITOR’s note: Paul Nixon will be leading Revitalizing Existing Ministry, the second of four sessions in the Congregational Development Leadership Institute April 8-9. Nixon’s books are available for purchase through the conference’s online Cokesbury store.)

By Neill Caldwell
Virginia Advocate

Saying he wanted to get back on the “front lines” of ministry, the Rev. Paul Nixon left his job in the Alabama-West Florida Conference office last summer and is starting a church from scratch in the Washington suburbs of northern Virginia.
Nixon was director of Congregational Development there until the end of June when he accepted Bishop Charlene Kammerer’s invitation to join the work being done starting new congregations in the Virginia Conference. Now the man who has coached a number of new church plants is starting his own, and from the ground up.
“I love the city; I’m an urban kind of person, and I am wired evangelically,” said Nixon. “I was offered a really great appointment by Bishop Kammerer, and it was a no-brainer.”

Episcopal Church, a new congregation sponsored by the Virginia Conference and being planted by Nixon in the greater District of Columbia area, is part of a new multi-site ministry at Arlington Temple UMC. Nixon has an office there and has been working with the Rev. Cathy Abbott, pastor at Arlington Temple. The church is located across the street from the Rosslyn Metro station.
“This is such a good spot,” Nixon says, “because everybody here knows the church with the gas station underneath.”
So far it’s been a time of networking and meeting new people, building relations while sitting in cafes and coffee shops. Episcopeter is just starting to bring folks together in small group meetings.
“I spend a lot of time explaining the vision,” Nixon says. “The main goal is to

See Nixon on page 16 . . .
Wesley Ministry Network features new releases

Wesley Ministry Network has released its seventh course, the recently published Devotion to Jesus: The Divinity of Christ in Earliest Christianity with an eighth course, Religion and Science: Pathways to Truth, being released this summer.

Devotion to Jesus explores essential questions about Christian origins: What did Jesus’ earliest followers believe about him, and when did they believe it? Professor Larry Hurtado of Edinburgh University, the course teacher and one of the world’s leading experts on early Christianity, explains: “How does a man people knew, who himself professed the one God of Israel, come to be revered as divine? The answer to that question lies at the heart of Christianity even from its earliest days.”

Religion and Science brings together more than a dozen leading American and British theologians and scientists, including Nobel Laureates, to consider the interrelationship of religion and science in the twenty-first century. The course is hosted by Dr. Francis S. Collins, director of the John Templeton Foundation.

These two courses – challenging, enlightening, and critically relevant – are in line with WMN’s commitment to in-depth Bible study done individually between sessions. This approach has been consistent since WMN’s inception, as has the goal of enabling lay leadership. A Leader Training DVD was produced last year and is now included in every course kit.

WMN courses are now in use nationwide and in a dozen countries, in settings that range from traditional Sunday morning classes to home-based small groups. The materials elicit consistently enthusiastic responses from participants, such as “thought-provoking” and “powerful.”WMN courses “allow all of us to be taught by professionals,” observes Tom Machen, of First United Methodist Church in Forrest City, Arkansas, calling them “an answer to my prayers.”

“The truth is that most church people have relatively little chance to talk about theological matters,” offers Ed McClellan of First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington, Indiana. “These materials fill that void. The scripture readings and the questions prepared us well, and it was wonderful to hear distinguished speakers on all these theological questions.”

Reverend Amy Yarnell found participants so engaged in their WMN course that they “talk seriously about wanting to take it again next year because it is so good and the desire to glean even more information from the study.”

Mike McCurry, former White House Press Secretary and Wesley Theological Seminary board member, explains, “The Wesley Ministry Network helps structure for lay people and clergy alike a journey through two centrally important Christian education materials – you get an adventure that leads to a richer understanding of who we are as people of faith; a seminary-level course that every congregation can find accessible and enjoyable.”

Thinking and vital discipleship; living and changing. The leaders are reading together and to support one another in their practice. To access this resource: Go to www.healthlink.com

Click on “Programs and Services”

Then click on “Special Offers” or “Healthy Living”

Wesley Ministry Network’s courses, log on to www.wesleyministrynetwork.com or phone 202-885-8607. Wesley Ministry Network courses may be ordered directly or through the Cokesbury online store at the IGRC website.

Wesley Ministry Network began in 2004 with a mission to bring the best of seminary scholarship to the local church. Three courses were released that first year, and the response was consistently encouraging. Bishop Richard B. Wilke, founder of Disciple Bible Study called Wesley Ministry Network “the perfect follow-up to Disciple Bible Study.” The Christian Century said, “It is hard work to embrace the fullness of the Christian faith while also responding to the challenges of modern critical inquiry. Wesley Ministry Network offers further resources to do just that.”

Health Link adds wellness resource

HealthLink, the PPO Network for IGRC active clergy and lay employees, has added a Wellness resource and valuable information on how to access discounts on essential services on the HealthLink website.

Spring break Continued from page 8

had a background check, or a job for 30 years, before they lost their homes.

The students did other various acts of community service while in the city.

Lindstrom said they went to a food bank to pack boxes of food for people in the area.

The trip also included painting a cabin at a camp for inner-city kids.

Still, Holman thought the best thing they did was advocate on important issues and stand up for people whose voices aren’t usually heard.

“My eyes were opened to the idea of helping people in a different way,” Holman said.


Schnase Continued from page 13

between churches that are thriving and churches that are just surviving is that growing churches are learning, adapting and changing.

Learning is hard work. I do not happen by passively waiting. In those churches that are doing well, the pastor is constantly learning and so are the lay leadership. The pastors are attending workshops, reading books about church leadership, talking with other pastors, searching the Internet for ideas, connecting and collaborating with other UM pastors and pastors of other denominations. They are constantly engaging with those outside the church and looking for unmet needs in the community.

They passionately search for niches of people who have no church home and new and creative ideas. The youth leaders are on the Internet searching for ideas, working with other churches collaboratively.

The same is true for mission leaders and education workers. They love learning. The leaders are reading together and planning together. They are not waiting passively for people to just come in the door. They are not just hoping that God will provide all the people, money, ideas and growth. They do not keep asking God to do for them what God created them to do for God! They are not sitting with their mouths open, waiting for the roast duck to come in!

Every new effective ministry initiative results from a thousand incremental steps. That’s what the lay person was reminding me of. In a good-natured way, he was asking me, “If this is really as important as you say it is, what are you doing this week and next to make it happen?”

Wow! Thank you for prodding me forward!

(Reprinted with permission from the March 7 issue of the Missouri Conference Review, the newspaper of the Missouri Conference of The United Methodist Church. Bishop Schnase’s book, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations is available for purchase from the IGRC Cokesbury bookstore. Bishop Schnase’s blog is found at www.fivepractices.org)
United Methodist membership down, constituency up

By Marta W. Aldrich

While professing U.S. membership continues to decline in The United Methodist Church, the number of constituents is steadily increasing, according to new denominational statistics.

Membership decreased by eight-tenths of a percent over a one-year period to more than 7.9 million, according to the latest statistics released by the denomination March 11. Specifically, U.S. membership was 7,931,733 in 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available, according to the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, which compiles data for the denomination.

U.S. membership in 2005 was 7,995,429.

Another 45,220 people were listed as clergy members of the denomination for a total of 7,976,953 in 2006. In addition, 871,218 people, primarily children, were listed as baptized, non-professing members.

Worldwide United Methodist lay and clergy membership, which stood at more than 11.5 million in 2005, is still being tallied for 2006 and is expected to be released later this year.

Meanwhile, the number of constituents in 2006 was more than 1.5 million, a 16 percent increase from a decade ago. Denominational records show the number of constituents has increased three of the last five years and eight of the last 10.

“Constituents are the unbaptized children, youth and adults who are not members of the church, but for whom the church has pastoral responsibility,” said Scott Brewer, the council’s director of research. “It’s a growing number, and it reflects that people aren’t so big into membership anymore.”

Brewer said the church “needs to pay more attention” to this growing category and understand the changing dynamics of religious affiliation in the United States. “It’s consistent with what we’re seeing in the larger culture, particularly when it comes to attitudes toward membership,” he said.

Some people aren’t joining

The Rev. Lovett Weems, the director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., said the constituent numbers should be prudently considered.

“There is certainly a phenomenon today of persons who seem more reluctant to join,” Weems said. “There are a number of pastors who talk about people in their congregations who are very active in the life of their church, but they just don’t join.”

He noted that such reluctance is spilling over into groups within the church. Historically, people would be asked to “join a new men’s group” that was forming; today, they might instead be invited to participate in a “men’s gathering.”

Today’s churchgoers, especially young people, are less likely to “join” and make long-term commitments, he said, and more likely to participate in short-term activities such as Volunteers In Mission trips, the Walk to Emmaus spiritual retreat and short-term Bible studies.

The latest United Methodist data puts church attendance at more than 3.3 million, down eight-tenths of a percent from 2005 and a 4 percent decrease from 1990.

Brewer said the church hasn’t experienced an increase in attendance since 2001. That increase, he said, was presumably related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Other statistics

The report shows that about 2.68 percent of the U.S. population are professing members of The United Methodist Church. Meanwhile, more than 50 percent of the population reported no ongoing relationship with a religious community in 2000, according to a separate study published by the Glenmary Research Center in Nashville, Tenn.

The number of United Methodist churches was 34,398 with a median size of 111. The percentage of churches that have grown since 1996 was 35 percent, and the percentage of churches receiving at least one member on profession of faith or restored was 58.8 percent, up for the third year in a row.

While the church’s decline in membership has continued since the mid-1960s, Brewer cautioned against dismissing excitement about current efforts to revitalize the church with a “renewed emphasis on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

“It’s important to remember that it will likely be a number of years before we see the fruits of these efforts in our statistics. We should be hopeful, but we also need to be patient,” Brewer said.

Fourteen annual (regional) conferences grew in 2006, double the number in 2005. They were Alabama-West Florida, 0.84 percent; Alaska Missionary, 1.75 percent; Arkansas, 0.37 percent; Central Texas, 0.89 percent; Kentucky, 0.17 percent; North Carolina, 0.01 percent; North Georgia, 1.12 percent; Oklahoma, 0.04 percent; Oklahoma Indian Missionary, 0.59 percent; Red Bird Missionary, 1.56 percent; Southwest Texas, 0.09 percent; Tennessee, 0.75 percent; Texas, 0.77 percent; and Western North Carolina, 0.23 percent.

Churches spent more than $6 billion in 2006, down 3.71 percent from 2005, adjusted for inflation, according to the report.

“When such a large increase in spending in 2005, I am not surprised to see giving leveling off in 2006,” Brewer said. “In 2005, we saw a tremendous outpouring of support through the Advance for persons affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the December 2004 tsunami. United Methodists have always been generous people, but it’s clear that when we’re motivated, we will give far beyond historical norms.”

*Aldrich is news editor of United Methodist News Service.

Pew study raises questions for Methodist leaders

By Marta W. Aldrich

Mirroring most other mainline U.S. denominations, United Methodists are generally older, whiter and wealthier in a nation that is increasingly populated with young adults, people of color and families with modest incomes.

The United Methodist Church also is losing more members than it’s gaining, with its parishioners increasingly moving to evangelical Protestant churches or choosing not to affiliate with another religious group at all.

That portrait of United Methodism was presented in a landmark study of religion in America released Feb. 25 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Based on interviews with more than 35,000 Americans age 18 and older, the study found that U.S. religion is increasingly diverse and fluid—a vibrant marketplace where individuals pick and choose religious traditions that meet their needs,” leaving religious groups to compete for members.

“There is no future for The United Methodist Church in the United States unless we can reach more people, younger people and more diverse people,” said the Rev. Lovett Weems, a researcher and professor of church leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, regarding the study’s findings.

“It’s not that we’re not making the efforts or spending the money to reach younger and more diverse people, but we’re not focusing our efforts on outcomes.”

Nearly half of American adults say they have left the faith tradition of their upbringing, either by switching to a different religious group or choosing not to affiliate with a faith tradition at all.

Of the 53 percent who left the Methodist faith tradition of their childhood, the survey reports that 19 percent went to evangelical churches, 11 percent to other mainline Protestant churches and 3 percent to historically black churches that are not Methodist. Another 12 percent say they no longer are part of any faith group, and 8 percent moved to a non-Protestant religion.

*Important foundational work*

The survey confirms much of the data collected in previous studies about both The United Methodist Church and religion in general in the United States. However, the breadth and depth of the survey provides a more detailed glimpse into trends that appear to be accelerating.

See Pew Study on page 18 . . .
Teen’s testimony shines under ‘Jeopardy!’ spotlight

By Matthew Ralph*

GLENDORA, N.J. (UMNS) – While the object of Jeopardy! is to guess the right question, it was the answers of 17-year-old contestant Becky Kralle that left the biggest impression during an appearance on the nationally syndicated TV game show.

Becky, who already had pledged to put 10 percent of her earnings in the offering plate at Chews UMC, was given two chances to share about her Christian faith in the form of answers to host Alex Trebek’s questions.

The first, which appeared in her introduction video on the Teen Jeopardy Web site, was a query about personal heroes. Becky gave only one: “My savior, Jesus Christ.”

Later during the national broadcast, Trebek asked about a mission trip Becky went on with dozens of other youth from her church in southern New Jersey. In both instances, Becky said witnessing to the faith was “natural thing to do.”

“How is your experience with new church starts all over the country? We are so blessed that God has called Paul to do a ‘new thing’ in our midst in Virginia.”

Nixon

Continued from page 13

renew presence of Wesleyan theology in a city where it’s not doing well. Bishop Kamberer invited me to look at this as a United Methodist project. We’ll start by looking at the community as a whole. It’s one big mission field. There are condo developments in three block of the Rosslyn Metro station, which is a hub station for blue and orange lines. All the Virginia population can easily access this spot.

“Habitat for Humanity”

is not connected to church,” he adds. “You have to understand the stats. Among professionals in our center cities, only a small percentage are affiliated with a mainstream church. Half of the people in the Washington metro area are de-churches... They go to church when they go back home, but they don’t go to church here. Their lifestyle doesn’t fit with church. They work hard during the week, and play hard on Saturday nights. On Sundays they read the Post and walk their dogs. We need to try and understand this group better.”

The church already has a web site (www.epicentersdc.com) and will soon hire a creative director.

“Paul Nixon is a church planting specialist,” says Anna Workman, the conference director of Church Development, Evangelism and Ethnic Local Church Concerns. “He has years of coaching experience with new church starts all over the country. We are so blessed that God has called Paul to do a ‘new thing’ in our midst in Virginia.”

“When Paul first shared his vision of Epicenter we me more than a year ago, I jokingly told him Virginia could offer him the ‘mission field’ he needed. As we continued to discuss the possibility, I was even more convinced that with the diversity in the Arlington area this was truly the best place to attempt such an out-of-the-box new church plant. Not only will his gifts help us to do a new thing, but they will also bless places where we are already in ministry.”

Nixon has drawn interest for a book released, titled I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church. Nixon says the book is about “key choices that church leaders can make to cultivate thriving, congregationally-based spiritual movements in a context where most of our fellow churches are stagnated and dying around us. We can choose to move with God’s Spirit in birthing something new from the old. After all, God calls us to lead a living church and to share in the movement of Jesus that transcends the life cycles of congregation and denomination.”

Conferences will bid farewell to 16 bishops across the United Methodist connection

By Linda Green

Some United Methodist annual (regional) conferences meeting this spring and summer will say goodbye to retiring bishops and become better acquainted with the candidates they have endorsed to succeed them.

The 2008 meetings will be the last for 11 retiring U.S. bishops. In July, their successors will be chosen by jurisdictional conferences, and the new bishops will begin serving effective Sept. 1. In addition, five bishops from the central conferences—regions in Africa, Asia and Europe—will retire this year or next.

Annual conference is the second of three major churchwide events this year in the United States. The 2008 General Conference, the denomination’s top legislative body, convenes once every four years and meets April 23-May 2 in Fort Worth, Texas. Afterwards, the church’s 63 U.S. annual conferences meet individually during the spring and early summer, followed by the conferences for the five U.S. jurisdictions, which also convene once every four years, in July.

Bishops hold the top clergy positions in the United Methodist Church and are elected in the United States for life. Bishops in Africa, Europe and Asia are elected for a specific term, and if they are not re-elected, they return to the pastorate and are no longer considered a bishop. Bishops outside the United States who retire while serving their term are considered for life.

Retiring U.S. bishops as of Aug. 31 include one Hispanic man, one African-American man, four white men, two African-American women and three white women.

See Conferences on page 18 . . .

The book is a follow-up to an earlier effort, Fling Open the Doors, which is about churches doing community ministry, specifically his experiences leading a second site church startup at Gulf Breeze UMC in Pensacola, Fla.

Nixon suggests churches, especially in urban areas, share space and ministry as Epicenter and Arlington Temple are doing, and predicts that multi-site churches will soon become a sizeable segment of the total United Methodist community.

In the meantime, Nixon will be adjusting to the Virginia Conference. “I moved 14 years ago from north Texas to the Alabama-West Florida Conference and never looked back. It became home, and Virginia will be the same way.”

Reprinted with permission from the September 2007 issue of the Virginia Advocate, the monthly magazine of the Virginia Annual Conference.
LOS ANGELES (UMNS) — United Methodist churches and annual conferences increased their giving to Africa University by 2 percent in 2007 and helped the Zimbabwe school’s endowment reach $44 million.

The 16-year-old university, though challenged by Zimbabwe’s astronomical inflation rate, is managing to cope with political and economic crises, according to a report delivered Feb. 26 to the Africa University Development Advisory Committee.

“Africa University is the hope of Africa when it comes to education,” said West Virginia Bishop Ernest Lyght, committee chairperson. “Some people in The United Methodist Church are uncomfortable talking about money, but how can you be Methodist and not talk about money?”

The committee’s primary task is to help the university’s development office and its board of directors raise “gifts of love” for the pan-African, United Methodist-related school in Mutare. Africa University is home to 1,400 students representing 26 countries.

Leaders say the university has managed to continue operating amidst national chaos because the Zimbabwean government has not interfered with school operations and because of generous giving to the school’s endowment. The $44 million endowment reached beyond the projected $40 million to be raised by 2012.

Local churches and annual conferences gave $2.3 million to the university fund in 2007, a 2 percent increase over 2006, while local churches, annual conferences and individuals provided $459,628 in endowed scholarships to date for the 2007-2008 academic year. Another $377,613 was raised for direct scholarships to students, which is $100,000 more than the same period last year. Churches, conferences and individuals also have launched campaigns for direct and endowed scholarships, endowed chairs, dormitories, a student health clinic and staff housing.

“The Africa University farm is our life-line,” said James Salley, the school’s associate vice chancellor for institutional advancement. “The biggest consumer of our farm products is the university dining hall and our students. The Lord knew that Zimbabwe would be where it is today, so Africa University was founded in chicken coops and barns built on the old farm of Old Mutare Mission. God knew and God prepared.”

**Apportionments praise**

The committee gave special thanks to churches and annual conferences in the Northeastern Jurisdiction for paying 100 percent or more of their apportionment asking for Africa University in 2007. Two conferences paid beyond their apportionment goal: West Virginia paid 129 percent and New York paid 100 percent. For the first time, Eastern Pennsylvania paid 100 percent of its apportionments, increasing its giving from 72 percent; Greater New Jersey increased from 88 to 100 percent; North Central New York went from 79 to 100 percent; and New England increased from 89 to 100 percent.

“This is the first time in recent years than an entire jurisdiction has paid an apportionment at 100 percent on any of the apportionments,” said Ken Sloane, director of communications ministry at United Methodist Communications. “In spite of all the challenges that the churches in the (jurisdiction) face, Africa University continues to be a cause that excites people.”

Not every annual conference in the Northeast jurisdiction was able to pay 100 percent to the Africa University Fund. Sloane said, “but because some conferences exceeded their 100 percent asking, the jurisdiction can celebrate what they connectionally did together.”

“We still believe that it is possible to have all jurisdictions give 100 percent of the apportionments to Africa University in 2008,” Salley said. “We will continue to press on in order to have Africa University become the first fund of the church to reach 100 percent.” In an effort to increase online giving, the development office redesigned its Web site at www.support-africauniversity.org.

**Stories of hope**

During the meeting, committee members affirmed Africa University for its work in offering hope and peace, changing lives, and serving as an instrument of God to change the world. They were encouraged to share these stories to help others in the church catch the school’s vision.

Last December, the university appointed faculty member Fanuel Tagwira as interim chief in the wake of Vice Chancellor Rukudzio Murapa’s retirement. Salley and Tagwira, the school’s dean of the faculty of agriculture and natural resources, have been working together to shepherd the school in the areas of student life, academic support, faculty and staff salaries and maintenance.

*Bishop Earl McCloud of the African Methodist Episcopal Church listens to United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert during the March meeting of the Pan-Methodist Commission.*

By Linda Green

By Linda Green

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (UMNS) — The African Methodist Episcopal Church has withdrawn its support of a resolution affirming full communion with the other denominations in the Pan-Methodist Commission, and it is reconsidering having representatives on United Methodist agencies.

Speaking at the March 6-8 meeting of the Pan-Methodist Commission, Bishop Earl McCloud, the ecumenical officer for the AME Church, said the withdrawal was based on a series of events, primarily those that led up to the dismissal of the Rev. Larry Pickens as leader of The United Methodist Church’s ecumenical agency.

Last November, the commission adopted a resolution affirming full communion and mutual support of the churches in the Pan-Methodist Commission. But since then, the bishop said, “I’ve changed my mind.”

“I do not agree presently with the resolution and will not take it to our General Conference” for adoption, he said. Other pan-Methodist denominations will consider the resolution at their General Conference gatherings in 2008 and 2010. The 40-member body includes representatives of The United Methodist Church and five historically African-American churches: the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, United American Methodist Episcopal and African Union Methodist Protestant denominations.

Established in 2000 by the top legislative bodies of the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist and United Methodist churches, the commission works to foster cooperation among its member denominations in evangelism, missions, publications, social concerns and higher education.

Following the 2000 General Conference’s Acts of Repentance, where The United Methodist Church apologized for actions that caused blacks to leave its predecessor churches in the 18th and 19th centuries, representatives of the historically black Pan-methodist churches were placed on the boards of directors of United Methodist agencies.

Those members who have served for eight years reported to the commission that their experiences had been educational and filled with opportunities to “see The United Methodist Church in action,” said Juanita Bryant, a representative from the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

Members who served on the Commission of Christian Unity and Intercultural Concerns questioned the process that led to the dismissal of Pickens, who was the agency’s first African-American executive. Last December, the three pan-Methodist representatives on that agency were unhappy enough with the process that they left the commission meeting after Pickens’ dismissal.

**Questions about roles**

“It was a gracious invitation by the part of The United Methodist Church to ask us to serve, but I don’t see our church becoming more involved in this. I’m questioning within my own heart and soul the real value since they (the United Methodists) have been doing this and we haven’t, (and) whether it is something we ought to continue,” McCloud said.

Some members of the Pan-Methodist Commission questioned their participation on the boards and agencies because it exposes them to some of the inner workings of a denomination.

Others said that, because of different church structures, United Methodists have not yet been able to serve on the boards of the other pan-Methodist churches.

*Green is a United Methodist News Service news writer based in Nashville, Tenn.*
Discipleship.

Religious organizations that use such data to spiritually inclined people are also "insti-
Church works to attract "seekers," some denominations to another? Or is our time
choose 'none of the above' when it

More than 16 percent say they are not affiliated with any religious group, making
more than triple its population.

Believing without belonging

A significant finding is that one in six American adults today say they are not affiliated with any religious group, making them part of the fastest-growing segment of today's religious landscape.

More than 16 percent say they are not affiliated, which is more than double the number who say they were unaffiliated as children. Among Americans aged 18-29, one in four say they are not affiliated with any particular religion.

"We need to be cognizant of the fact that increasing numbers of people are choosing 'none of the above' when it comes to religious affiliation," said Scott Brewer, director of research for the General Council on Finance and Administration.

"It's not really that we're seeing agnos-
Mr. Reinke will get his day in court.

Mailbag

Church law requires U.S. bishops to retire after jurisdictional conference if turning 66 on or before July 1 of the jurisdic-

Continue reading about the impact on children in the first case, we

Discipline

The United Methodist Church. Mr. Reinke

The Current

Because the letter fell outside the guide

No assignment of guilt or innocence

Informed persons can make adult choic-

Church leaders, particularly with main-

According to Weems, the pathway for choosing a church home has changed sig-

Traditions and denominations don't tend to be the beginning point for people today when they select a church," he said.

"The pattern today is belonging before believing. People have to feel like they belong first. It's the sense of belonging that

Although The United Methodist Church works to attract "seekers," some spiritually inclined people are also "insti-
tionally suspicious" and wary of reli-
gious organizations that use such data to target them, said the Rev. Taylor Burton-

Discipline

Continued from page 15

The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (http://religions.pewforum.org/reports) estimates that, of the nation's 225 million adults, 78 percent are Christian, 5 percent belong to other faiths and more than 16 percent are unaffiliated. Of those who profess to be Christians, 18 percent identify themselves with mainline Protestant churches, including 5.4 percent with the Methodist tradition.

Mainline denominations have generally experienced across-the-board losses, with the Methodist tradition suffering a net loss of 2.1 percent. The United Methodist Church at 7.5 percent, but its decline has been offset by the large num-

The Pew study says the group experi-

We've got the paradigm turned around. ... It's not about getting people inside of the church; it's about getting Christians out," he said. "It's not how many people are in our organization, but what level of spiritual impression people are experiencing. How are they being imprinted with the likeness of Jesus Christ? And what is the impact crater around them as a result?"

Demographic snapshot

The study offered a demographic snap-

Continued from page 19

The study says 93 percent of United Methodists are overrepresented in every age category above 50 (55 percent) and underrepresented in every age category below that. Approximately 11 percent of United Methodists are ages 18-29. Seventy-two percent say they do not have children under 18 living at home.

The study says 93 percent of United Methodists are white. Two percent are identified as black, 2 percent as Latino and 1 percent as Asian, with the rest being of other or mixed racial backgrounds.

Church leaders, particularly with main-

According to Weems, the pathway for choosing a church home has changed sig-

"Every time we do that, we miss the point," Burton-Edwards said. "Instead of adjusting our message to get those people with us, we should be working to be in mission with people, whoever they are, wherever they are."

Burton-Edwards said the study's data is useful but shouldn't be the focus in meas-

The two letters from same writer took me

Just as the writer was concerned about

The two letters from same writer took me

All of the information contained in

lines established by the Communications Commission, I could not publish the letter but the writer raised concern for the impact such a story would have on children.

At the same time, the second letter enclosed criticized The Current's coverage of former pastor Larry Reinke who was dis-

All of the information contained in

The two letters from same writer took me

Just as the writer was concerned about

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A word of thanks

To the people and churches of IGRC,

We wish to thank the many people and churches who have written, e-mailed, and called us since our granddaughter Ryanne Mace’s death in the Valentine’s Day shootings at Northern Illinois University. Your thoughtfulness and prayers have been a powerful support for the Mace and Palmer families.

Ryanne’s death was caused by a senseless act, but we are looking in faith and hope for appropriate ways to continue her influence for a better world. We pray that in that way, God will help us make some meaning out of a truly absurd tragedy. Meanwhile, because of prayers and expressions of concern from folks like you, we are experiencing in our sorrow the promised peace that passes all understanding. We are truly blessed to be part of the United Methodist family.

Gene and Sally Mace
Miley and Janet Palmer
Retired IGRC clergy

Revival needed in church

Editor, The Current:
The article, Why We Are Losing Ground with Young Adults written by Rev. Marty Cauly (March 2008 issue of The Current) is one of the most correct assessments of our situation I have read.

The principles apply also to our decreases in middle age adult membership. Methodism has strayed so far from our Wesleyan roots that we are hardly recognizable as a Christian organization. We more reflect a socio-political organization. As long as we take priority stands for political issues whether governmental or collegiate and decrease our interest in salvation by grace through Jesus Christ we will continue to lose members and find it hard to attract new membership.

We have appointed liberal bishops, liberal academics in our universities and seminaries and trained pastors to espouse this liberal agenda. Then we wonder why we are dwindling away.

Methodism is fortunate to have young ministers like Rev. Cauly who is not afraid of the denomination hierarchy and willing to speak out. We also have the Confessing Movement trying to turn us back to our roots. This organization meets with opposition from the entrenched liberals but continues to fight on.

We need a revival in our denomination led by Holy Spirit-filled preachers to start grassroots turn back to our founding creed.

Charles A. Crowder
Flora, IL

Connect with General Conference 2008

The quadrennial gathering of United Methodists for general conferencing is upon us. Starting April 23 in Ft. Worth, Texas, United Methodist Christians from around the world with worship, pray, sing, and deliberate together about how God is calling The United Methodist Church to live out God’s vision and mission in today’s world.

Even though this will be the ninth general conference I have attended, four as a delegate and now five as a bishop, the anticipation and excitement remains as high as it was in 1976, the year of my first general conference experience. Gathering with old friends from across the globe and making new friends, connecting in Christ with those gathered through powerful preaching and worship, watching and experiencing God’s Spirit at work is always amazing and inspiring.

Unlike 1976, the 2008 general conference will be incredibly accessible to all through the communication advances that have taken place between then and now. The whole first day of the conference, including the episcopal address from the Council of Bishops, a message from the general secretaries, a message from our young people, and the laity address will be streamed live on the Internet through our web site at www.ge2008.umc.org. You can sit in the comfort of your home and participate in it all!

Following the first day, you will have a day-by-day access to the work of the general conference at this website.

A few facts might help put the whole thing in context.

• The general conference is composed of an equal number of clergy and laity elected by the annual conferences. In other words, the decisions about the future direction of The United Methodist Church lie in the hands and hearts of the grassroots of our church. Last year, at the 2007 session of the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference, we elected our delegates. Bishops, having no voice or vote in the conference, preside over the conference and then lead the church in the vision and mission established by the general conference.

• Every United Methodist has the opportunity to shape the future of our church through a petitioning process. Every petition submitted by individual United Methodists, congregations, conferences, boards and agencies is considered and voted upon by at least three bodies in the context of general conference. In other words, the United Methodist conferencing process is democratic, not autocratic. It is communal, not bureaucratic.

• The general conference will have before it for its deliberation some of the hot-button issues of the day. Newspapers from around the world will be reporting, often in polemic ways since that is what makes a good news story, about the actions taken. Please do not automatically assume these reports are completely factual or descriptive of the internal workings of the conference. Go to the United Methodist website for information. Be in conversation with the IGRC delegates upon their return for their interpretation of actions taken. It is a time for thoughtful response, not knee-jerk reaction.

I hope you will find ways to connect with the general conference, April 23-May 2. It is a gathering in which the breadth, depth, and height of United Methodism and God’s work through us comes to life.

— Bishop Sharon A. Brown Christopher

Gathering andsyscalling

By Paul Black

It is hard to believe that in the course of a single day, we come into contact with more information than was available during our grandparents’ entire lifetime. An information explosion has occurred where our information is no longer confined to a region but through the advent of cable television and the internet, we are instantly transported around the world.

The United Methodist Church is a global church and no event highlights John Wesley’s charge that the World is Our Parish more than General Conference, the quadrennial gathering of delegates from the 66 annual conferences in the United States and the Central Conferences around the world.

In the course of presenting the United Methodist story, there are aspects that cause us to bust our buttons in pride over being United Methodist, while other stories provoke us to think and still others upset us. And when the latter occurs, more often than not, the messenger gets blamed for the message.

A couple of weeks ago, two letters to the editor along with a phone call came from upset folks.

The phone call came from a pastor who took issue with the IGRC website publishing information about liberal theologian Marcus Borg being in Evanston in April. The caller said posting the event was...
Midwest flood response begins

By Susan J. Meister*

Many residents in Arkansas are experiencing a “nightmare” as they deal with a series of weather-related systems affecting parts of the U.S. Midwest, according to Maxine Allen.

Families affected by the Feb. 5 tornadoes suffered an ice storm two weeks later and in March were dealing with devastating flooding along a nearly identical track. “People are in a fragile mental state, wondering, ‘Why me?’” said Allen, the disaster response and missions coordinator for the United Methodist Arkansas Annual (regional) Conference.

Allen is working with partners and the United Methodist Committee on Relief to assess the needs created by all three events and organize response and recovery.

“We are in touch with the annual conferences affected by the flooding to provide support as events unfold,” said the Rev. Tom Hazelwood, who leads UMCOR’s domestic disaster response.

In neighboring Missouri, Disaster Response Coordinator Karen Benson is relying on her district coordinators to check in. “Because of past experience in the affected counties, we can anticipate that there will be uninsured and underinsured families who will need our help,” she said.

“While it’s really too early to say exactly what we’ll need, we are ‘cooking’ the recovery picture.” Benson is chairwoman of the Governor’s Disaster Recovery Partnership in Missouri, and the Rev. Mark Dumas is active in the state Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. “Lots of United Methodists will be active in this response,” she said.

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference has requested emergency grants from UMCOR to address flooding in both February and March.

“Lots of flooding happened on the east side of town, the commercial area. People may be out of work for weeks,” said the Rev. Paul Widicus, pastor of Harrisburg (Ill.) First United Methodist Church, where between 9 and 12 inches of rain fell in 24 hours during the week of March 17.

Widicus expects a long summer of cleanup. Like his counterparts in Arkansas and Missouri, he is preparing for the long-term response. “We have an ecumenical group in Harrisburg called Christian Compassion Center. We’ll be able to find families needing help as the response unfolds,” he said.

United Methodists can support UMCOR’s flood relief efforts with donations to Advance #901670.

*Meister is the Domestic Disaster Response Correspondent for UMCOR.

Sunday School curriculum invites children to build ‘rock solid’ faith

By Kathy L. Gilbert*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS)—Hank the Hammer and friends will help children build a “rock solid heart of faith” with a new Sunday school curriculum being offered this fall by the United Methodist Publishing House.

Rock Solid: Building a Heart of Faith will invite children ages 3-13 to lay a solid biblical foundation and construct a personal relationship with God. The cornerstone of Rock Solid is Matthew 7:24, the story of the wise man who built his house on rock. It includes multisensory activities, crafts, stories and games, supplemented by an interactive Web site at www.IAmRockSolid.com.

“Faith cannot be taught; it must be caught,” said Marj Pon, managing editor of church school publications, in a presentation to the Publishing House board of directors during its spring meeting March 18-19 in Nashville.

“We want to create a faith experience each week.”

The new curriculum replaces Exploring Faith, which has been offered for the past eight years. Rock Solid incorporates language based on a faith-building model instead of a school model and uses, for instance, words like session instead of lesson, leader instead of teacher and group instead of class.

The curriculum will be ready to ship to churches in June. It includes a leader guide, kids books, a resource packet and musical CD. A fun pack with craft ideas is available for younger age levels, a puzzle book for older children and a drama book for “tweens.”

Rock Solid is less expensive than Exploring Faith. The leader’s guide costs $2 less per book, and the kids book $1 less.

Reporting on other Publishing House products, Linda Tozer and Marilyn Thornton, editors of Vacation Bible School resources, said the 2008 VBS Beach Party had exceeded $1 million in sales during February.

*Gilbert is a United Methodist News Service news writer based in Nashville, Tenn.