

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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Gender Identity

OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNDERSTANDING

by Kathryn Johnson

Having transgender persons serve as clergy in the United Methodist Church is not new. I grew up and was ordained in an Annual Conference, for example, where a transgender pastor, now deceased, served for many years in the state of Maine.

What *is* new, is that with the case of the Rev. Drew Phoenix, a transgender pastor in the Baltimore Washington Annual Conference, the issue has come before the church in a public way, engendering conversation and an opportunity for education and deeper understanding. I pray we will take this opportunity as the gift that it is and relate to Rev. Phoenix as a brother-in-Christ who has much to teach us.

For those unfamiliar with the situation, at the May 2007 session of the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference the Rev. Drew Phoenix, who had served for five years as the Rev. Ann Gordon, was reappointed as pastor of St. John's UM Church in Baltimore. Having moved through a transition which Rev. Phoenix describes as allow-

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Rev. Drew Phoenix

Bishops Call for Withdrawal from Iraq

At their recent meeting in Lake Junaluska, NC, the UM Council of Bishops called for the United States and its coalition partners to begin an immediate withdrawal of all troops from Iraq. MFSA encourages all United Methodists to thank the bishops for this significant resolution and to make sure it gets wide exposure in your local churches. The full resolution reads as follows:

Whereas, the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, meeting Nov. 9 at Lake Junaluska, N.C., is committed to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world; and

Whereas, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, calls his followers to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9); and

Whereas, "We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ" (*Book of Discipline 2004*, Par. 165.C); and

Whereas, the cost of the war in Iraq as of Nov. 7, 2007 has been the lives of 3,843 members of the U.S. military, 171 mem-

bers of the United Kingdom military, 132 members of the other Coalition military, 28,385 U.S. military wounded, and the lives of at least 76,241 Iraqi civilians; and

Whereas the war in Iraq has displaced 2 million persons and forced another 2 million persons into refugee status;

Whereas, every day the war continues more soldiers and innocent civilians are killed with no end in sight to the violence, bloodshed and carnage;

NOW, THEREFORE, THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS calls on the President and Con-

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General Conference Update

With just over four months left before thousands of United Methodists converge on the Convention Center in Fort Worth, Texas, MFSA continues to prepare for our witness at General Conference.

LEGISLATION

In preparation for MFSA's fall board meeting in October, the MFSAF staff surveyed all of the General Conference legislation that has been prepared and submitted by the national agencies and commissions of the church. This survey reassured us that our agencies are serving the church well. The General Board of Church and Society and General Board of Global Ministries have carefully combed the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* and *Book of Resolutions* to determine those things which

are now outdated or need updating as well as current issues that need to be addressed in the areas of the social justice and mission ministries of the church. The Commission on Religion and Race and Commission on the Status and Role of Women continue to hold the church accountable on issues of sexual harassment and gender inequity and racism and white privilege.

Along with supporting the excellent legislation of these and other groups and individuals whom we surveyed, MFSA has submitted five pieces of legislation, focusing primarily on the issues of peace and war. The next issue of the Social Questions Bulletin will contain more detailed information

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MFSA Fall Chapter Highlights

by Rev. Amy Stapleton,
National Organizer

This fall MFSA chapters around the country have been engaged in a variety of activities.

The **East Ohio Chapter** hosted a fall event, *Because it Matters* in Uniontown Ohio. The day included a keynote address by Bishop Sally Dyck, of the Minnesota Episcopal Area who shared on the topic *Few Reflections on Bridges*. The event also included workshops on the Judicial Council, How Advocacy Groups Impact General Conference, Protecting Planet Earth, Globalization, Is the Church Supportive of Radical Hospitality?, Supporting Peace in the Middle East and the Global AIDS Initiative.



Southwest Texas MFSAers Protest Death Penalty

At the MFSA National Board meeting in Nashville we welcomed the **Southwest Texas Conference Chapter** as an official chapter. The Austin sub-group who is especially thriving, recently created its mission statement and visioning for 2007 – 2010. The vision states, "the Southwest Texas Conference Chapter of MFSA calls on United Methodists to educate, promote, and act on Jesus' teaching of God's radical love and justice for all." Goals for the Southwest Texas chapter include:

- Educate, promote and act on (take steps towards) eliminating poverty
- Reducing the number of annual executions in Texas.
- Full inclusion of GLBT persons in the church & society, including ordination of clergy, full membership rights and the right to marry.
- Increased peace and non-violence in our personal lives, the UMC, and our communities

- Protecting the environment
- Working to create a compassionate immigration policy

The **Oregon Idaho MFSA** chapter had two days of fellowship, feasting and theological conversation with members and friends of the Methodist Federation for Social Action at their Fall Retreat held at Peace House in Portland Oregon. The retreat's theme was "Cynicism and Hope: Reclaiming Hope in a Post-Democratic America."

The retreat focused on how as a nation we have entered into a time when democracy can no longer be taken for granted and how the government agenda is more often not the agenda of the people. The chapter explored the following questions: What will be the role of Christian social action in this new environment? What can the New Testament and other available resources teach us about successfully challenging the principalities and powers that oppress us, in a time when democracy can no longer be taken for granted?

The **Northern Illinois Chapter** celebrated the work and witness of the past 100 years of MFSA with a centennial celebration. The event speaker was Bishop Minerva Carcaño of the Phoenix Episcopal Area. Broadway UMC in Chicago provided a readers theatre that highlighted the history of the organization. The chapter affirmed it's mission to be "a community of hope committed to a vision of the world that includes every one as beloved as God. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we work for justice and peace for all creation through prayer, education and witness." The North



Rev. Lisl Heymans welcomes people to 100th Anniversary Celebration

Illinois chapter also hosted a round table discussion and dialogue on the proposed changes in the United Methodist Church structure with Bishop Sharon Rader and Rev. Bruce Robbins in mid-November.

The **Virginia Chapter** of the Methodist Federation for Social Action is celebrating the 10th Anniversary of being a chapter and the 100th anniversary of MFSA in a variety of ways. This fall the chapter is hosting a workshop "A Second Look at the Death Penalty" sponsored by the VA Chapter, the Conference Committee on Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries. The workshop will provide participants with the opportunity to consider a range of death penalty issues and explore responding to this 'life or death' issue as Christians and United Methodists.

On October 27th the **New England Chapter of MFSA** gathered United Methodists in front of the Massachusetts State House to voice their opposition to the War In Iraq. The Rev. James McPhee brought greetings to the group from Bishop Peter Weaver who was not able to be present and the Rev. Michael Clark spoke to the group. After the United Methodist Witness the group joined thousands of other New Englanders in a day of protest against the war.

These actions are just a few among many. MFSA chapters and members across the connection continue to be a voice of justice and hold a vision of peace. That witness inspires hope. May we continue to be faithful. ❖

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Virginia Hilton Remembered

It was with heavy hearts that we heard the news the Virginia (Ginny) Hilton had passed away in early October in Sacramento, California.

Some months ago Ginny was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent surgery. The cancer had metastasized and moved into her bones by the time of her death.

Her passing was quick and seems sudden to those of us who loved her so dearly. We rejoice, however, that she did not suffer long. Her family, including her husband Bruce, was with her at the time of her death.

Ginny was a beloved member of our MFSA network for many, many years. She had a passion for justice, an amazingly generous spirit and an unflagging commitment to making the world a more just and peaceful place. We will miss her terribly.



WORDS IN MEMORY

by Rev. Lee Williamson

I met Virginia in September 1976 at Pacific School of Religion where we both were incoming students. She already had studied at Drew and was the class ahead of me. In the coming months Virginia and Bruce, along with their family, became good friends of our family.

In the mid-1980s Virginia organized an effort that put new life into the California-Nevada Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action.

For years we had been going along with a nominating committee which simply "reproduced" the leadership year after year. MFSA in general and our chapter also were at a crossroads. There were emerging justice issues that needed our witness. The "old guard" was not going to let these new issues (especially matters of welcome and support for GLBT) come to the agenda of the chapter.

So Virginia and some allies brought in an alternate slate of leaders to the meeting where we were to have an election. Her efforts prevailed and our chapter joined the larger MFSA in being up-front about the injustices being done to GLBT sisters

and brothers by society, and most especially by our denomination.

Virginia was a strong leader in the California-Nevada MFSA Chapter. The offices in which she served are: Treasurer, Membership Secretary, Chapter President, and Chapter Representative to the National MFSA Board.

At a meeting of the National MFSA Board in Sacramento in 2001 I had the privilege of introducing her and Bruce as recipients of the Ball Award, the top award which MFSA gives to justice seekers and peace makers.

Later Virginia and Bruce, working through the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), led in the formation of a strong movement called Parents Reconciling Network. This group created its own award called: The Hilton Award. Virginia and Bruce were the first recipients.

Virginia was a friend – strong and good and true. She was a wise colleague.

We grieve Virginia's death but most of all we rejoice for her life and for the friendship we had. Heaven's spirit was greatly enlarged when Virginia died because her spirit is there!

As we learned from our friends in Central America when we stood with them for justice, democracy, and freedom – we stay in company with sisters and brothers who have gone on by remembering their work, by claiming their strength and by embracing their ongoing presence among us.

VIRGINIA HILTON – PRESENTE!

A memorial service was held for Ginny on October 27 at St Marks UMC in Sacramento CA. The family has indicated that memorial gifts may be sent to:

Parent's Reconciling Network, 3801 Keeler Ave., Chicago, IL60641; or

Methodist Federation for Social Action, 212 E. Capitol St. NE, Washington, D.C.20003.

To read more about Ginny, share your memories or thoughts with Ginny's family, visit:

www.reverendvirginiahilton.blogspot.com

MORE MEMORIES

Jean Reynolds Cal-NeV MFSA Convenor

Virginia was a vital member of the CA-NV chapter of Methodist Federation for Social Action, serving most recently as the chapter representative to the National MFSA Council. I could always count on her to have useful advice about how to make our chapter programs timely, relevant and holy. I sought her perception of Annual Conference proceedings, current LGBT justice issues, and political issues both denominational and secular. Her insights always cut to the heart and truth of what was happening. She understood people, and helped me on more than one instance to examine a conflict situation and choose a thoughtful response. I am grateful for the time I spent with Ginny: I hope some of her strong sense of justice and spirituality rubbed off on me. Please accept my regrets for your loss and my joy for having known such a beautiful soul. ❖

CALL FOR IRAQ WITHDRAWAL continued from page one

gress of the United States and the leaders of all the nations in the Coalition Forces:

- To begin immediately a safe and full withdrawal of all military personnel from Iraq, with no additional troops deployed;
- To declare that there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq;
- To increase support for veterans of the Iraq war and all wars;
- To initiate and give strong support to a plan for the reconstruction of Iraq, with high priority given to the humanitarian and social needs of the Iraqi people, such as healthcare, education and housing;

FURTHER, THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS calls United Methodist people throughout the world:

- To pray for peace and to have regular prayer vigils for congregations and communities;
- To care for all impacted by the war, including combatants and noncombatants by honoring the dead, healing the wounded and calling for the end of the war;

To be peacemakers by word and deed that we may be called the children of God. ❖

Journey of Justice

GATHERINGS OF JUSTICE-SEEKERS ACROSS THE CONNECTION

by Virginia Lapham

The journey of those who seek justice and peace in the church and world must include places along the way where one can restore one's own soul with renewal, worship, and community.

There have been those times and places in the past few months at gatherings across the UMC connection.

RMN CONVOCATION

More than 500 people gathered in Nashville for the **9th Reconciling Ministries Network Convocation**, held August 2-5, 2007 at Vanderbilt University. Worship was a highlight as participants felt the presence of God in a welcoming, loving community. Each morning began with Bible Study led by Dr. Amy-Hill Levine, Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt. Morning and afternoon forums included topics on Creating a Future with Hope, Strengthening Marriage, Welcoming Gays, The Time is Now: Moving for Justice and Called to Witness: Putting Values into Action. Training workshops were held in preparation for General Conference.

United Methodists of Color [UMOC], Parents, Clergy and those in Reconciling processes came a day early for extra planning and meetings. The average age went down as the large **MOSAIC** group of young adults arrived and impacted every aspect of the event. The **Cup of Justice Award** was presented to Rebecca Cramer, a leader in the Methodist Students for an All-inclusive Church. The **Voice in the Wilderness Award** was presented to St Mark's UMC of New Orleans, LA . Located in the French Quarter of New Orleans, St. Mark's is the only Reconciling Congregation in the state of Louisiana. Reconciling family ties were all highlights of the weekend that ended too fast.gbc

LIVING FAITH, SEEKING JUSTICE

Nearly 700 United Methodists gathered in Fort Worth, Texas November 1-4, 2007 for an event sponsored by the General Board of Church and Society entitled, **"Living Faith, Seeking Justice."** This was a new kind of conference with the goal of bringing together congregations and individuals who are adept at doing "works of mercy," to educate them about the need to perform "works of justice" and to



Dr. Elizabeth Tapia and Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, two of the outstanding speakers at the GBCS conference

address oppressive systems and institutions that make works of mercy necessary.

The event attracted nearly twice as many participants as initially expected. Interactions and dialogues took place through multicultural worship, workshops, site visits to justice ministries in the Fort Worth-Dallas area, and through exhibits of art and opportunities to create art during the conference.

Daily worship and plenary sessions were organized around the conference theme, focusing sequentially on "living," "faith," "seeking" and "justice." Nearly 50 workshops were divided into seven major themes: Economic Justice and Political Action; Ecological Justice; Congregational and Community Development; Advocating for Health and Wholeness; Promoting Civil and Human Rights; Pursuing Peace with Justice; and Just Faith through Worship.

United Methodist Central Conferences – those regions beyond the United States – had better representation than at most U.S. conferences, thanks to scholarships provided by Church and Society board members, ethnic local churches and other donations. Spanish, French and Portuguese translators provided interpretation for Central Conference participants.

Conferences and gatherings like these help us more fully be the church and help the church be a witness for the world.

LIVING A NEW VISION

As part of a day-long symposium and tribute entitled, "Living A New Vision: The Struggle Continues," the Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell was the first recipient of "The Gilbert H. Caldwell Justice Ministry

Award" for his lifelong witness on racial, gender, sexual orientation, economic and peace issues.

The event, sponsored by the Church Within A Church movement, brought people from across the country together at Union UMC in Boston.

Gil has been a long-time friend and advisor to MFSA and other progressive movements within the United Methodist Church. As one committed to the full humanity of all persons, Gil has an amazing gift for breaking down barriers and building bridges between diverse constituencies. Active in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, the Selma to Montgomery March, the March on Washington and a March on the Boston School Committee led by Martin Luther King, Jr., Gil has been arrested 4 times for nonviolent civil disobedience including two times at the 2000 UMC General Conference in protest of discrimination against LGBT people.

A prolific writer, Gil has made 6 trips to the continent of Africa, written 3 books and has had many articles published in periodicals.

The Rev. Martin McLee, pastor of Boston's historically black, Union United Methodist Church, welcomed everyone to the church which hosted the symposium which included several speakers and workshops.

In attendance to honor Caldwell were the Rev. Mpho Tutu , Executive Director of the Tutu Institute and daughter of Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Massachusetts Congressional members, Dianne Wilkerson

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Ashley Caldwell enjoys some time with her grandfather, the Rev. Gilbert Caldwell, as he signs books

MFSA National Board Meets in Nashville

Nashville was the setting for the **MFSA annual Board meeting** as forty-five people, representing chapters from across the United States, gathered from October 17-20, at Scarritt-Bennett Center. In addition to presenting reports about the wide range of justice work being done by chapters across the country, a **new chapter from the Southwest Texas Annual Conference** was enthusiastically welcomed.



Board Rep Tara Thronson of the newly chartered Southwest Texas MFSA Chapter

Much of the board meeting time was spent in preparations for the justice ministries of MFSA related to General Conference 2008 in Ft. Worth, Texas. MFSA staff members gave the board a comprehensive overview of all legislation that has been submitted by official church agencies, councils and commissions, as well as caucus groups and annual conferences. It was encouraging that these church bodies have given careful consideration to the most pressing justice issues of our day, both within the church and in society and have responded with thoughtful and helpful legislation,

The MFSA board approved five pieces of legislation to be submitted by MFSA to General Conference calling for: the UMC to be unequivocal in its language about war and its incompatibility with Christian teaching; support of persons affected by war; a global treaty for space to remain free of weapons; an end to the U.S. war and occupation in Iraq; the UMC to undertake a process of corporate engagement

moving toward selective divestment, if necessary, from companies that support the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

As the board looked to the future, celebrations continued with the news that MFSA's "Faithful Witness" capital campaign had reached its initial goal of \$300,000 in pledges. This included 100% participation by the MFSA Board of Directors. This money will be used to lay a firm foundation for the future through improving MFSA's communications capacities, outreach and leadership training for young adults, and creating financial stability for the organization.

In additional actions by the board of directors, MFSA agreed to follow its very successful Faithful Witness funding campaign with a follow-up effort to raise funds both for its upcoming witness at General Conference and to fund a strategic planning effort to better prepare MFSA for the coming 100 years of ministry. ❖

GENERAL CONFERENCE continued from page one

on our own legislation, as well as our analysis of the larger picture in terms of what is at stake for the UMC at this General Conference.

OVERVIEW

On page eight of this issue, you will find an excellent article written by Cynthia Astle, Editor of *UM Nexus*, that gives an overview of top priorities that will be facing General Conference delegates. An excellent writer and analyst, Ms. Astle succinctly describes how the leaders of the church have united to set what she calls the "genuine agenda" for General Conference. For those of us who tend to focus in on particular issues, it is important to step back and view the larger picture of what lays before the church. Ms. Astle's article, "**Special Report: A Vision for a Future**" is very helpful in this respect.

COMMON WITNESS

Once again, progressive groups including MFSA, the Reconciling Ministries Network and Affirmation will be joining together to form a coalition called **Common Wit-**

ness for General Conference. This collaboration has proven especially helpful over the years as we learn from one another and support one another in our common work for justice.

LOGISTICS

Hundreds of volunteers have already indicated that they will be coming to Fort Worth to work with MFSA and related Common Witness groups during the two weeks of General Conference. On page six you will find the volunteer interest indicator in the event that you will be coming to GC to volunteer and have not yet filled out the form.

HOUSING

In the last SQB we included a housing form which many of you filled out and sent in immediately. By the time you get this newsletter, hopefully your requests for rooms will have been confirmed. We apologize for the delay in responding to people. We had not anticipated that the response would so quickly exceed the space we had available at the hotel which MFSA has secured across from the Convention Center. We have subsequently secured additional rooms at a nearby hotel. If you have not heard from us in response to your request for housing, or if you have yet to send in a request, please contact us right away. We are working hard to make sure that everyone has adequate housing during your stay in Fort Worth.

CONCLUSION

In reading the history of MFSA over the past 100 years, it is clear that MFSA has long had a key role during the quadrennial gathering of the church known as General Conference. As early as 1908 we were a force to be reckoned with. Over the years it has often been MFSA that has held before the church the pressing issues of the day. We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors who were committed to making sure that the church would not only **proclaim** justice, but that it's decisions at General Conference would **empower** the church to **act** for justice once the dust from General Conference had settled. We pray that this will once again be the case. ❖

Volunteer Opportunities General Conference 2008

Fort Worth, Texas - April 23 – May 2

Common Witness Volunteer Interest Indicator: MFSA, RMN, Affirmation

Volunteer opportunities abound for progressive United Methodists who are committed to justice and are willing/able to attend General Conference in Fort Worth. Once again the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA), the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) and Affirmation will be coordinating housing and volunteer activities. Many plans are still being worked out. This form represents a **preliminary indicator** of your interests. **Check as many boxes as apply.** More information will be sent as it becomes available.

ADVOCACY

Prior to GC:

- writing and editing petitions
- developing position papers
- analyzing legislation in DCA (early 2008)

During week one at GC:

- monitor legislative committees
- participate in evening debriefings

During week two of GC:

- monitor progress of legislation as it comes to the plenary session and be available to help with minority reports and/or talking points for progressive delegates.

ISSUES

I am particularly interested in the following issues related to MFSA/RMN/Affirmation ministries:

CELEBRATION/WORSHIP and WITNESS

GC has been shortened by two days and delegates will be working through the weekend, a time when our groups traditionally provide opportunities for special worship and celebration. We are in the process of making adjustments. Please indicate below if this is an area in which you are willing to provide volunteer help and more information will be sent when available.

- participating in witness activities such as the Prayer Witness outside the Convention Center at GC 2004**
- helping with worship/celebration activities.

INFORMATION

Interested in:

- gathering information for publications
- writing articles and press releases
- editing
- doing layout
- getting newsletters and other information printed
- blogging
- website

HOSPITALITY AND OFFICE COVERAGE

Helping to prepare and serve meals:

- Breakfast
- Lunches
- Helping to provide office coverage
- Staffing Hospitality Center (including sale of materials)

CARE

- Providing pastoral care for volunteers and delegates
- Serving as "go-fers" for delegates including doing laundry, picking up prescriptions

NEW VOLUNTEERS

Check here if you've never been to General Conference, would like to volunteer, but need more information. Indicate below the best method to reach you (i.e. by phone, email, etc.)

=====

Name: _____

Address: _____

Day Phone: _____

Evening Phone: _____

Email: _____

Annual Conference: _____

Primary Affiliation: MFSA RMN Affirmation

Other _____

Also Affiliated with: MFSA RMN Affirmation

Other _____

Dates I Plan to Attend:

Week One on the following dates _____

Week Two on the following dates _____

Mail to: MFSA, 212 East Capitol Street, NE, Washington, DC, 20003 or **Fax to:** MFSA at 202-546-6811

Email: mfsa@mfsaweb.org. **Forms will be forwarded by MFSA to all three groups.**



We Give Thanks for What Has Been And All That is to Come



An Appeal for Your Support

Dear Friends,

We felt your presence with us as the National Board met in October. It was our first meeting since our spectacular **Voices of Faith** gathering last spring in Washington where we celebrated MFSA's 100th anniversary, launched our **"Faithful Witness Campaign"** for the future of MFSA and began preparing for **General Conference 2008**.

You were with us during this first board meeting of the new century. We sensed your presence as chapter representatives reported and celebrated your accomplishments. We were amazed and grateful for the variety of gifts which individuals and chapters have contributed to our common efforts addressing Peace, Poverty, People's Rights, and other Progressive Initiatives.

Our excitement was moderated as we faced the realities of our current financial situation. Although the Faithful Witness Campaign reported pledges over the next five years reaching our minimum goal of \$300,000 and anticipation that additional gifts and pledges which we are seeking will greatly exceed the minimum goal, we also learned that our current operating budget is in deficit with no reserves. Without reserves, which the Faithful Witness campaign intends to restore for future years, we face a bottom line that if we pay all current outstanding bills, we will not be able to pay salaries next month.

We must end 2007 in a strong financial position as we prepare to raise additional support for our General Conference work in 2008. Our dedicated staff cannot be distracted by anxiety about salary and current finances when there is so much to be done in preparation for General Conference. Let's work together to end the year not only with all bills paid, but also with a generous surplus for beginning the first full year of our second century.

Through your chapter representatives, you were with us in October as we began to dream about our second century, shared visions about our future, and set the stage for strategic planning. You were with us as we met with coalition partners in preparation for **General Conference**. You were with us giving thanks for all that has been and for all that is to COME.

Please be with us now as we make our Thanksgiving/ year's end gifts to the ongoing work of MFSA in response to this appeal.

With appreciation for your gifts and service to MFSA.

Marilyn and Cliff

Ms. Marilyn Outslay and Bishop S. Clifton Ives, Retired

National Co-Presidents, MFSA

Cut here -----

We will make a gift of: \$1,000 \$500 \$250 \$100 Other \$_____

Enclosed is a check for this gift.

Charge this gift of \$_____ to my/our credit card. Visa or MasterCard

Card number _____ Expiration date ____/____

Name _____ Email _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

**Please send to MFSA, 212 East Capitol Street, NE, Washington, DC 20003 or Fax to 202-546-6811.
Call 202-546-8806 with any questions. Many thanks.**

Special Report: A Vision for a Future

By Cynthia B. Astle, Editor

UM NeXus

Newly elected delegates to the 2008 General Conference will want to note that the agenda – the authentic agenda, not merely the processing of thousands of petitions on varied topics – already has been set by a remarkable collaboration among the denomination's bishops and board and agency executives and directors.

With a single-mindedness atypical of past competition for resources, UMC leaders at the highest levels have collaborated on an agenda with a single goal: to prevent the demise of the 13.7 million-member global United Methodist Church, either through schism caused by theological politics or through numerical decline.

This collaboration has resulted in three recent developments that will be top priorities for the April 23-May 2, 2008 session in Fort Worth, Texas. They are:

- 1) Four "mission initiatives" designed to redirect the denomination away from political battles;
- 2) A \$642 million, four-year budget based on the mission initiatives, prepared in May by the Connectional Table and the General Council on Finance and Administration;
- 3) A "state of the church" report released in June, based on clergy and laity surveys that give a psychosocial picture of what United Methodists think about the denomination's current state and future prospects.

These three developments will be influenced by a fourth: the report of the task force on the global nature of the church, which is likely to propose that the church in the United States become a separate region, with its own Book of Discipline. (Note: This is indeed what has been proposed.)

The effort to save the UMC began early in the 2005-2008 term after conservatives at the 2004 General Conference openly proposed an "amicable separation" of the denomination, mainly over whether the church should change its stances that currently hold homosexual behavior as "incompatible with Christian teaching." The phrase reflects the theological battle over the authority of Scripture that lies at the

heart of the division.

In an effort to revive the moribund UMC, in 2005 the Council of Bishops identified "seven pathways" to transform the denomination:

- New church development
- Transforming existing congregations
- Racial/ethnic ministries;
- Leadership development;
- Reaching children;
- Eliminating poverty;
- Teaching the Wesleyan model of disciple-making.

FOUR MISSION INITIATIVES

The four mission initiatives emerged publicly in November 2006 as "provocative propositions" presented to the 60-member Connectional Table, a body created by the 2004 General Conference to coordinate mission and ministry after delegates axed the previous Council of Ministries. The proposals, renamed "mission initiatives" this Spring, were chosen from among more than 50 ideas generated in a collaboration among United Methodist general boards and agencies, sparked by the bishops' "seven pathways."

From these ideas, the Connectional Table synthesized four proposals as key to the revitalization and growth of the UMC:

- Develop new leaders,
- Build congregations,
- Partner with the poor,
- Combat the preventable diseases of poverty, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

General Conference will be asked to approve the four initiatives as the outline for the denomination's work over the 2009-2012 program term.

Over the past year, even before the "provocative proposals" had been selected by the Connectional Table, the General Board of Global Ministries and United Methodist Communications seized on global health as a quick success. The UMC has partnered with the United Nations Foundation, Sports Illustrated and NBA Cares, the charitable foundation of the National Basketball Association in the "Nothing But

Nets" campaign, which provides insecticide-treated mosquito nets in malaria-prone areas of the world, especially Africa. In late May, the Rev. Gary Henderson, a pastor from Euclid, OH, was named to direct the UMC's growing global health initiative.

A massive public relations campaign to get annual conferences, local churches and individuals behind the "mission initiatives" program is now under way via United Methodist Communications.

UMCom executive, the Rev. Larry Hollon authored a "unity resolution" outlining the "mission initiatives" that has been circulating among United Methodist boards and agencies this Spring. In a May 25 story by United Methodist News Service, Hollon was quoted: "I think what we're saying is that it's time to be very serious about collaboration ... I think there's a deep yearning in the church for focus and unity."

Hollon's agency also sponsored an online town hall meeting titled "Celebrating a Generous Church" on April 17 in which board executives and Bishop Janice Riggle Huie, president of the Council of Bishops, outlined the plan. A transcript of the event — which apparently garnered little interest among rank-and-file UMs, since at least two of the public questions came from agency staffers — is posted on the UMC's web site, www.umc.org (see 'Resources' on page 3).

\$642 MILLION BUDGET FOR 2009-2012

Even before consideration at the 2008 General Conference, the four mission initiatives have influenced the creation of the 2009-2012 budget proposal to come before General Conference. The budget was prepared in May at a joint session of the Connectional Table and the General Council on Finance and Administration — the first time the two entities had met to form a financial plan for the denomination.

The process was also the first time that agency budgets were submitted according to a business-based model that focused on outcome, as opposed to line-item compilations. The new model intends to make it easier for congregations and individuals to see how the money they put in the offering plate will be spent and what difference the spending is intended to make, according to GCFA staff. In other

words, the budget has been reconstructed as a mission document to show how the church's giving will help to "transform the world," as the UMC's official mission states.

The two agencies trimmed some \$39 million from budget requests, but the budget still totals a 4.8 percent increase in apportionments – the fair-share contributions levied against congregations to support mission and ministry beyond local churches.

Furthermore, the budget is predicated upon an 88 percent payout of apportionments, since few congregations and annual conferences pay 100 percent of the fair-share assessment.

'STATE OF THE CHURCH' SURVEY

Results from the "State of the Church" survey commissioned by the Connectional Table in 2005 provided some encouragement as United Methodist leaders contemplated the enormous changes they're asking the denomination to make. A June 1 story by Marta Aldrich of United Methodist News Service reported that "United Methodists have a deep love for their church and passion for their beliefs" and "are also both hopeful and concerned about the future of The United Methodist Church."

The \$300,000 study conducted by Martec Research also shows that dissonances loom between the mission initiatives and United Methodists' views on similar topics. For instance, church leaders want to attract young people ages 18 to 30, but they're not willing to change practices and invest money to do so. In addition, United Methodist pastors think they're not well trained, well-supervised or assigned to churches appropriately – not much job incentive with which to attract younger people to ordained ministry.

About 3,000 United Methodist clergy, lay leaders and members from across the globe were interviewed between June and September 2006. The report is intended to stimulate dialogue about the church. United Methodist Communications says it will have a web site about the report operating by mid-June.

United Methodist bishops, board executives and other participants in the Connectional Table have clearly worked hard to come up with a plan for the

denomination's future. Often unspoken when the vision is promoted, however, are two "elephants in the room:"

How close The United Methodist Church came to breaking apart at the 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh, PA, and

The ongoing impact of the UMC's membership decline in the United States, which provides the bulk of funding for the denomination worldwide.

IT'S STILL THEOLOGY

The first concern – the threat of schism – poses an overarching theological and political dilemma. The United Methodist Church turns 40 years old next year, and every General Conference since its creation has been wracked by rancorous discord over theology and politics, embodied in the ongoing battle over the church's condemnation of homosexual behavior and its ban on LGBT people in ordained ministry.

The church's stances regarding homosexual people are often seen as the presenting issue of a deeper theological conflict:

Whether one accepts The Holy Bible as the inerrant word of God with all its precepts equally valid, or

Whether one interprets Scripture using a historical-critical method that recognizes the Bible as written by inspired humans who were nonetheless captive to their culture and times.

As if they needed more instruction than their past experience, United Methodist leaders no doubt are observing the recent agonies endured by the Episcopal Church (USA), which has been censured by its own Anglican Communion because of its acceptance of LGBT people and has begun to fragment over the issue. Perceptive and pragmatic, United Methodist leaders clearly aim to sidestep similar travails by redirecting the denomination's attention to the mission initiatives and their accompanying budget. Two of the four mission initiatives — ministry with the poor and eradicating diseases linked to poverty – specifically represent the type of on-the-ground mission at which United Methodists historically excel and which they support no matter what their theology or politics.

AND IT'S STILL THE NUMBERS

The second concern – the ongoing impact of U.S. membership decline – speaks to

whether the UMC will have any future whatsoever. The other two mission initiatives – developing leaders and building congregations – are tied to this reality.

According to the recently published statistical report, "This Is Our Story," from the General Council on Finance and Administration, the percentage of the 34,925 U.S. congregations that failed to take in even one adult member by profession of faith continues to hover around 43 percent. However, the report found an unsettling surprise in its aggregate statistics: The group of smallest-membership churches brought in the same total of new members as the group of largest-membership churches – about 30,000 members annually for each segment.

In other words, the largest churches may be numerically bigger, but they aren't necessarily better at inviting people without religious affiliation to profess faith in Jesus Christ and join the church. Given that the United States now has four generations of adults with no ties to an organized faith community, this lack of skill poses a major obstacle in translating Christian faith for contemporary audiences – let alone communicating the "Wesleyan traditions" that few United Methodists themselves understand in full.

Furthermore, getting bodies into the pews forms only half of the issue. The other half is getting those bodies to put their hands into their wallets and deposit money into the offering plate. It's simple math: The United Methodist Church in America foots practically all the bill for the entire global denomination, from one-time mission projects to bishops' pensions in the Central Conferences. Latest statistics show that nearly 87 cents of every dollar contributed stays in the local church, with nearly 55 percent of that amount going to pastoral and staff wages and benefits and operating costs. Of the remainder, about 2 cents goes to global church funding.

Even when channeled through agency budgets, each of the mission initiatives requires significant funding, and two of them – ministry with the poor and combating the diseases of poverty – are aimed at populations with few resources of their own. These two goals could be adversely affected by a third mission initiative, building churches, because undoubtedly there

continued on next page

will be existing churches whose likelihood of renewal is slim to none. Pruning the congregational deadwood – if annual conferences have the courage to do so — would cause a drop in income from those churches. While that amount may seem insignificant individually, clearing the rolls likely would result in a drop in aggregate income, given that churches to be closed would come from the 70 percent of United Methodist congregations with 100 or fewer members.

THE CHURCH'S GLOBAL NATURE

Despite efforts to be globally inclusive, the “mission initiatives” plan, its accompanying budget and the State of the Church report all bear evidence of the UMC's Euro-American bias.

The goals of developing young leaders and growing congregations are not problems in either Africa or the Philippines, where church leaders are young and congregations are growing. The goals of partnering with the poor and fighting the diseases of poverty are commendable, but they still put the U.S. church in the position of a wealthy entity doling out benevolence to developing countries. History shows that such a relationship tends to perpetuate dependence rather than remove it.

A key recommendation of the task force on the global nature of the church has been restructuring the UMC to permit the United States to become a regional conference, in the same way that Central Conferences are organized in regions outside the United States. Politically, this proposal poses the trickiest challenge. It would require amendments to the church's constitution, which are hard to accomplish because of the complicated and lengthy process of ratification by annual conferences worldwide.

In addition, the proposal would separate American conservatives from the support of African and Filipino delegates whose votes help keep the UMC from overturning its stances against homosexual people. Those international votes are even more crucial now that both the South Central and Southeastern Jurisdictions, strongholds of conservative politics and theology, have posted membership losses that diminished their delegate counts for the 2008 General Conference.

So as General Conference delegates prepare to saddle up for Fort Worth, the push

is on to have them adopt a tightly crafted plan. The question remains whether the plan to save the UMC can be discussed and amended, or whether the programmatic intertwining of its parts, coupled with advance efforts to engender church-wide support, has already accomplished the true agenda.

Information from the General Council on Finance and Administration, the Connectional Table and United Methodist News Service was used in this interpretive article. ❖

RESOURCES

The original publication of this article in June 2007 included a substantial list of resources and the URLs where they could be found on the internet. Rather than listing the often lengthy URLs here, we suggest that those interested in reading material related to this article **go to the United Methodist web site at www.umc.org**. There is a **search engine** at the top of the home page. By entering the following words you will come up with several articles providing background and updated information:

This Is Our Story

Provocative Propositions

Connectional Table

State of the Church Report

Global Nature of the Church

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LIVING THE VISION continued from page four

and Byron Rushing. They recounted Gil's historic contributions to civil rights for African Americans and commitment to equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons.

Gil, founder of People of Color for an All Inclusive Church, wants all discrimination to stop. During one of the plenary sessions, the Rev. Scott Campbell of Cambridge, MA noted: “Seldom has such a diverse group of progressives come together in one place in the United Methodist Church. The group was wonderfully balanced in so many ways—race, gender, age, sexual orientation and even theology. It was a great tribute to the way Gil has lived his life. He has spoken his truth courageously and lovingly and in so doing has created around him a community that surely must be a foretaste of that great day yet to come.”

Gil is married to Grace Caldwell, who along with sons, Dale and Paul, and daughter-in-law Sharon and granddaughter Ashley, were all present for the event. ❖

GENDER IDENTITY continued from page 1

ing him “to live fully as the male I know myself to be,” Rev. Phoenix had started the process of legally changing his name.

It was the request to have the Annual Conference recognize his new name, reflecting his understanding of his gender identity, that occasioned two members of the Annual Conference to challenge the ruling of Bishop John Schol that a change in name is an administrative procedure and that there is nothing in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* that prevents a transgender person, as long as they remain a clergy person in good standing, from being appointed to serve a church.

Attending a church in Washington, DC which is blessed to have several transgender members, I have been on a journey myself these past few years of expanding my own understanding of gender in general, and the experience of transgender persons in particular. I have delighted to see my thirteen-year-old daughter developing an understanding and feeling of comfort with this reality as she moves toward young adulthood. I am particularly grateful that it is within the con-

continued on next page

text of Christian community that she is experiencing and learning about the lived experience of those whose inner sense of their gender does not match the physical body with which they are born.

Seeing this opportunity for learning, loving and acceptance, I have been deeply dismayed to see that some of the news coverage related to Rev. Phoenix is misleads rather than elucidating. One such source is the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD).

I am aware of two press releases published by the IRD about the case of the Rev. Drew Phoenix, one on October 29th and a second on October 31st. I have seen quotes from these press releases quoted in a number of other publications. In the IRD material I find two misleading implications or assertions. The first is that the physical gender change which Rev. Phoenix is undergoing is connected to his sexual orientation and/or sexual behavior. The second is that Christian teaching speaks clearly on this matter.

As I understand it, Rev. Phoenix has shared little or nothing about his sexual orientation. Rather, what he has shared publicly is the fact that he has always understood his **gender** to be male. One's gender identity refers to a person's understanding of themselves as male or female. It says nothing about whether that person will feel themselves attracted to persons of the same and/or of the opposite gender.

The IRD Press release states that "the Rev. Drew Phoenix, pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore, professes to have changed from female to male." We gain a fuller understanding of the situation by listening to Rev. Phoenix as he explains that he has **always** understood himself to be male. He has recently undergone surgery that made changes to his body, but his sense of his own gender has not changed.

In his own words, Rev. Phoenix says:

When I was born, society declared that I was a girl, and my parents named me Ann Gordon. But for as long as I can remember I have felt like a boy, acted like a boy, dressed like a boy and wanted to hang out with the boys. And for the first several years of my life, my parents let me be my boy-self. In fact, I was referred to by

everyone in our small town as my father's son, Dave Gordon's son.

So it was very difficult when I reached puberty to be pressured by family, friends, church and community to conform, to dress and act, like a female. At the time (unlike now) there was not language or body of knowledge about gender identity, and certainly no available medical expertise, to help me describe and understand the disconnect I was experiencing between my physical, external self and my internal, spiritual self. I identify as male. The gender I was assigned at birth has never matched my own true, authentic, God-given gender identity...how I know myself.

Fortunately, today, God's gift of medical science is enabling me to bring my physical body

Fortunately, today, God's gift of medical science is enabling me to bring my physical body into alignment with my true gender. I am making this transition under the care of an excellent medical team. I am grateful for their expertise. They have been instruments of God's grace for me.

The Rev. Drew Phoenix

into alignment with my true gender. I am making this transition under the care of an excellent medical team. I am grateful for their expertise. They have been instruments of God's grace for me.

Continuing to link the reality of gender identity to the reality of sexuality, a connection that confuses rather than clarifies things in the case of Rev. Phoenix, the IRD press release goes on to say that "the United Methodist Church officially does not ordain into the ministry practicing homosexuals or others who are sexually active outside of marriage."

The case of Rev. Phoenix does not involve the issue of homosexuality. Homosexuality involves being attracted to persons of the same gender. Rev. Phoenix has shared that he believes that his gender is now, and always has been, male. As far as I know, Rev. Phoenix has shared nothing related to his sexual orientation or practice. I have no idea, and I would conjecture that the IRD has no idea,

whether Rev. Phoenix is straight or gay. Likewise we have no idea whether he is sexually active. Nor do I believe it is any of our business to inquire.

The IRD press release ends with the assertion that "Christian teaching across the centuries has upheld the sacred nature of God's gift of maleness and femaleness" and that "Christianity's traditions strongly argue against any affirmation of transsexuality or sex change procedures."

I would respectfully submit that there has been precious little information, let alone understanding, of the experience of those persons who understand their true gender identity to be at odds with their physical bodies. And given the fact that medical science has only recently developed to the point that physical changes can occur to have

one's physical self reflect one's gender identity, certainly Christian tradition and teaching do not address this reality directly.

At General Conference 2004 MFSA took the following position related to transgender clergy:

"As a church we lack a clear understanding of the myriad issues related to gender identity. We need to study this issue before making changes

to the Book of Discipline. In the meantime, we can depend on the good judgment of Boards of Ordained Ministry at the Annual Conference level to determine the fitness of candidates for ministry.

"No new language prohibiting transgender persons from serving as clergy should be added to ...the Book of Discipline in the section on Ordained Ministry. Instead, we should continue to use the same criteria for transgender persons seeking to become ministers as we do for those who are not transgender."

This is not a time in the life of the church to draw lines of exclusion in the sand. This is a time to open our minds and our hearts, to expand our understanding of the diversity of God's creation and to follow Christ in loving those we encounter on life's journey. ❖

MFSA Christmas Gifts



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BOOKS

Pioneers in the Faith: The Methodist Federation for Social Action at 100 Years 94 pages, color cover, historical summaries, articles, scanned historical documents, historical pictures, written/compiled by Kathryn Johnson, Ginny Lapham, George McClain, Jeanne Knepper and Thom Keely, 2007
Cost (includes shipping):1-4 copies - \$15.00 each; 5-9 copies - \$12.00 each; 10 or more copies - \$10 each

Thy Kingdom Come: The Methodist Federation for Social Service and Human Rights, 1907 – 1948, by Jeanne Gayle Knepper, © 1996, 118 pages dissertation, carefully documented history of the first four decades of the Federation. Very accessible and enjoyable reading. Cost (includes shipping): 1-8 copies - \$13.00 each, 9 or more copies - \$11.00 each

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SOCIAL QUESTIONS BULLETIN

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