

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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Editor's Reflections

by Kathryn Johnson

The quadrennial ritual has become familiar. I return from General Conference exhausted only to realize that Annual Conferences are upon us and an MFSA newsletter needs to be produced pronto.



I sit down to write a summary of what happened at General Conference and discover, to my surprise, that the list of celebrations is far longer than the list of disappointments.

Among the things to celebrate:

- adoption of a more comprehensive mission statement reading, "to make disciples of Jesus christ for the transformation of the world";
- a highly qualified Judicial Council;
- a powerful new Social Creed Litany;
- positive changes to the Constitution will go to the Annual Conferences for ratification;
- stronger language was adopted in the UM Social Principles related to war and the death penalty;
- reaffirmation of the UMC stance to oppose Israel's occupation of Palestine;
- a strong statement in support of immigrant rights; and
- continued support for the UMC's relationship with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

These are all positive and important outcomes of General Conference.

"So why," I find myself asking, "if the cause of justice did so well, do I *feel* so bad?"

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General Conference 2008

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE CHALLENGES THAT LIE AHEAD

Those of you who have been to General Conference can probably relate to the following: You sit through an hour or more of debate on a piece of legislation (one of over 1,000 pieces of legislation before the delegates)...through the minority report....the majority report....the perfecting of the reports....the debate on the reports....amendments on substance...motions on process....points of order.... amendments to the amendments and more points of order. When action is finally taken you turn to the person next to you (who has also been sitting there the entire time) and ask, "What did we just decide?" And the person next to you scratches her head and says, "I have no idea." It's disconcerting to say the least!

You will be glad to know that on your behalf, a fabulous team of MFSA legislative coordinators and monitors attended General Conference and focused their attention on keeping track of what decisions were made and how to support delegates in their efforts to keep the UMC a just, inclusive and prophetic church. It's not an easy job and they did it splendidly! Not to mention the countless other volunteers who produced nutritious meals for volunteers and delegates, those who produced and handed out the daily newsletter and those who participated in a variety of other activities to hold before the church a vision of justice and peace. Speaking of volunteers, the following summary of legislative actions related to MFSA priorities was compiled by MFSA Board Member, and GC volunteer, Fred Kandler. Many thanks to Fred and all of the MFSA/Common Witness volunteers!

Check out the information posted on the MFSA Web Site during General Conference including a blog by Laurie Hayes Coffman www.mfsaweb.org

CELEBRATIONS

JUDICIAL COUNCIL

GC 2008 delegates elected five eminently qualified persons from the list of those nominated by the Council of Bishops to serve on the **Judicial Council**. The two lay and three

clergy members elected were: Angela Brown (Lay, Cal-Nev) and Ruben Reyes (Lay, Philippines); Kathi Austin-Mahle (Clergy, Minnesota), F. Belton Joyner (Clergy, North Carolina), and William Lawrence (Clergy, North Texas). **MFSA supported electing Judicial Council members from those nominated by the Council of Bishops and celebrates the election of these highly qualified persons.**

SOCIAL CREED/LITANY

A new **Social Creed for the UMC** was adopted as a "companion litany," leaving the current creed in place and adding this poetic and singable litany alongside. The first Methodist Social Creed was penned by Methodist

UMNS Photo



The United Methodist Judicial Council

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Federation leader Harry F. Ward and was adopted at the 1908 General Conference. MFSA supported the development of the new Social Creed (adopted as a litany) and looks forward to its use within the church.

MEMBERSHIP

The petition modifying article IV of the constitution to read "all persons" willing to recite the appropriate vows shall be accepted into membership in any local church in the connection was adopted by a 2/3 vote. It will now be sent to the annual conferences for ratification. **MFSA supported this petition's concept that "all means all" and considers this a major step forward to strengthening the UMC's commitment to inclusive membership.**

PEACE

The adoption of amendments to the 2004 *Discipline's* paragraph 165.C in the *Social Principles* strengthened the church's **witness for peace** by stating that United Methodists reject war as an instrument of national foreign policy and oppose unilateral first/pre-emptive strike actions and strategies on the part of any government. Previous statements allowing for "just war" factors were removed. **MFSA celebrates the fact that the UMC's stance against war was clarified and strengthened.**

The adoption of petitions empowering all young people to work for peace; calling upon the US President and Administration to pursue peace-making strategies with Iran and North Korea; calling upon the US government to develop and implement a plan for troop withdrawal from Iraq and to work with other nations to rebuild Iraq and to provide funding for US military personnel returning from Iraq and their families; and calling upon the UMC to continue to publicly condemn and work for the abolishment of torture - - all speak a prophetic word of peace to our nation and world. **MFSA supported these petitions and others that represented ways that lead to peace.**

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

General Conference voted to establish a **Socially Responsible Investment Task Force** comprised of representatives from the General Board of Church and Society, the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, the United Methodist Church Foundation and the National Association of United Methodist Foundations. The mandate of the task



United Methodist peace activist Beth Corrie and Liat Weingart of Jewish Voice for Peace prepare to speak at an MFSA event promoting justice and peace in Israel/Palestine

force is to establish, implement and promote a common standard for determining prohibited investments and positive investment principles that are consistent with The United Methodist Social Principles and that can be utilized by both individual and institutional investors especially considering global human rights for example, in the Middle East, Sudan and China. This task force shall report its progress to the 2012 General Conference.

MFSA supported the formation of this Task Force and will eagerly follow its progress, particularly as it relates to investments in companies that benefit from the occupation of Palestine.

The General Conference **affirmed its stance against Israel's expansion beyond its 1967 borders and against the settlements established on Palestinian land in occupied areas.** Delegates voted to accept all UN Security Council resolutions related to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, by removing the limiting words "Security Council" and affirming all UN resolutions on the conflict. These would include resolutions requiring the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes and requiring Israel to withdraw from all Palestinian lands occupied since 1967. General Conference also supported the use of **"Fair Trade Coffee & Other Products"** which includes supporting Palestinian farmers and purchasing Palestinian products and the petition **"Holy Land Tours"** which urges all United Methodists to apply the guidelines outlined in the General Conference resolution on "Responsible Tourism" to all travel to the region.

General Conference did not approve a petition calling on the church to **oppose divestment from Israel** and a petition that called on the UMC to reject rhetoric equating Israel with apartheid South Africa. It also re-

jected a call to withdraw United Methodist support from the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. **MFSA is pleased that these last three petitions, submitted by persons affiliated with the Institute on Religion and Democracy, were not adopted.**

TRANSGENDER PERSONS

Several petitions submitted to General Conference called for rejection or exclusion of transgender persons in one way or another. All of these petitions were defeated. **MFSA celebrates the fact that the church has not moved to exclude transgender persons.**

DEFINITION OF FAMILY

GC delegates adopted revisions to the *Book of Discipline* statement on the family that change the descriptive wording from "fathers and mothers" to "loving parents" and "men and women" to "two parents." **MFSA supported these changes and celebrates their adoption.**

IMMIGRATION

General Conference further **clarified and strengthened the denomination's support for immigrant rights**, including the rights of farm workers, the right to bilingual education and comprehensive immigration reform in ways that reflect our biblical mandate to love the sojourner and advocate for the most vulnerable in society. A rally at the beginning of General Conference and a press conference focusing on immigration and the sanctuary movement, both events co-sponsored by MFSA as a member of the Immigrant Rights Task Force, were visible examples of a commitment to acknowledge that all are made in God's image and that we must support laws that preserve the civil and human rights of immigrants regardless of their legal status. Legislation passed that will re-



Common witness volunteers joined in the Rally for Immigrant Rights

continued from previous page

sult in resources being developed by general boards and agencies for use across the denomination to support annual conferences and churches as they engage in migrant ministry. General Conference voted in support of "Resisting Hate" which calls on all United Methodists to oppose acts of hate in speech, scapegoating, racial profiling and stereotyping and did not support legislation which objected to churches establishing themselves as sanctuary churches. **MFSA supported all of the legislation which was adopted and celebrates the increased focus on justice ministries related to immigrant rights.**

SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND CHOICE

The petition to retain the UMC relationship with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) was adopted after the rejection of a minority report that erroneously conveyed that RCRC's moral and theological stance contradicts UMC's teaching on sexuality and reproductive health issues. **MFSA supported our continued relationship with RCRC.**

DEATH PENALTY

UMC's commitment to abolish the **death penalty** with governments and legislative officials was continued: *"The United Methodist Church cannot accept retribution or social vengeance as a reason for taking human life. It violates our deepest belief in God as the Creator and Redeemer of humankind. In this respect, there can be no assertion that human life can be taken humanely by the state."* Within 40 days of the closing of General Conference US federal and state governments will be requested to enact a moratorium on carrying out death penalty sentences. An additional petition, focusing on the death penalty in Texas, also passed. This petition calls upon "the Texas Legislature to abolish the death penalty completely or to stop executions in the state until such time as all capital cases can be tried in a completely equitable way." **MFSA recommended that the UMC's 52 year commitment against capital punishment be maintained and strengthened and celebrates the many ways in which this happened. The one disappointment was that a petition, that if passed, would have required General Conference to meet in places without capital punishment, failed both in committee and in the plenary.**

DISAPPOINTMENTS

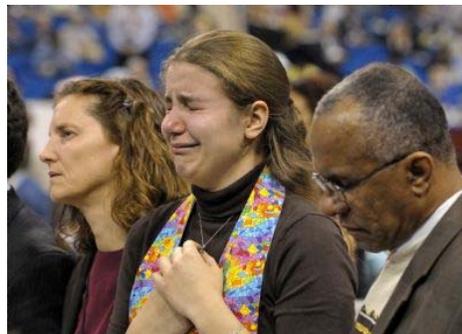
MEMBERSHIP

The *2004 Book of Discipline* language about **church membership** was retained. Both a majority report seeking to include the congregation's role in receiving all persons into membership and a minority report supporting sole pastoral authority in membership decisions, were defeated. The language retained reads: *"All people may attend its worship services, participate in the programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection."* The retention of this language means that the Judicial Council's Decision 1032 has not been reversed legislatively. **MFSA supported legislation that would clarify the limits to a pastor's ability to make membership decisions without accountability. MFSA's position is that Judicial Council Decision 1032, that holds that the pastor has sole authority in membership matters, should be overturned.**

FULL INCLUSION

Efforts to move the UMC toward fuller inclusion of LGBT persons through revisions in the section on Human Sexuality in the Social Principles were defeated. In fact, the language that was adopted represents a move in a more exclusionary direction. This vote was particularly painful given the careful efforts of the Legislative Committee to craft language that speaks the truth about the divisions within the church and confesses that **the Holy Spirit has not yet brought peace to our community of faith on this issue. (***)see a section of the language that was not adopted at the**

UMNS Photo



Pain is etched on the face of young adult delegate Rebecca Farnum (West Michigan) as GC votes to retain negative language on homosexuality in UM Social Principles

end of this report). While the minority report that was accepted affirmed that all persons are "individuals of sacred worth created in the image of God" and retained statements asking "families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends" **MFSA believes that the church took a step backward by accepting the minority report rather than the majority report.**

In separate resolutions, no changes in the restrictions against the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals or the restrictions against UMC clergy participating in the celebration of same gender covenant unions were made. A petition seeking to increase the civil rights of homosexual persons also was defeated. On a positive note, a resolution was adopted calling on the General Board of Church and Society to create educational materials on the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, the discrimination or prejudice against lesbians or gay men by heterosexual people. As one MFSA member noted at the time, the fact that these petitions were all passed on the same day tests credulity. A UMC self-study obviously will offer plenty of case material for the GBCS! **MFSA supported the removal of all discriminatory language, the removal of restrictions against homosexual clergy and the celebration of same gender covenant unions.**

[NOTE: See page five to read about the Common Witness response]

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

"Promoting Peace Through Ethical Investment," the MFSA petition seeking a comprehensive approach to the issue of divesting from companies that benefit from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, was not adopted by the Financial Administration Legislative Committee, and did not reach the floor of the GC for a vote. The Financial Administration Legislative Committee did insert a reference to human rights "needs" in the Middle East, China and Sudan in another petition (see next paragraph) and did recommend that the General Board of Church and Society enter holy conferencing with targeted companies seeking resolution before proceeding with divestment recommendations. However, no discussion or debate of the critical situation in Israel/Palestine and the possibility of using divestment as an ethical, non-violent response, took place on the floor of

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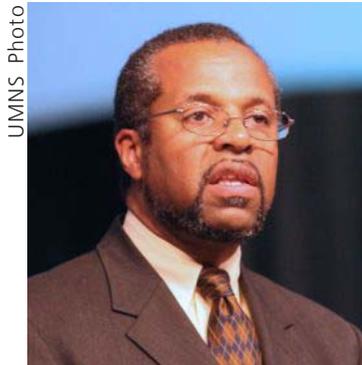
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GC2008. MFSA is disheartened, along with representatives from Jewish Voice for Peace who attended several days of General Conference to support MFSA efforts, that the larger issue of bringing pressure to bear to end the immense suffering in Palestine went largely unaddressed by GC2008. ❖

Majority Report

Language that was crafted in the Church and Society 2 Legislative Committee but not adopted by General Conference delegates:

We know that all are God's children and of sacred worth; yet we have been, and remain, divided regarding homosexual expressions of human sexuality. Faithful, thoughtful people who have grappled with this issue deeply disagree with one another; yet all seek



UMNS Photo

Attorney Fred Brewington, lay delegate from the New York Annual Conference, chaired the Church and Society II Legislative Committee and presented the Majority Report t

a faithful witness. We continue to reason and pray together with faith and hope that the Holy Spirit will soon bring reconciliation to our community of faith. The fire in our disagreements points to a deeper human mystery than we knew. We believe that the Spirit has brought our collective conscience to acknowledge this mystery more honestly, and to make our claims with greater humility before God and our neighbors. We therefore ask the Church, United Methodist and others, and the world, to refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices until the Spirit leads us to a new insight. In the meantime, let us seek to welcome, know, forgive, and love one another as Christ has accepted us, that God may be glorified through everything in our lives. ❖

How Long Oh Lord?

"The communion table at the center of our worship life has been shrouded as a reminder that the body is broken. We wear black to acknowledge that the body is broken. And if you recognize that brokenness, you are invited to come to the table, to add a black cloth to the shroud, and to offer your prayer for brokenness of the church. "

Rev. David Meredith

UMNS Photo



Progressive UMs Respond to GC Votes on Membership and Sexuality

MFSA joined with other Common Witness groups, including the Reconciling Ministries Network and Affirmation, with acts of witness both outside and inside the convention center in response to the harmful legislative actions of the church related to membership and sexuality.

As delegates entered the plenary hall on Thursday morning they were met by fellow United Methodists lying on the ground, making visible the wounds inflicted by the church. The prone bondies were outlined in chalk, making an eerie statement throughout the rest of the day as anyone walking in or out of the main doors was reminded of those who are suffering due to the actions of the church.



During a mid-morning witness on the plenary floor, many UM Bishops joined twelve Common Witness leaders at the conference's communion table while hundreds of volunteers and delegates stood together in the main aisles singing, offering a liturgy, and making visible the spiritual harm that has been committed by GC2008 to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons, and indeed to the church as a whole. Representatives of the Council of Bishops met with representatives of Common Witness leaders twice during the final two days of General Conference to dialogue about both immediate and longer range concerns.

UMNS Photo



Bishop Melvin Talbert joins in shrouding the GC Communion Table

Prophetic Words

Spoken by Bishop Talbert during the witness on the floor of General Conference

My name is Melvin Talbert. I am one of your bishops. In this General Conference we have been reminded that in 1939 this church took an action that separated my sisters and brothers into a separate jurisdiction. That action was wrong. That action was a sin against God. Thank God we have moved through and discontinued that segregated structure. But my sisters and brothers, here we are again. In the name of Jesus Christ, we have taken an action that is wrong. At least for the Central Jurisdiction we remained within a structure and we worked out the relationships. But for these sisters and brothers we have chosen to leave them out rather than invite them into work out our relationships in the name of Christ. I can do no other than to say what's on my heart. General Conference, General Conference, this is wrong. I invite you to reconsider.

Pain and Hope

by Tara Thronson

They told me the worship would be uplifting...they were right.

They told me I would make friendships and connections with Methodists from around the world...they were right.

They told me we are divided on GLBT concerns, and Wednesday would be a tearful day. I was hopeful they were wrong, that they would instead be tears of joy because of the messages of hope, because of the sermons and focus on inclusiveness, because of the agreed concern with the decline in the US church membership and the desire for more young persons in leadership. Sadly, they again were right.

On Wednesday we spent most of the day amending and debating the committee's proposed new wording to paragraph 161G of the Social Principles vs. the minority report proposal. The primary difference is the new proposal removed the statement "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and instead offered an alternative which basically stated we will agree to disagree. See the full text here.

As you can read in other blogs/articles, the minority report was adopted (501-417), which kept the non-inclusive language in our Social Principles. The vote was closer than in years past, which is a sign of hope, but none the less, I along with many others was devastated. Immediately after the vote, GLBT supporters stood in silent protest until the afternoon session ended, which was for 25 painful minutes as the General Conference Secretary read us a Judicial Council ruling. As they were standing, they sang "Jesus Loves Me". I didn't stand at this point, as I was trying unsuccessfully to hold back the tears and compose myself.

I can't even begin to describe the pain, hurt, and confusion. Why couldn't the delegates at General Conference "agree to disagree"? How could they not see how this divisive topic parallels with overcoming our racism as a church 40 years ago? How could we speak for days about how we are ALL part of the body of Christ, then so many vote to exclude those who aren't like them? How could there be such different messages from God on the hearts of the delegates?

I have been and continue to struggle with what I experienced...but I have found hope.

UMNS Photo



Tara Thronson, MFSA member and young adult delegate from Southwest Texas, speaks on the plenary floor

I was proud to stand with others within my delegation during the Witness on Thursday. (see article here). I found this to be a time to begin healing. Where is the hope? The vote was closer than years past. There were baby steps of progress made at the General Conference (we changed the definition of family from "both mothers and fathers" or "men and women" to "loving parents" and "two parents"!). Most of all, I have hope because there are more and more churches who are loving, accepting, and welcoming of all persons. Although the official UMC stance on homosexuality pains me, we will keep doing what we are already doing...welcoming ALL at the local church level while we wait for the official UMC position to catch up. ❖

Tara Thronson is a leader in the Southwest Texas Annual Conference MFSA Chapter

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Perhaps the Greatest Challenge of All

STRUCTURE

Actions taken in relation to the structure of the church defy the categories of celebration or disappointment. Arguably, these decisions were, and will continue to be, the most important decisions made by the UMC in this decade. It is not the structure itself that is important, but the ways in which the structure enables or impedes the UMC throughout the world to live out the Gospel and embody God's love and justice in different geographical and cultural contexts. The jury is still out on what impact actions taken at GC 2008 will have in this respect.

Actions taken: Petitions were adopted to amend the Constitution to change the name "central conference" to "regional conference" and the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table are instructed to jointly appoint a study committee of twenty persons to propose possible legislation to GC 2012 for the US to become a regional conference.

MFSA supported the creation of a regional conference in the U.S. in affirming a new structure for a worldwide UMC, but preferred the Robbins/Okayama proposal that called for a quadrennial study to arrive at legislation where no one region would dominate others, all regions would share in the support of the church and each region would have a degree of self-determination in carrying out its mission and ministry.

The significance of this challenge before the UMC cannot be overstated. Representation to GC from Central Conferences is growing at a rapid rate. Estimates are that by 2012, 40% of GC delegates will be from non-US Conferences and that by 2016 the majority of the delegates will be from outside the US.

This reality creates great opportunities for making changes in our structure that contextualize and regionalize decision-making where appropriate while at the same time coming together as a worldwide church in new ways.

We must not pour the new wine of the worldwide church into the wineskins of an old structure. It is imperative that the new study committee include visionaries that can empower everyone and exclude no one. ❖

Hope in Relationships

by Amy Stapleton, MFSA Organizer

It's hard to give words to the feelings and range of emotion I felt at General Conference and upon returning home. The two weeks in Ft. Worth were less than life giving (to say the least), although there were moments were hope snuck in. Many of the highlights and disappointments have already been mentioned in the legislative review printed in this edition of the SQB. What likely doesn't shine through are the countless hours MFSA and other coalition volunteers spent being a faithful witness.

Thousands of meals were served in the name of Christian hospitality. Cups of water were given freely to highlight clean water as a human right. Volunteers laid their bodies on the ground in a silent witness after the devastating votes on membership and human sexuality giving new appreciation for the phrase "laying down your life for your friends."



Common Witness volunteers dramatically illustrate the wounds the UMC is inflicting upon LGBT persons

Volunteers stood up, showed up and woke up time and time again to pass out daily newsletters, track legislation, run errands, make signs for the immigrant rights rally and set up and take down boots for the Eyes Wide Open exhibit. Many more folks followed events from home and prayed, emailed, and called to lend support. This was the church in action.

Returning from Ft. Worth, I searched to make meaning of all that had happened. I wondered what it would mean for the church and for people I know and love, for those of us under the age of 35, for MFSA and chapters across all the jurisdictions, for the world. I wondered what to communicate in the new members class I facilitate at my local church or with the candidates I am working with

who are exploring ordained ministry. I turned to reading everything from Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" naming that "justice delayed is justice denied" to the early history of our church when the church was still a movement, to the new study by The Barna Group reflected in the book *un-Christian* that shows the generation from ages 16 to 29 are more skeptical of and resistant to Christianity and its role in society than were people of the same age just a decade ago.

Then I came across this from Thomas Merton:

"Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything."

The strength of MFSA is in our relationships-relationship with God, one another, our local churches and communities, and even with those whom we adamantly disagree. You are the people who cross the street, the tracks, and the world speaking words of love and justice even to those who fail to listen. You are the people who do more than pray for those who persecute you, you feed them. You are the people who stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable in society and work for the day when all God's people are free and have more than crumbs from the table.

This is what gives me hope for the United Methodist Church and for the world. You are already doing this holy work and truth telling in local churches, annual conferences, and chapters. You are doing it with your lives rather than waiting on the actions of General Conference. Thanks be to God. ❖



Eyes Wide Open

By Darryl Fairchild

The boots speak for themselves. Attached to each pair of boots is a tag with the name of one of the service members from Texas who has died: 364 pairs of boots in neat rows - 364 lives cut short. Likewise, the shoes speak for themselves. They represent the Iraqis who have died from the violence of the war. Unfortunately, we value their lives so little we do not officially count them when they are killed. Careful estimates put Iraqi deaths over 600,000.

The boots and shoes make visible the human cost of war that is too frequently buried in the coverage of the war in Iraq. It appears the church is also reluctant to face the war. During the roughly 100 hours in which the



Boots in Eyes Wide Open display in front of the Fort Worth Convention Center

General Conference was in session, delegates did not pause to acknowledge the harsh realities of the war in Iraq, our failure to live out God's desire for humanity, the sacrifice of our service members, or call for peace - a petition calling for Peace in Iraq passed on a consent calendar.

While it pales in comparison to the human cost of war, the exhibit also highlighted the financial cost of war. Economists have calculated that the U.S. spends \$720 million per day for the war in Iraq. "This spending raises the question, how could we spend those dollars? We know from the General Conference debate that we could use that money to fund the ministries of the United Methodist Church for four years, and still have almost \$80 million dollars for additional ministries!"

MFSA partnered with the American Friend Service Committee (AFSC) to bring the **Eyes**

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Jim Winkler of the General Board of Church and Society and Marilyn Outslay and Bishop Cliff Ives, Co-Presidents of MFSA, remember those lost in war

Wide Open and **Cost of War** exhibits to General Conference. This witness was on Tuesday, April 29 in General Worth Park. It was located so that delegates and visitors of the General Conference could not avoid it as they walked to the convention center.

At the evening dinner break, a service of witness was conducted and included Bishops John Schol, Warner Brown, Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda, and Charlene Kammerer, General Secretary James Winkler, and delegate Darryl Fairchild.

Bishop Ntambo reminded participants that while the US has been harmed by war with over 4000 casualties, his country has been ravished by war. There have been over 4 million people lost to war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Bishop Kammerer shared her experience of being the mother of a service member and urged us to be mindful of the families who often endure their anxiety and grief in isolation. Bishop Schol reiterated the Bishop's Statement opposing the war in Iraq and Mr. Winkler read the petition poised to be past calling for Peace in Iraq. ❖



MFSA member, Darryl Fairchild, a delegate from West Ohio and a member of the AFSC National Board, helped organize the Eyes Wide Open exhibit.

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At one level, the answer is simple. The intense schedule of General Conference with twenty-hour days and four-hour nights, leaves everyone fatigued, nerves frayed. Disappointments and losses are magnified when one's reserves are spent.

At another level, however, I believe the answer has to do with the *particular* losses and disappointments progressive United Methodists experienced. As you will see from the article which begins on this page, three of the major disappointments we experienced have to do with inclusion, membership and justice in Israel/Palestine.

These are not peripheral issues. They are issues that rest at the very heart of what it means to be the church, the embodiment of the love, justice and mercy of God as known to us in Jesus.

The decision of GC delegates to accept the minority report on paragraph 161 G of the Social Principles, without even discussing the majority report which honestly articulated the ways in which the church is deeply divided on the issue of sexual orientation, leaves the prophetic words of Bishop Talbert echoing across the church. "General Conference, General Conference, this is wrong." (see pg 4)

The agony etched on the faces of so many, the sobs and the large numbers of people participating in the different forms of witness in response to the vote underline the tragedy of an opportunity lost, an opportunity to at least tell the truth, if nothing else.

The decision to retain the language in our *Book of Discipline* which the UM Judicial Council interpreted to mean that a pastor has authority to deny a person membership, belies the outcry expressed across the church when this decision was first announced two years ago. Twenty-one conferences submitted legislation calling for this decision to be overturned legislatively – and yet it still stands.

The decision by the delegates to readopt resolutions that clearly state that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is wrong is heartening. Our disappointment comes from the fact that we did not put our words into actions, whether that be through divestment in companies that benefit from the occupation or through some other means. That these topics were never even mentioned, let alone discussed in plenary, is disheartening to say the least.

These are not minor issues. These are issues that define who we are as the Body of Christ. Are we a church that embodies God's grace? Are we a church that welcomes all? Are we a church that invests our substantial resources in ways that support justice and peace?

There is much that is good about General Conference. But the limits have never been so obvious as they were in Fort Worth. Parliamentary procedure may bring some order to what could be chaos, but it has never been more clear that it isn't designed to make room for the movement of the Spirit.

I am in total agreement with others who have written in this newsletter that we need not let the actions of General Conference proscribe our actions of love and justice at the local level.

People enter our doors each Sunday to worship, some to eat a meal on Monday or to attend a Bible Study on Wednesday. If we are lucky, they come to our church asking to be married (even if they never join) or to have their love affirmed in a Holy Union or for a pastor to help them bury a loved one.

They come because they hope that within our doors, within our community of people they will find love and acceptance, grace and forgiveness. We do not need the actions of General Conference or any conference to follow Jesus in extending love and grace to those who enter our doors, to those who surround our churches, to those in the larger community and indeed the world.

We can decide today, personally in our local churches, in our annual conferences, how to invest our resources in peace.

At the same time we must not move forward with blinders on, pretending that the actions of General Conference do not impact the spiritual health of our lives as United Methodists and the vitality of our ministry.

What does it do to our sense of integrity to be part of a church that has, and at this point can continue, to deny membership to a person because of their sexual orientation? As the bumper sticker accurately points out, "If you are not outraged, you are not paying attention!" Decision 1032 must be overturned. We must continue to express our dissent and pray that the Judicial Council revisits and reverses this erroneous decision sooner rather than later.

What does it mean in terms of our witness in the world that we left Fort Worth with lan-

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guage in our Social Principles that brings hurt rather than healing to LGBT persons? In essence, we have once again said to LGBT persons that they are somehow less-than-whole. This is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The basic untruth that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching has been codified into church "law" in various places in the UM Book of Discipline. These laws are unjust and should be challenged at every turn...now...not four years from now when we gather again for General Conference.

What does it say to the world that delegates at General Conference never even discussed the fact that millions of our pension dollars are invested in companies that support the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Is divestment in these companies (not in Israel as inaccurately reported over and over again) the best nonviolent means of action? I don't know. But I do know that it sends a message to the world when the issue doesn't even make it onto the plenary floor for discussion.

Reflecting on the experience of General Conference, the decisions made there, I am convicted once again of the importance of the witness of MFSA and other progressive groups and individuals.

In many ways we are able to influence the direction of the church through our participation, writing, speaking, analysis and support.

But maybe even more important is what our witness provides in terms of what it keeps from happening.

I love the story of the A.J. Muste, minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, trade union activist, peace-maker and executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation for many years.

He was once asked, "Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night in front of the White House with a candle?"

Reportedly he replied softly: "Oh I don't do this to change the country, I do this so the country won't change me."

Much of what we do through MFSA will hopefully change the church for the better. And certainly all are changed when they work together for God's kingdom.

But in those times and places where we believe the church is in error, perhaps the most important witness we can provide is one that provides a place for people to keep the church from changing us. ❖

Water as a Human Right

"They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water."

—Isaiah 49:10



Brian Schlemmer of MFSA's Young Adult OnFire network, pours water from a Humane Borders emergency water station for General Conference delegates on their way into the Convention Center.



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