

Special Report: United Methodist Council of Bishops
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Bishop Huie Urges Church to Move into World Health ‘Connexion’

Council of Bishops President Janice Riggle Huie (Houston Area) is challenging the church to gain a new focus on the roots of Wesleyan “connexion” and be part of emerging “bold and risky” opportunities to improve the health of millions of persons around the globe.

"The United Methodist Church is being invited to explore partnership far greater in scope and capacity than we have entered in decades — maybe ever," Bishop Huie said.

Bishop Huie shared her experiences attending global health-related meetings and consultations in behalf of the denomination. She was one of five faith leaders in the company of heads of states, corporate executives, philanthropists, Nobel Prize winners and grassroots activists in poverty reduction, health care and education. In another instance, The United Methodist Church was the only faith organization involved.

The global gatherings reflected the depth, scope and challenges faced by people across the world, with malaria as a chief concern.

Most groups working on global health do not have faith groups on their radar when developing partnerships. "I came away with the clear impression that most of these folks simply did not expect mainline Protestant churches to play a significant role in changing the world over the next few decades. How sad!" Bishop Huie said.

Global health is one of four areas of focus developed by United Methodist leaders as a denominational agenda for the coming years. The church wants to promote global health by combating preventable diseases of poverty such as malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

"A number of you have asked, 'Why malaria as the entry point for global health? Malaria is a disease of poverty. Reducing poverty is one of the council's seven vision pathways. Poverty is one of the four areas of focus for the (general) agencies. Our episcopal colleagues in Africa have identified poverty as a key issue for several years now,'" Bishop Huie said. "Malaria is a consequence of poverty, and it is a root cause of poverty."

Bishop Huie invited the church to return to its roots and live out discipleship in connexion. For instance, early American Methodists partnered with groups like the American Bible Society to spread the Methodist movement globally.

"Collaboration and partnerships build capacity ... (and) invite us to stretch our imaginations to discover new possibilities for living into the kingdom of God. More connections mean more life."

Bishop Huie listed United Methodist connections resulting from the church's involvement with the Nothing But Nets campaign, the United Nations Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to eradicate malaria. "The United Methodist response to the Nets campaign has been nothing short of remarkable," she said.

The Gates Foundation offered a \$3 million matching grant to the denomination for Nothing But Nets. The goal was not reached in two years – the original schedule, but in 10 months. Bishop Huie said.

Bishop Bevel Jones Recognized for Contribution to Fighting Racism

The Council recognized retired Bishop Bevel Jones on the 50th anniversary of the Ministers' Manifesto in Atlanta. Eighty Atlanta area ministers signed a statement against racism on Nov. 3, 1957, after mobs had partially shut down Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. Bishop Jones was a key figure in a National Public Radio report marking the anniversary.

Central Conference Pensions Pool Tops \$4.6 million

The drive to provide pensions for United Methodist pastors outside of the United States continues to build momentum. Bishop Ben Chamness (Fort Worth Area) reported that contributions to the Central Conference Pensions Initiative have hit the \$4.6 million mark. The program began first with a pilot project in Liberia. The next country, he reported, will be Mozambique. The initiative is looking for numerous ways for bishops and pastors to become involved. Bishops have been given packets to help them encourage participation. Pledges can be made over a longer period of time – 4-5 years – he said, and can be paid by check, payroll deduction, and electronic transfers. The initiative is also looking for individuals and foundations with the capacity to make large donations to the cause.

2007 State of Church Report Translated into 10 Provocative Questions

After listening to two reports outlining how the 2007 State of the Church research was undertaken, Bishops heard a thought-provoking analysis of the 20-page summary by the Rev. Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., distinguished professor of church leadership and director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.

The report, "An Invitation to an Upright, Charitable and Discreet Conversation," was the result of two-years' work by The Connectional Table. The report, related essays, and discussions about it can be found at www.umc.org.

Weems' provocative questions are:

Issue: Theological Grounding and Spiritual Vitality. Provocative question: Can we capture the Wesleyan Power of being an evangelical church in a liberal tradition?

Issue: Global United Methodism. Provocative question: Can the growing global regions of United Methodism remember the first law of lifeguarding – don't let the drowning person drown you?

Issue: Structure. Provocative question: Can we move from a structure of control to a structure of grace?

Issue: An Aging Church. Provocative question: Can medical science keep U.S. United Methodism alive?

Issue: Finances: Can we escape the approaching "tipping point" of declining income over thirty years of aging as a denomination?

Issue: Young Clergy. Provocative question: Should we declare young United Methodist clergy as an endangered species?

Issue: Diversity. Provocative question? Should the affirmative action and monitoring priority for the next decade be people of color professions of faith?

Issue: Future. Provocative question: Can the church change to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people?

Issue: Large Churches. Provocative question: Can we learn from a cohort of large churches that have for thirty years been reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people?

Issue: Pastoral Effectiveness. Provocative question: Can we shift our attention from a few ineffective clergy to the many faithful pastors who desperately need help becoming fruitful?

Weems told the bishops, "without a new vision, the future does not look bright... It does not have to be that way. Indeed, it is in times of hardship that new visions often emerge."

Katrina Recovery Needs are still overwhelming – 3rd Offering Sought

Bishop William Oden, chair of the Katrina Church Recovery Appeal task force, reported that nearly \$4 million has been raised through the special appeal to help in rebuilding churches, parsonages and to support salaries of pastors and church workers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

This funding is in addition to the more than \$68 million raised by the United Methodist Committee on Relief for immediate humanitarian relief after the devastating storm in 2005. The recovery appeal is for specific church rebuilding costs that UMCOR is prohibited from covering.

Bishops Hope Morgan Ward (Mississippi Area) and William Hutchinson (Louisiana Area) reported on progress made in their regions.

“The appeal has made a tremendous difference... [but] the needs are still overwhelming,” Bishop Hutchinson said. Partnerships are still needed with churches and conferences in the continuing rebuilding effort.

Bishop Ward reported that wood from Gulfside Assembly, the Southeast Jurisdiction retreat center on Mississippi’s gulf coast that was destroyed by the storm, is being used to create a communion table for the 2008 General Conference.

“Jesus asked: Do you love me? We hope for a third time, people will answer, feed my sheep,” Bishop Ward said as she asked the council to approve a third special offering in 2008. The council agreed.