



2009

Lay Member Summary

Green jobs and green living. Global warming. Climate change. Those are just some of the buzzwords often heard in the political and social conversation about today's environmental issues. But what's the Christian contribution to the debate and the response to those issues? This year's Florida Annual Conference Event focused in large part on that question and the ways all Christians are called to actively care for and be in relationship with God's creation.

Caring for creation: More than 1,700 lay and clergy members, including more than 120 youth and young adults, gathered June 10-13 at Bethune-Cookman University under the theme "Transforming the World by Cherishing the Creation," the first of four themes set by Florida Conference Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker for the next four years. Each theme begins with "Transforming the world by ..." and concludes with a different action. Along with the business of the conference, members considered environmental issues from both a theological and practical perspective.

Listening to Scripture: In her keynote address June 11, Dr. Laurel Kearns, associate professor of Sociology of Religion and Environmental Studies at Drew University in Madison, N.J., said she was happy to share with the conference what she has known since she was a young girl growing up on Sanibel Island — that the Christian faith and caring for creation are intimately intertwined. "We are clearly called by God to care for creation," she said. With the planet in environmental peril because of pollution in the air, on the ground and floating through water sources, Kearns said individuals must begin taking responsibility for the environment by taking simple actions — turning off computers and televisions when not in use, walking and biking when possible, getting better gas mileage from cars. Using Genesis 9:12-13 as a frame of reference, Kearns said Christians "must hold up their end of the rainbow." The Rev. Dr. Denise Honeycutt, director of mission and global outreach for the Virginia Annual Conference and guest preacher for the communion service June 11, said caring for creation is not a choice. "We as Christians have a responsibility to care for creation," she said. "We, of all people, should be leading the way in caring for this precious creation because it is God's. It's God's (creation); it's not ours. By caring for creation, we may very well find ... ourselves transformed." During his Bible study messages, the Rev. Pat Watkins, a church and community worker with the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church and assigned to the Caretakers of God's Creation ministry in the Virginia Conference, focused on relationships between people and God and creation. "Just as a relationship with God compels us to be in relationship with each other," he said, "so too a relationship with God compels us to be in relationship with God's creation." Fulfilling the call to transform the world, he says, requires focusing on creation because issues affecting the planet also affect people. "If we don't cherish creation," he said, "there may not be much of a world left to transform."

Learning about the issues: A "green" film festival held June 10, a day before the conference session officially began, featured short documentaries on a host of environmental issues. Each offered a unique environmental perspective and ways Christians can positively impact the environment. The first cluster of films examined sustainability and how energy use relates to "carbon footprint" — a measure of how human activities affect the environment and climate change. Film titles included "Kilowatt Ours: A Plan to Re-energize America" and "Going Green," about a New Jersey congregation that examines and modifies its carbon footprint. The second cluster focused on consumption, lifestyle and the environment. It featured "Trashed," a story about American garbage and its consequences, and "The People's Grocery," about an organization that helps residents satisfy their need for healthy, fresh food.

Considering the worldwide church: Members voted on 32 amendments to the denomination's constitution. All conferences vote on the amendments, which must be ratified by two thirds of the total voting membership in all annual conferences worldwide to become church law. If passed, 23 of the changes could lead to a new global structure for the church, with the 62 U.S. annual conferences belonging to one or more "regional" conferences and the five U.S. jurisdictions retained. Other amendments dealt with church membership, ethics and conflict of interest policies, transition periods for new conferences, and women's rights. (Results of the Florida Conference voting will be posted on the conference's Web site, www.flumc.org, as soon as they become available; worldwide voting results will be available soon.)

Addressing the denomination's areas of focus: During the 2008 General Conference — the church's top lawmaking body — delegates approved four areas of emphasis for the denomination: developing principled Christian leaders, starting

new congregations and revitalizing existing ones, engaging in ministry with the poor, and fighting diseases of poverty, such as malaria and HIV/AIDS. The Florida Conference is working to support those areas in part by:

- **Launching new communities of faith:** New Church Development reported that 15 new churches and missions were launched in 2007 and 2008; of that number 13 were ethnic communities of faith. The goal for 2009 and 2010 is to start 17 and 12 communities of faith, respectively. Fourteen of those launched throughout 2009 will be ethnic communities of faith. Members approved a budget of slightly more than \$1.5 million to support the launch of churches and missions in 2010. Committee members reported that established congregations are increasingly launching new communities of faith in the form of mother-daughter and multi-site models.
- **Revitalizing congregations, helping them remain vital:** The Office of Congregational Transformation reported that 195 of the conference's more than 700 churches were among the top 10 percent in one or more of three categories related to growth in professions of faith and average worship attendance in 2008 (highest numbers and greatest numeric and percentage increases). Professions of faith and average weekly worship attendance are considered two of the most missionally significant measurements of a congregation's effectiveness. More than 120 congregations are currently involved in ReFocus networks (ReFocus is a two-year program that helps churches rediscover their vision through spiritual growth exercises); the conference now has 15 transformational coaches to work with pastors and lay leaders; more than 1,100 people attended one of five Radical Hospitality events held across the conference in 2008; and the Rev. Harold Lewis has joined the conference staff as its first director of African-American Congregational Development.

Strengthening partnerships: Churches gave an offering of more than \$61,000 at the communion service June 11 in support of the East Angola/Florida Partnership. The offering will be used to provide funds for development of future church leaders in Angola; for education at the Angola conference's School of Theology; to send the Rev. Armando and Icel Rodríguez and their daughter, Amanda, to Angola to work as missionaries for the 2009-2010 conference year; and for grants to Florida Conference churches to assist them in traveling to East Angola to build relationships with partner churches there.

Considering the health of the conference:

- The conference statistician reports membership in the Florida Conference in 2008 was 302,001, a decline of 8,710 or 2.8 percent from 2007. Average weekly worship attendance was 144,149, a decline of 7,205 or 4.76 percent. Professions of faith totaled 6,683, a decline of 214 or 3.1 percent.
- The Ministry Protection committee reported rate reductions in 2008 of 50 percent for automobile insurance, 20 percent for workers' compensation and 10 percent for overall property and casualty insurance premiums. During the last two insurance renewal periods, total insurance costs to conference churches have decreased by 30 percent or nearly \$5.5 million, and over the last year reserves increased by nearly \$1 million for a total of more than \$4 million. Property and casualty premiums decreased by \$2 million.
- The Council on Finance and Administration reported giving for all apportionment levels in 2008 totaled \$19.6 million or 83.9 percent, down from \$20.5 million and nearly 85 percent in 2007. Although giving for Florida Conference apportionments was \$1.6 million less than the \$9.5 million budgeted, only \$500,000 in reserves was needed to offset the loss due to a reduction in spending or maximization of income in other areas. The committee reported the financial health of the conference is good, with \$14.5 million in reserves to fund retiree health benefits for the next 20 years, \$15 million to fund any future pension deficits, \$10 million available for emergency claims payments and \$4.5 million in unrestricted, undesignated conference reserves.
- Conference members approved a 2010 budget of slightly more than \$18.4 million — a decrease of \$5,510 or .03 percent from the 2009 budget.

Celebrating partners in ministry: Members celebrated:

- the ordination, licensing, commissioning and recognition of orders of 39 individuals,
- the 25th and 50th anniversaries of the ordinations of 30 clergy,
- the retirement of 15 clergy,
- the ministries of 36 clergy and clergy spouses who have died since last year's annual conference session,
- the 175th anniversaries of two churches — New Hope United Methodist Church in Istachatta and Bethel United Methodist Church in Tallahassee — among the 34 other churches having significant anniversaries, and
- the ministries of seven churches that voluntarily discontinued and four that merged to form two new congregations.

Complete coverage of this year's annual conference event is available through e-Review Florida United Methodist News Service at <http://www.flumc.info>.

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