

Annual Conference Report

First, I want to thank you for the opportunity to represent Grace as your lay member to the annual conference. It was my first time at Annual Conference and I learned a lot about the United Methodist Church. I wish that every member here at Grace could go!

For those members that do not know what Annual Conference is, it is similar to our Charge Conference or Church Council meeting. The “business” of the Holston Conference is done, committee reports are approved, pastors are ordained, and grants are awarded at Annual Conference. An important piece of business is voting on changes to the Methodist Book of Discipline and to Holston Conference policy.

Bishop Swanson gave the State of the Church report. As with the nation and our churches, the recession is affecting the Holston conference. Churches paying their total apportionments are down, causing the conference to cut expenses by 15%. The cabinet has opted to not accept salary raises in 2009. According to the Finance report, 85% of apportionments were received in 2009 but spending totaled 89%. The shortfall was covered from reserve funds. It was noted that if the members that are regular givers tithed (that is give 10% of their income)—even if all were at poverty level—their total gifts would exceed the current conference budget. The 2010 budget of \$5.2 million which is 4.6% below last year’s, was approved.

Holston’s mission work was highlighted. Bishop Swanson pointed out that Holston had mission teams in 6 of 7 continents as well as local church ministries for the homeless and prisoners. His favorite mission is to Sudan, where Holston has sent 7 mission teams, including one he attended and a medical team. The Methodist Compound in Yei, Sudan, has completed one block of classrooms and has started two more. The Revs. Boo and Phyllis Hankins was sent off to Sudan for a 2-year assignment. A new Landrover was presented to them, paid by Holston’s donations, and an anonymous donor gave the money to build them a house. Holston’s Hands-On mission to Zimbabwe and Liberia was a great success with all districts exceeding their goals and some doubled theirs.

The Congregational Development office has set a goal of starting 15 new churches in the next 5 years, with one church started this year and 3 more in 2010. It doesn’t take a bucket load of money, just a mustard seed of faith!

The Ministries report (our NOW Committee) covered several exciting topics. The Discipleship Team announced the start of Leadership Holston, a 9-month training program for 12 lay members and 12 clergy. Nine Hispanic communities have been organized, an African-American Ministry team has been started, and a Poverty Action Team will soon be formed. The Witness Team will offer an evangelism conference in 2010 and has set a goal to baptize 3000 on Pentecost Day. Seven grants for new ministries that bring in new members and 13 grants for programs for children were awarded.

There was 32 constitutional amendments and 3 resolutions to be voted on. The constitutional amendments would change the Book of Discipline if passed by 2/3 majority of the cumulative votes of the 134 conferences. Most (23) concerned the change from central conferences to regional conferences and were defeated in the Holston Conference. Another amendment that was hotly debated granted membership to all who takes vows was also defeated. The main resolution that was discussed at length was direct invoicing of the pastor’s insurance. This change in Holston policy was approved.

The services were wonderful. I had never seen a Service of Ordination before and was privileged to see our own Rev. Clair Travis ordained as a full elder. I also saw our District Superintendent, Rev. Al Bowles, retired in the Retirement and Commissioning Celebration.

The speakers were inspiring. Rev. Tyrone Gordon spoke on “So You Want to be a Great Church”. He pointed out that Jesus told the disciples to ‘Go and make disciples’, not tell the people to come to you for the Good News. Rev. Adam Hamilton from the Church of the Resurrection gave many practical ideas to incorporate into our church—from how to introduce songs, to how to reach the unchurched around us.

You will be hearing more about these ideas in the next few weeks as I talk about them in various committees. I will also give expanded reports to the appropriate church committees so they will know what is happening in the Holston Conference. Many times I said, “We could do that!” And I believe that Grace can be one of the top churches in our conference!

Judy Kroulek, Lay Member to the Annual Conference