

**Among many other actions during the ten-day event, delegates:**

- Increased the retirement age of bishops from 66 to 68 on or before July 1 in a year when jurisdictional conferences are held and increased the retirement age of other ordained clergy from 70 to 72.
- Simplified the candidacy process whereby men and women become ordained as deacons and elders. A person must be a church member for one year (instead of two) before he or she can be considered a candidate for ministry. The body also ruled that membership is not required if the candidate has been involved in a United Methodist campus ministry or other denomination ministry for one year.
- Approved a plan that will result in one less bishop in four of the five U.S. jurisdictions, beginning in 2012. The savings will be used to fund new episcopal areas elsewhere. The action will not affect the Southeastern Jurisdiction, which already elects one less bishop than the present formula allows.
- Voted to retain statements in the *Social Principles* that the “UMC does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Delegates also voted to retain language that defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman. The assembly affirmed that all persons are “individuals of sacred worth created in the image of God.”
- Let stand language in the *Book of Discipline* regarding pastoral authority over church membership, which states “All people may attend its worship services, participate in the programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection.”
- Voted that pastors or district superintendents may now ask the bishop to give sacramental authority to a deacon, in the location of his or her primary appointment, if an elder is not present. In areas where it would take a great deal of time to deliver the sacraments to persons, a layperson is given the right to deliver consecrated Communion elements.
- Voted to approve the creation of a 27-member hymnal revision committee. Delegates also approved a petition calling for at least seven percent of the hymns to be from the Evangelical United Brethren tradition and the creation of both gender-neutral and traditional-language editions.
- Approved a full communion agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in which each church recognizes the other’s ministry and mission, the authenticity of the other’s baptism and Eucharist, and the interchangeability of ordained ministers. The ELCA’s assembly will act on the agreement in 2009.
- Decided that a proposed new social creed would serve the church better as a “companion litany.”
- Created a 24-member standing committee on faith and order to help bishops and the church reflect on matters of faith, doctrinal teaching, order and discipline.
- Called for a continuation of a study authorized by the 2004 assembly on the church’s ordering of ministry.
- Asked the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits to establish denomination-wide wellness guidelines for clergy and lay employees.

**Full coverage of General Conference can be found at [www.awfumc.org/gc2008](http://www.awfumc.org/gc2008) or [www.gc2008.umc.org](http://www.gc2008.umc.org).**

\_\_\_\_\_ The next General Conference will be in 2012 in Tampa, Florida. \_\_\_\_\_

# General Conference 2008

April 23 - May 2 | Fort Worth, Texas



Focusing on “A Future with Hope,” 992 delegates from around the world met April 23-May 2 in Fort Worth, Texas for the 2008 General Conference session of the United Methodist Church. General Conference, which convenes every four years, is the top policy-making body of the United Methodist Church and is the only body that can speak for the 11.5 million member denomination. The Alabama—West Florida Conference was represented at General Conference by 14 delegates as well as reserve delegates and visitors.

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## 2008 GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION NEWS WRAP-UP

(This wrap-up has been compiled from United Methodist News Service articles.)

### MISSION STATEMENT

Delegates added the clause “for the transformation of the world” to the current mission statement of the United Methodist Church. Our mission statement now reads: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

### FAITHFUL IN WITNESS

People who join United Methodist churches henceforth will promise to be faithful in “their witness” as well as in their prayers, presence, gifts and service. The conference also voted to add the witness phrase to the liturgy used by the church when a person makes a profession of membership.

### BUDGET

Delegates approved a \$642 million denominational spending plan for the next four years built around four areas of focus for the immediate future:

- Developing principled Christian leaders.
- Creating new places for new people by starting new congregations and renewing existing ones.
- Engaging in ministries with the poor.
- Improving global health, especially attacking the killer diseases of poverty.

It was the first time the church has developed a budget on an outcome-based model, and church leaders celebrated the collaborative process used to reach a consensus among general agencies and other interests. The budget is 4.8% higher than the spending plan for the 2005-2008 period.

### PRESENTATIONS

United Methodist head of state—Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—delivered an address that was an assembly highlight. “This is a special honor for me,” she said. “I am the first African leader and the first female president to address the General Conference of The United Methodist Church.” Her message included that “Liberia is on the way back” after years of civil war.

William H. Gates Sr., co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, thanked the denomination for being a partner in the *Nothing But Nets* campaign to eliminate malaria in Africa. More than \$20 million has been raised since the campaign began in 2006. The church recently learned it will receive a \$5 million grant from the United Nations Foundation with help from the Gates Foundation on other health initiatives.

Music groups from across the world performed for the assembly, including Clanton (Ala.) FUMC’s own, *Elevate*, and the 23-member *Hope for Africa Children’s Choir*.

The 40th anniversary of the founding of the denomination also marked the 40th anniversary of the dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction, a racially based structure, and the formation of the Commission on Religion and Race. The assembly also celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Advance and the 100th anniversary of ministry to Methodist men, the Social Creed and the Board of Pension and Health Benefits.

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## THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH

The assembly reflected changing demographics, as membership has shrunk in the United States while growing in Africa and the Philippines and parts of Europe. This gathering was less centered on issues confined to the United States than at previous assemblies. Delegates approved 23 constitutional amendments that would make it possible to change the church’s U.S.-centric structure to a more uniform global structure. The amendments must be ratified by a two-thirds vote of the aggregate total of annual conferences. A 20-member committee will bring recommendations to the 2012 assembly.

### JUDICIAL COUNCIL & UNIVERSITY SENATE NOMINATIONS

Five persons were elected to the Judicial Council, the supreme court of the denomination: Angela Brown (California-Nevada), Ruben Reyes (Philippines) and the Revs. Kathi Austin-Mahle (Minnesota), F. Belton Joyner (North Carolina), and William B. Lawrence (North Texas). The Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, dean of Cannon Chapel and religious life at Emory University in Atlanta, was elected president of the Council.

Four persons were elected to the University Senate, a group of 25 higher education professionals which determines which schools, colleges, universities and seminaries meet the criteria to be listed as affiliate institutions of the denomination: Maxine Clark Beach, dean, Drew Theological School; David L. Beckley, president, Rust College; Charlene Black, retired administrator, Georgia Southern University; and the Rev. Maxie Dunnam, former president, Asbury Seminary.

### CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

General Conference passed numerous amendments to the church’s constitution, which now await action from annual (regional) conferences. All constitutional amendments approved by a two-thirds vote of General Conference must be ratified by a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of voting annual conference members. Amendments to be voted on by the Annual Conference include:

- Reduction from 2 to 1 the number of years a person must be a professing member of a local church before he/she can be a member of an annual conference.
- Enabling of deacons, associate members and provisional members to join ordained ministerial members in full connection in voting for delegates to General and jurisdictional conferences. To vote, local pastors must have completed the Course of Study or master of divinity degree and have served under appointment for two consecutive years immediately preceding an election. Only ordained members in full connection with an annual conference may be delegates.
- Mandating that local churches, jurisdictional and General Conference, “organizations, groups, committees, councils, boards and agencies” will have to adopt ethics and conflict-of-interest policies. These policies will apply to both members and employees to help them “embody and live out our Christian values.”
- Making it clear that all persons shall be eligible to attend worship services and, upon taking vows, become church members.

*Note: Unless stated otherwise, all items go into effect on January 1, 2009. Constitutional Amendments will be voted on at our June 2009 Annual Conference session.*