



2005

Lay Delegate Report

More than 2,000 Florida United Methodists — both laity and clergy — gathered at the Lakeland Center June 2-5 for this year's annual conference. It was a time to make decisions about matters of business that are important to the life of our conference, but it was much more than that. It was a time for connecting as individuals and congregations; for worshipping together; for being the church.

Meeting as "One Body, One Spirit:" Every year the annual conference focuses on a different theme. This year it was "One Body, One Spirit." Our bishop, Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker, developed that theme as a way to reflect on and remember the series of hurricanes that swept through the state last year; to celebrate how we, as United Methodists, have worked as one body and one spirit to help people in our communities recover from the storms.

Being the church in Lakeland: On Wednesday, before conference began, delegates had an opportunity to be the church in Lakeland through two outreach events. Delegates went door-to-door visiting residents and sharing the love of God in a neighborhood near downtown Lakeland through the evangelism ministry called Celebrate Jesus. Others worked with Habitat for Humanity to help build a house for a family that has dreamed of owning a home, but never had the resources to do so.

July 1 marks new beginnings: Bishop Whitaker said the theme is also a reflection of the conference's new structure, which officially takes effect July 1. Together, as one body and one spirit, we will begin to be in ministry as nine districts, instead of 14, and as clusters of churches within our districts. This church, and every other church in the conference, will join five to seven other churches to form a cluster. Churches within the clusters will work to be in relationship with each other, to support each other, and discern together how to be effective in ministry.

In ministry to the world: This conference also reminded us we are called to be one body and one spirit in the world. An offering of dollars brought by our churches was collected for East Angola. The Florida Conference launched a partnership with the East Angola Conference of The United Methodist Church in February 2003. The Angolan conference shares its abundant spirit and vitality; our conference offers a wealth of financial and leadership resources. Since the partnership began, our conference has

helped rebuild parts of a United Methodist spiritual center in Angola called Quessua that was almost destroyed during the country's civil war. Work on the church at Quessua is almost complete, and we've helped buy bicycles for their pastors, sewing machines for a women's center and medicine for a clinic. Eighty percent of this year's offering will help rebuild the theological center there and bring two Angolan students to Florida to study at Florida Southern College and share their experiences at churches throughout the conference. Twenty percent of the offering will go toward our conference's Children's Harvest ministry, which will provide backpacks filled with school supplies to low-income children throughout the state.

The health of our conference: Being in conference together also meant looking at the health of our churches.

- ❑ Our conference statistician reported that overall membership at our churches in 2004 was 325,609, a decline of 3,409 or 1 percent. Overall attendance in worship was 161,038, a decline of 337 or .2 percent. During the past 12 years, overall membership has steadily declined with a loss of about 18,000 members. Overall worship attendance has increased by slightly more than 10,000 in that same period.
- ❑ Financially, 2004 was the best year the conference has experienced in a number of years. Despite hurricanes and declining membership and attendance, giving to apportionments, conference and general Advance Specials, and both Florida Storm Recovery and tsunami relief increased.
- ❑ Delegates celebrated both new life and past ministries: celebration for the beginning of 18 new churches in 2005 and the scheduled launching of 15 new churches in 2006 and of the many years of faithful service and witness of seven churches that were discontinued.

Partners in ministry are sent forth: Conference is also a time when those who have heard the call to ministry are sent forth to begin their service. Fifty-four people were licensed, commissioned and ordained. These clergy are our partners in ministry.

Laity answer their call: God's call is upon us, as well. As we leave a culture in which we laity have been cared for and did not assume high risk to be God's people, we all joyfully respond to Jesus call. We are one body, one spirit. The "we" includes all humankind. Each of us is to be engaged in Christian formation, and we United Methodists have the system to facilitate our engagement.