

News, Connections, Conversations

Annual Conference Opens With Singing, Balloting

By Cary McMullen | June 1, 2011

A table bearing the Bible and symbols of the sacraments formed a colorful centerpiece for the opening of the 169th Florida Annual Conference on June 1.

More than 1,600 delegates -- 860 lay and 759 clergy -- gathered for the opening session of the Conference at the Tampa Convention Center. Well-known music and worship leader Marcia McFee led the Conference in singing an African hymn, "Jesus, We Are Here" and an upbeat version of the historic Wesleyan hymn "And Are We Yet Alive."

As Bishop Timothy Whitaker consecrated the meeting hall, attendants brought the Bible, a plate and cup and a water jar to the central table, draped with multicolored cloths and bearing a large candle.

Delegates then got down to work, electing the first clergy delegate to represent the Conference at next year's General and Jurisdictional conferences.

The theme of the Annual Conference is Living as Peacemakers, and the keynote speaker for the Conference was the Rev. Dr. Daniel Bell, professor of theological ethics at Lutheran Southern Seminary. Bell laid down two principles in his address, that Christ is our peace and that the peace of Christ must be reflected in the life and actions of the church.

After Bell's address, Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker invited members of the Conference to share acts of peacemaking and reconciliation they had recently witnessed "so we may know that God is in our midst."



Symbols of the sacraments are presented during the opening of the Florida Annual Conference June 1 in Tampa. (Photo by Cindy Skop)



Bishop Timothy Whitaker asks questions of the candidates for ordination during the opening of Annual Conference June 1. (Photo by Cindy Skop)

The Rev. Ron McCreary, pastor of Gray Memorial UMC in Tallahassee, said his church participated in an anti-cyber-bullying program to help young people realize the damage they have caused. The Rev. Nora Ramirez said a Kairos prison ministry program had helped two women inmates ask forgiveness of other inmates they had harmed.

The Rev. Audrey Warren, pastor of Branches United Methodist Church in Florida City, a multi-ethnic congregation, recalled how her church had been destroyed about a year ago in a fire set by an arsonist.

"The next Sunday we had communion, and we invited people to come and partake, but only if they were willing to forgive the person who did it. On the anniversary of the fire, we had a celebration, and we all marched in peace," she said.

The Conference is being held in Tampa in preparation for next year's General Conference of the United Methodist Church, which will also take place in the Tampa Convention Center. A major item on the agenda this year is the election of 11 clergy and 11 lay delegates to the 2012 General and Jurisdictional conferences.

Balloting for the delegates got underway promptly after the opening ceremonies. Conference leaders decided to use electronic voting this year in hopes of making the process go more smoothly, but there were technical glitches, especially with the laity voting.

The clergy completed two ballots, electing its first delegate, the Rev. Jorge Acevedo, pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Fort Myers. Acevedo will be the leader of the clergy delegation.

The laity completed only one ballot, with no nominee receiving the necessary number of votes. Sharon Luther, the Conference Lay Leader, led the voting, followed by Conference treasurer Mickey Wilson and Associate Lay Leader Russ Graves.



The Rev. Dr. Daniel Bell Jr.



Florida Conference Lay Leader Sharon Luther talks with a delegate during a Meet the Nominees event at the 2011 Florida Annual Conference. (Photo by Linda Beavers)

The nominees for General and Jurisdictional conferences were present at informal gatherings on Tuesday and Wednesday to meet delegates and answer their questions. Several of the nominees expressed the desire to put divisive issues aside and work for more unity in the church.

Luther, a member of Cypress Lake UMC in Fort Myers, said she has been prepared to serve as a delegate to General Conference over the past three years by serving as the Conference Lay Leader, representing the Conference at General and Jurisdictional church functions. She said as a delegate to General Conference, she would push for reforms.

“I hope we’re gutsy enough to make the changes the United Methodist Church needs to make, to make disciples and not worry about structure. I’d like for us not to be afraid. I think God is saying, ‘My church needs to change,’” she said.

Rod Groom, a lay nominee who is a member of First United Methodist Church in Fort Pierce, where his wife, Shirley, is pastor, said he was moved to become a nominee in part out of a love for Wesleyan theology.

“We need to get back to the basics of ministry – laity as well as clergy. There needs to be more focus on the local church and its outreach and ministry,” said Groom, a retired corrections officer for the State of Florida. “I’d like to see some of the divides and polarizations heal.”

An emphasis on local ministry was also the concern for the Rev. Tom Nelson, pastor of First UMC in Port Orange.

“I’ve served in some tough places. I spent six years in Miami. The needs of the church are what it’s all about. My issue is churches reaching out to their immediate communities,” he said.

The Rev. Bill Bailey, pastor of Rogers UMC in Bradenton, said he became a nominee for the first time because “it’s always the same people” who are elected. “It’s time for new voices,” he said. Bailey echoed the desire for more unity.

“My thing is, we don’t need to let issues divide the church. We need to decide what issues we can unite on,” he said. “I have no objection to anyone being ordained except someone who’s not called.”

News, Connections, Conversations

Annual Conference Elects Delegates, Looks Ahead

By Cary McMullen | June 4, 2011

The 2011 Florida Annual Conference, which concluded June 4, had its moments of joy, sorrow and excited anticipation.

Meeting in the Tampa Convention Center, the site of next year's United Methodist General Conference, clergy and lay members of the Annual Conference decided on delegations to the 2012 General and Southeastern Jurisdictional conferences. They celebrated covenant partnerships with Methodist churches in Cuba, East Angola and Haiti. And they gave their approval to a future direction for the Conference's mission.



Marcia McFee leads the congregation in song during the Gospel Worship Service at the 2011 Florida Annual Conference June 3 in Tampa. (Photo by Cindy Skop)

Election of delegates to General and Jurisdictional conferences dominated the proceedings, with balloting interspersed throughout the three-day meeting. After an initial glitch, the electronic voting procedure proceeded smoothly, but there were several ballots on both the clergy and laity sides that stalemated, failing to produce an elected delegate due to insufficient votes. The delegations were not completed until almost noon on June 4, past the scheduled time for adjournment.

The clergy and lay leaders of the delegation, respectively, will be the Rev. Jorge Acevedo, pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Fort Myers, and Mickey Wilson, director of the Conference Finance and Administration department. Some members of the Conference noted that more delegates under the age of 40 were elected this year. The youngest clergy delegate, the Rev. Emily Oliver, gave birth to a baby just three days before the opening of the Conference.



A complete list of the elected delegates can be seen [here](#).

On June 3, the Conference received reports about its covenant agreements with overseas partners. A story about the visit of Cuban Bishop Ricardo Pereira to the Annual Conference can be seen [here](#).

In his report on the statistical and financial state of the Conference, Wilson used



The partnership discussion panel representing Cuba, Haiti, East Angola and United Methodist Volunteers in Missions discuss the partnerships at the 2011 Florida Annual Conference June 3 in Tampa. (Photo by Cindy Skop)

humorous graphics to declare “It’s a jungle out there.” He recounted several economic hits taken by the State of Florida in 2010, including the BP oil spill, which impacted tourism.

Wilson noted that Conference membership declined more than 3 percent to about 285,000, and average worship attendance was down 4.8 percent, continuing a 10-year decline. However, he said, giving was up by \$1.6 million, and Conference spending was about \$500,000 less in 2010 than the previous year. Members of the Conference approved a budget for 2012 of \$17.8 million, a 1.8 percent increase, but an amount, Wilson said, that

is less than the Conference’s budget from four years ago.

Members of the Conference also approved a proposal from the Board of Trustees to relinquish the bishop’s residence, returning it to Florida Southern College, which owns the property. The proposal authorized the board to borrow up to \$250,000 to purchase a new residence for the next bishop before he or she takes office in September 2012.

The Rev. Beth Fogle-Miller, director of Connectional Ministries, gave the members of the Conference a preliminary look at the work of the Strategic Leadership Team, a group chosen by Bishop Timothy Whitaker to articulate the Conference’s core purpose and to examine whether its ministries are in line with that purpose.

Members of the Conference endorsed the team’s direction.

Because the Conference ran well behind schedule, consideration of several resolutions, some of which were potentially controversial, was not taken up until after noon on June 4. Before the resolutions could be considered, there was a motion from the floor to table all of them. The motion passed.

One resolution considered earlier in the week did receive the approval of the Conference. A resolution on “Inclusivity (and) Anti-Racism in the Florida Annual Conference” denounced racism and committed the Conference to “creating a



Retiring clergy members and their spouses pass the light to newly ordained members of clergy during the Retirement Service at the 2011 Florida Annual Conference June 3 in Tampa. (Photo by Cindy Skop)

multi-cultural environment of equity which moves us from race to relationship.”



Conference treasurer Mickey Wilson reports on Conference statistics and finances at the 2011 Florida Annual Conference June 3 in Tampa. (Photo by Cindy Skop)

The resolution also directed the bishop’s task team to educate clergy and key lay leaders about inclusivity, educate congregations about “open itinerancy” and review and evaluate Conference personnel policies.

The Conference voted to discontinue six churches. One that received particular attention was First United Methodist of Tampa, whose members contested the discontinuation. South Central District Superintendent Sharon Austin gave a lengthy presentation about the reasons for recommending the church be discontinued.

Austin said the district is committed to continuing a United Methodist ministry in downtown Tampa and that the property of First UMC would become “a legacy” that would enable a new ministry to be started there.

In the debate that followed the motion, a member of the church expressed disappointment with the recommendation and asked for an extension of one year. However, the Conference voted by about a 3-to-1 margin to discontinue the church.

Reflecting on his next-to-last Annual Conference, Whitaker said he was pleased with the way members had conducted business in spite of election pressures.

“I thought there was a very good spirit manifested throughout the week, based on the mood during the plenary sessions and the comments from members. It’s always difficult when it’s an election year. Emotions run high and the process is tedious. It makes it a challenge to take seriously the business of the Conference while you’re in the middle of electing people,” he said.