

## Group to draft plan for starting new churches

Selected Southwest Texas Conference leaders are to meet Jan. 18-19 in Kerrville to consider ways to start new congregations across the region.

The 26 clergy members and 21 laypeople are to develop a strategic plan over the next nine months for offering Christ to all by starting new faith communities.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez initially called the group together Dec. 1 in San Antonio to launch a "Bishop's Initiative with New Church Development."

At Mount Wesley Conference Center in Kerrville, the planners are to discuss concepts in *Robust Church Development*. That's a book about how church judicatories—like annual conferences—can effectively start new congregations.

"We need early on to engage intentionally with the substance of that book," Martinez said. "It calls us forth from what we have been doing into new ways of doing things.

"I hope that by bringing us together to have a common experience, we can develop a common vision, a common direction and a common language about what it means for an annual conference to aid and abet new church development."

In December Martinez called conference leaders to move forward with efforts to start new congregations.

"We could keep talking about starting new churches until Jesus comes," Martinez told some 40 pastors and lay leaders at Alamo Heights UMC, San

Antonio. "But I think God is calling us in some sense to move forward. We are not going back to Egypt" (as the Hebrews following Moses in the desert wanted to do).

The 45-member group "is to enlarge the New Church Development Commission to bring other conference leaders into the process of strategic planning," Martinez said.

"Unless we have a strategic plan that people understand, they won't line up to support it," the bishop said.

The strategic plan, which is to guide new church development for the next decade, is to include components that detail ways to develop clergy and laity leaders for new congregations as well as to select sites.

The planning may lead to a conference-wide capital funds campaign for new church development, Martinez said. But that's not a certainty.

"Somebody's got to raise the question of resources (as part of the planning)," he said. "But if we can come up with a way to start new churches without a conference-wide campaign, let's explore that."

Southwest Texas has many opportunities for church growth, said the Rev. Bill Henderson, chair of the New Church Development Commission. Some 100,000 new residents move into the conference area each year. Not all parts of The United Methodist Church can take advantage of that level of population growth.

"A rule of thumb says that if you

are not starting 3 percent (of new churches) a year, you will decline," said Henderson, senior pastor of Northwest Hills UMC, Austin. "That means we need to start 9 to 10 new churches a year. We haven't done that."

Henderson called new church development "an essential dimension of the life of the church."

"We need to shape a consensus about what we should be doing (in new church development) over the next 10 years," he said. "The people are coming."

Martinez called current conditions in Southwest Texas "a new and unique moment to be focused on planting new churches and expanding God's kingdom."

Martinez is co-chairing the planning group with Henderson. The group includes all members of the New Church Development Commission, the seven district superintendents, all conference staff directors, and pastors and laypeople from each district.

"I don't know where we're going, but we're going to make something happen," Henderson told the group. "We must seize on this opportunity and leverage it into something that can make something happen for God. We must use our minds, our passions, to make something happen for God."

Martinez has divided the planning group into three teams:

- Strategic planning.
- Clergy leadership development.
- Potential New Church Sites.

### 3 more churches certified as 'welcoming congregations'

Three local Southwest Texas churches won recognition in November as "Certified Welcoming Congregations" for 2004.

That brings to eight the total of "welcoming congregations" in Southwest Texas. Seven of those are in the McAllen District.

First UMC, Schulenburg, became the first Southwest Texas

outside the McAllen District to receive a plaque from the General Commission on Communication in Nashville. That happened Nov. 18.

First UMC, Falfurrias, and First UMC, Premont, were certified Nov. 29.

The certification means the three congregations have system-

atically evaluated their hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of welcoming newcomers.

The certification program is part of the denominationwide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign.

Only 10 of the 2,079 UM congregations in Texas have earned certification plaques.

## UMs help victims of late November flooding

Victoria District United Methodists continue helping neighbors to recover from late November flooding.

The Southwest Texas Conference has been supporting those efforts with money from the Disaster Response Fund (Advance 2050) and cleanup supplies from a storage unit in San Antonio.

Flooding from heavy rains Nov. 21-23 affected Cuero, Gonzales, Seguin and Victoria along the Guadalupe River as well as El Campo and Ganado.

Bastrop in the Austin District dealt with high water from the Colorado River.

Seguin Area Recovery, an interfaith organization supported in part by Southwest Texas Conference funds, reopened its office Dec. 6 to help low-income flood victims.

The Seguin group—originally formed after 1998 flooding—faces a big financial challenge, said the Rev. Linda T. Montgomery of First UMC, Seguin. Damage from Nov. 23 flooding apparently won't qualify for federal aid.

**Send contributions to help with flood relief to the conference treasurer earmarked for Advance 2050 (Disaster Response).**

"We have around 150 families that will need help," Montgomery said. "That's about the same as in 2002. These are almost all low-income people, and with no FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) help, addressing unmet needs will be difficult. We'll try to help those with the greatest need."

The interfaith group responded to Guadalupe River flooding in 1998 and 2002.

"Like 1998—but unlike 2002—the water came up so fast that these people didn't have time to move their stuff to higher ground," Montgomery observed. "Some of the families lost everything. In 2002 they had time to move before the flood hit."

Don Jones, Southwest Texas Conference disaster recovery coordinator, delivered 128 flood buckets filled with

cleaning supplies, 100 health kits, and mops and brooms from San Antonio to Wharton County Dec. 4.

The previous week he took 40 flood buckets and 40 health kits to Ganado. He delivered 10 more flood buckets and 10 health kits Nov. 21 to El Campo.

High water damaged Wesley Chapel UMC, El Campo, and Oakman UMC, Ganado.

First UMC, El Campo, opened Nov. 21 as a shelter for more than 100 flood victims, said the Rev. Joyce McCormick, pastor of the 140-member congregation. The local volunteer fire department requested the aid.

Besides shelter, flood victims received food and clothing from the church, McCormick said.

"We're just offering people whatever we can and trying to get them the basics of what they need," McCormick told the Disaster News Network.

The list of victims included six families from the church, McCormick said. Two suffered substantial losses.

In Bastrop the American Red Cross opened a shelter Nov. 21 at First UMC.

## First UMC, McAllen, sends 'care boxes' to U.S. troops overseas at Christmas

Members of First UMC, McAllen, offered Christ to U.S. troops overseas at Christmas.

The 1,258-member congregation shipped about 50 "care boxes" to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan Nov. 1. The boxes were to arrive by Christmas.

Each box contained beefjerky, trail mix, protein bars, crackers, peanut butter, chips, nuts, cheese dip, cookies, Christmas candy, Kool-Aid and towelettes.

An accompanying message read, "Christmas Cheer! With lots of love and prayers. Love, First UMC, McAllen."

Paul and Marilyn Moffitt spearheaded the "care box" project.

"This is one way we're 'Offering Christ to All,' just like the (Southwest Texas) conference vision statement," said Marilyn Moffitt. "It's our way of

offering Christ to our troops who are so far away from home."

Moffitt said she hoped that when the troops open their boxes, they would know that someone was thinking, praying and caring about them while they were away from their homeland.

The couple was inspired by God to begin the "care box" ministry when their grandson, Capt. Austin Moffitt of Corpus Christi, was assigned to serve in Baghdad, Moffitt said.

"I know it was the Lord that directed us to do this," she said. "It makes me feel overwhelmed, and I feel I'm reaching out to others. When we sent a box to my grandson, he really liked it, and the other troops liked receiving the boxes, too. He told me they were very appreciative."

## Official calendar shows bishop, missionary on front

Southwest Texans who buy the official 2005 United Methodist Program Calendar will see a familiar face on the cover.

A color photo shows Bishop Joel N. Martinez commissioning a missionary.

Above the photo are the words from Isaiah 8:6: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"

Martinez was president of the UM mission board from 2000 to 2004. He is continuing in that role through 2008.