

Bishop calls for prayer effort during Epiphany

Bishop Joel N. Martinez called Southwest Texas United Methodists last month to a time of prayer and fasting during Epiphany.

The Jan. 6 to Feb. 20 prayer effort is to help church members and leaders discern how God is calling them to start new congregations and transform existing ones.

"It is my strong conviction that our decision to launch a serious and sustained strategy of new church planting and transformation was inspired by the Holy Spirit," Martinez said. "Hands were raised

to vote yes (at the 2006 annual conference session) because hearts were moved.

"In the same way, new churches will be 'raised' only as our hearts are moved through prayerful openness to the leading of the spirit."

Martinez said he would send letters about the prayer time to clergy and laity leaders throughout the Southwest Texas Conference. Those letters would include prayer guides, a fasting covenant and suggested scriptural passages to consider.

Martinez characterized the six-

week prayer effort as a time of "disciplined listening."

"Discipline is a good Wesleyan word," he noted. "And listening is the primary way we approach God."

Epiphany provides an opportune time for discernment, Martinez said. The liturgical season, which follows the 12 days of Christmas, is a time of revelation of Christ to the world.

Epiphany begins Jan. 6 with the Magi's visit to the Christ child and ends the day before Ash Wednesday.

Southwest Texas ends 2006 with 86 welcoming churches

Three more Southwest Texas churches joined the list of welcoming congregations during December.

The Southwest Texas Conference ends 2006 with 86 certified welcoming congregations. That's the most of any conference in the United States.

In addition, First UMC, Rockport, in the Corpus Christi District renewed its certification Dec. 1 for the second straight year. Welcoming certification must be renewed annually.

New welcoming congregations are:

■ First UMC, Yoakum, Victoria District, certified Dec. 4.

■ First UMC, Marble Falls, Kerrville District, certified Dec. 11.

■ St. Andrew's UMC, San Antonio, San Antonio District, certified Dec. 11.

The count of welcoming congregations by district now stands at Austin, 14; Corpus Christi, 9; Kerrville, 13; McAllen, 21; San Angelo, 7; San Antonio, 13; and Victoria, 9.

Conference Lay Leader Jay Brim of Austin called on district lay leaders in June to help all current welcoming congregations renew their certifications.

Brim challenged leaders to inspire at least half the remaining churches in their districts to be certified before next June.

Granted by the General Commission on Communication, certification means a congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of welcoming newcomers.

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

Certified congregations earn a plaque and a special designation in the "Find a church" database at www.unitedmethodist.org.

To earn certification, congregations must qualify for at least 100 points on a yearly checklist of welcoming activities.

Those activities include designating a welcoming coordinator, training church members in welcoming techniques and doing various things around the church to make it more welcoming to visitors.

Checklists are available at ignitingministry.org or umcswtx.org.

District superintendents must sign each checklist to confirm the information reported before submissions go to the communication agency in Nashville, Tenn.

Martindale UMs buy headstone for man's grave

When the 33-member Martindale UMC learned about the unmarked grave of a mentally retarded neighbor, it took up a special collection Nov. 19.

The United Methodist offering raised \$350 to buy a headstone for Joey, a resident of the Century Home in nearby Lockhart.

Joey had died in June.

An additional \$75 from the Martindale offering went to the Century Home, which serves people 35 to 78 with mental retardation or Down syndrome.

Beverly Hunter, a home administrator, cried when she received the church's check.

Martindale UMC got involved because Joey had no family to buy a headstone.

The state mental health agency, which helps fund the Century Home, doesn't provide money for grave markers.

The Century Home itself had no budget for providing a headstone.



Easter offering to help pay for VIM training site

Southwest Texas United Methodists have an opportunity in April to contribute to ongoing Volunteers in Mission and disaster-response ministries.

That opportunity comes in the form of a special one-time Easter offering.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez informed pastors in a Dec. 1 letter about the April 8 offering. Proceeds are to support a planned VIM training center and disaster-response warehouse in Fair Oaks Ranch.

"I hope you will urge your congregation to support this offering during Easter to help us all become stronger partners in our ongoing outreach to God's children in special need," Martinez wrote.

The Council on Finance and Administration approved the one-time Easter offering in November. The April 8 offering is part of a coordinated effort to raise more than \$1.5 million for the 15,000-square-foot facility, Martinez said. It is to be built adjacent to Spring Creek UMC.

The Southwest Texas Conference is seeking more funds from various foundations, he said. Methodist Healthcare

Ministries of South Texas approved a \$185,000 grant in November to equip a medical training area at the facility.

A special 10-member task force, chaired by the Rev. Warren G. Hornung, senior pastor of First UMC, Kerrville, has been guiding the training center project.

The Board of Trustees appointed a three-member building committee, headed by Jim Martin, University UMC, San Antonio, in November.

The facility, to be located just off Interstate 10 northwest of San Antonio, is to provide a site for regular VIM leadership and team training, Martinez said. In addition, the structure will house a basic inventory of disaster-response supplies, such as flood buckets, health kits and home-repair items.

"This stock should enable the conference to begin responding to natural disasters in Texas within 24 hours," Martinez wrote Dec. 1. "In the past we have often needed several weeks to mount our response."

Southwest Texas has experienced two major regional floods, a number of tornadoes and several hurricanes

since 1998, Martinez noted. In addition, the region provided shelter to thousands of evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

"Along with others," Martinez wrote, "I have been concerned with upgrading our capability in responding to such natural disasters as part of our ministry and witness in this episcopal area. In addition, we have a vital and growing Volunteers In Mission ministry, which makes a remarkable witness both in our region and other parts of the world."

The bishop said he had been amazed at the way Southwest Texas congregations have reached out to others—both in the United States and abroad—in their times of need. He said he hoped church members would see the Fair Oaks Ranch facility as a continuation of that outreach.

The Communications and Public Witness Office is to send congregations promotional materials in January. They are designed to inform church members about the training center and warehouse, the Easter offering, and the ministry the facility is to empower.

New congregation established at Canyon Lake

Bleak weather didn't deter members of the Southwest Texas Conference's newest congregation from officially organizing Dec. 10 and breaking ground for a new church.

North Shore UMC, Canyon Lake, begins with nearly 180 charter members. Many gathered inside Rebecca Creek Elementary School following a 10:30 a.m. worship service for a constituting conference.

That meeting officially established the new local church in the San Antonio District.

The group then moved to the proposed site for the new church for a groundbreaking.

North Shore is a daughter congregation of Canyon Lake UMC. The established congregation is helping start the new church.

Though Bishop Joel N. Martinez couldn't attend the constituting conference, he sent a letter with the Rev. J. Michael Lowry, executive director of new church development and transformation.

"Today you are part of a historic new beginning," Martinez wrote in his letter, which the Rev. Malford Hierholzer read. "I rejoice and celebrate the work of God's grace among you."

Hierholzer is serving the new congregation as pastor.

Lowry also brought a letter from San Antonio District Superintendent Virgilio Vazquez-Garza. He authorized the constituting conference and added some personal notes praising the pastor and congregation for having a vision and remaining faithful to it.

Lowry said the Southwest Texas Conference would contribute \$150,000 to the new congregation over the next four years.

"You're not in this alone," Lowry said. "The great help is the Savior, but you also have a larger Methodist church supporting you—including people from places like Bastrop and Uvalde and Zapata."

"This day you have done a great thing on behalf of the Lord. Every church is a mission post of advancing the kingdom of God. It is my pleasure to congratulate you, and may you always be the light that shines on the hill of this side of Canyon Lake."

Marty Chrismon, one of the church's music leaders, led the congregation in a final song, "This Little Light of Mine."