

40 churches draw 992 first-time visitors Dec. 24

Forty-four percent of Christmas Eve visitors to Home for Christmas churches were worshipping with those congregations for the first time.

That was one result from follow-up reports on the 2005 Home for Christmas public witness and outreach campaign. Forty congregations—more than twice the number that responded for 2003 and 2004—submitted information to the Communications and Public Witness Office by Jan. 11.

The 40 congregations reported welcoming 2,229 visitors to Christmas Eve candlelight services. Of that number, 992—or 44 percent—were first-time visitors.

“We did something right because we had way more first-time visitors (who signed in, at least) than in the past,” reported the Rev. Linda T. Montgomery, associate pastor of First UMC, Seguin. Of the 207 visitors to the Seguin church Dec. 24, 58 had come for the first time.

Total worship attendance in the 40 reporting churches Dec. 24 was 10,748. That was 1,063—or 48 percent—more than had worshiped Christmas Eve in those congregations in 2004.

“We had nine people at last year’s service,” said Raymond Hicks, lay leader of Bend UMC. “This year, due to the Home for Christmas campaign, we greatly increased our numbers (to 45). We plan to follow up with cards, calls and visits.”

First UMC, Premont, doubled its 2005 Christmas Eve attendance count to more than 70, Pastor C.W. Pearcy



reported. That compared to 35 in 2004.

The Rev. Mark Adams, pastor of First UMC, Schulenburg, credited the Home for Christmas campaign with boosting 2005 Christmas Eve attendance to 140. That compared to 80 in 2004.

Three of the 40 reporting congregations recorded decreases in 2005 Christmas Eve attendance from 2004. All three also reported that they didn’t follow the step-by-step eight-week Home for Christmas campaign timetable. Two of the three didn’t include a day of prayer in their outreach efforts.

The eight-week plan is outlined in a 146-page *Igniting Ministry Campaign Workbook* for the Southwest Texas Conference. The workbook calls for a foundation of prayer and specific invitational, promotional and follow-up activities.

Sixteen of the 40 reporting churches included prayer as part of their Home for Christmas activities.

“Without the prayer element, all you have is an advertising campaign,” said the Rev. Damon E. Relder, pastor of Wesley UMC, Corpus Christi, and chair of the Board of Discipleship. “Prayer is what empowers our efforts for evangelism.”

The Board of Discipleship has

sponsored the Home for Christmas campaign for six years. The purpose is to help church members invite acquaintances who don’t usually attend church to worship Dec. 24 and then continue the disciple-making process with those who come.

One-hundred-thirty-nine of the 348 United Methodist congregations in Southwest Texas had indicated they were taking part in the 2005 Home for Christmas campaign. That’s up from 34 in 2004, 31 in 2003, 64 in 2002 and 99 in 2001. In 2000, the first Home for Christmas year in Southwest Texas, 142 congregations took part.

For the sixth straight year, First UMC, Kerrville, reported the largest number of Christmas Eve visitors—794—and the biggest count of first-time worshipers—279.

The Communications and Public Witness Office ran ads Dec. 23 or 24 in seven regional daily newspapers. Those ads listed Christmas Eve worship times at participating Home for Christmas congregations.

The conference office also bought commercials Dec. 12 to 23 on six radio stations to invite listeners to United Methodist churches. The 60-second commercials closed by directing listeners to www.umcswtx.org to find a United Methodist congregation near them.

Home for Christmas is one way the Southwest Texas Conference tries to empower ministries in local congregations so they can offer Christ to all.

6 more welcoming congregations certified

Six more Southwest Texas churches have joined the list of certified welcoming congregations in recent weeks.

The count now stands at 38.

First UMC, Rockport, became the first certified welcoming congregation in the Corpus Christi District Dec. 22.

First UMC, Aransas Pass, another Corpus Christi District congregation, was added to the list later that same day.

First UMC, Beeville, a third Corpus Christi District, earned a welcoming congregation plaque Jan. 5.

First UMC, Brady, was also certified Jan. 5. The 573-member congregation is the second in the San Angelo District to be recognized.

Crestview UMC, Austin, became the third congregation certified in the Austin District Jan. 9.

St. John’s UMC, Corpus Christi, a

fourth Corpus Christi District congregation, joined the list Jan. 9.

First UMC, Donna, a McAllen District congregation, was recertified Jan. 6 for the second straight year.

Certification means a congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of welcoming newcomers. Congregations need to renew their certification annually.

7 McAllen UMs cut up trees toppled by Rita

Seven people from the McAllen District helped the Texas Conference with hurricane recovery in Orange Dec. 2-4.

"We knew we weren't going to rebuild anything," said J'Nevelyn Lloyd of First UMC, McAllen. "We knew we'd be on a cleanup mission. We were told that we didn't need to bring any tools—just gloves, goggles, bug spray and a willing spirit."

But team members didn't know was what was in store for them.

"It seems like there is a lot of devastation still," said Ken Cady of St. Mark UMC, McAllen. "After three months, you'd think a lot more would have been done."

"I didn't see many homes that were not affected (by Hurricane Rita). About half the houses were covered with tar paper."

Upon arriving in Orange, team members received details about where they would be working and what they would be doing. A volunteer from Stonebridge UMC, McKinney, in the North Texas Conference made the assignments.

"We were there primarily to help clean yards of people who turned in request forms to UMCOR" (United Methodist Committee on Relief), Cady said.

Every one of the project descriptions said "large tree(s) needed to be cut or removed," he said.

Lloyd said the McKinney volunteer's "eyes got really big when we told her we had no tools, no chainsaws, just us."

The McKinney woman was part of a mission team herself. That team of nine had come equipped with chainsaws.

"We decided to team up with them," Lloyd said. "The 16 of us together cut and hauled trees and brush from seven houses in two days. These were not trees like we have in south Texas!"

The Federal Emergency Management Agency and Orange city crews had said they couldn't haul away anything more than 10 feet from the curb.

"We moved lots and lots of trees for them to haul away," Lloyd said.

Cady said, "These people were poor.

They couldn't afford to remove the trees themselves. If not for UMCOR, it wouldn't be done. They'd been waiting for the city or the federal government to help.

"They look at the devastation in the yard and see nothing has happened, nothing has happened, nothing has happened."

At one home, though, hope replaced that despair when the United Methodists arrived, Cady said.

"A woman came out the door screaming hallelujah and screaming something about us doing God's work," he said.

Lots of people around Orange are still in need, Cady said.

"We were just on the outside of the area," he said. "To think it goes on to the panhandle of Florida—there's just a lot of destruction."

"When it hits the news and gets a lot of coverage, people really want to help. Then it's off the news, and people don't think about it. There are a whole lot of people in need."

Volunteers return from cleanup in New Orleans

Volunteers from First UMC, McAllen, and the Methodist Church of Mexico returned last month from hurricane cleanup work in New Orleans.

The teams worked Jan. 3 to 8 and 6 to 11 to gut houses damaged Aug. 29 by Hurricane Katrina and remove furniture. The work was done in conjunction with First Street UMC and El Mesias UMC in New Orleans.

The volunteer workforce included 22 members of First UMC, McAllen, and eight Mexican Methodists.

Susan Hellums, Southwest Texas Conference Volunteers in Mission coordinator, said recovery efforts would be ongoing along the Gulf Coast for several years.

Katrina affected areas from Florida to Louisiana. Hurricane Rita hit Texas and Louisiana in September.

Northern Mexico needs volunteers

Storm relief centers coordinate volunteers

Recovery teams wanting to know where they can help should call these storm recovery centers:

■ Alabama-West Florida Conference: (866) 340-1956

■ Florida Conference: (800) 282-8011, Extension 149

■ Louisiana Conference: (877) 345-5193

■ Mississippi Conference: (866) 435-7091 or 7092 or 7093

■ North Alabama Conference: (877) 273-5018.

■ Northwest Florida: (850) 777-8663.

■ Texas Conference: (877) 774-2700 or (409) 892-0140.

to rebuild homes destroyed in July by Hurricane Emily and Tropical

Storm Gert.

Florida is still recovering from four hurricanes and one tropical storm in 2004 as well as Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma in 2005.

Alabama was still rebuilding from Hurricanes Dennis in July and Ivan in 2004 when Katrina slammed into the area in August.

Recovery teams wanting to know when and where they can be of use in the United States should call the storm recovery center for each affected conference, Hellums said.

"If there's a work team from your church going, please let me know," she said. Hellums is tracking all Southwest Texas Conference disaster response.

Crews wishing to go to Mexico should contact Hellums. She can be reached at (956) 661-9771 or shellums@mcfirst.com.