

23 churches report 907 Christmas Eve visitors

Two of three 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 December's Home for Christmas public witness and outreach campaign.

Twenty-three of the 98 participating congregations submitted information about Christmas Eve attendance to the Communications and Public Witness Office by Jan. 5.

Those 23 congregations reported welcoming 907 visitors to Christmas Eve candlelight services. Of that number, 601—or 66 percent—were first-time visitors.

"Most of our attendees were visitors," reported Debra Bradley, membership chair for Leakey UMC. The 185-member congregation drew 112 worshippers to candlelight services last month—14 more than for Christmas Eve 2005.

"Many of the individuals who attended (Christmas Eve) were not our Sunday regulars," said the Rev. Dou-



glas Hinchcliff, pastor of First UMC, George West. "Many of them were out of town. Thus our (23 percent attendance) increase (from Christmas Eve 2005) was dramatic."

Total worship attendance at the 23 reporting churches Dec. 24 was 5,073. That total was 679 more than had worshiped in those congregations Christmas Eve 2005. The figure was 55 percent higher than average Sunday worship attendance for those 23 congregations.

"For 2004 we had nine attendees—before we followed the Home for Christmas campaign," said Bonnie Millican, Home for Christmas team leader at Bend UMC. "For 2005 we had 45 attendees, and for 2006 we had 37 attendees. Two of last year's visitors attended as members this year and brought seven visitors with them."

Bend plans to expand its Home for Christmas team for 2007 to contact more unchurched people personally, Millican said.

First UMC, Kerrville, reported the largest number of Christmas Eve visitors—602—and first-time visitors—348.

Eleven of the 23 congregations said they followed the step-by-step eight-week Home for Christmas timetable for 2006. That 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.

Fourteen of the 23 congregations included prayer as part of their Home for Christmas activities.

Prayer makes Home for Christmas distinctive, said the Rev. Damon E. Relder, pastor of Wesley UMC, Corpus Christi, and chair of the Board of Discipleship. "Without the prayer element, all you have is an advertising campaign," he said.

Churches get items for Bring a Friend day

Southwest Texas congregations received planning materials in late November for Bring a Friend Sunday 2007.

Set for March 25, Bring a Friend Sunday is the Lenten version of Home for Christmas. On the Sunday before Palm Sunday, UMs are asked to invite and escort friends to worship and a fellowship meal. Then members invite visitors back for Palm Sunday and Easter worship.

A 24-hour prayer vigil in January was to kick off local Bring a Friend Sunday preparations.

Research shows that 70 to 90 percent of people who join a congregation already have friends there.

11 more congregations join list of welcoming churches

Eleven more Southwest Texas churches joined the list of welcoming congregations in late December and early January.

The Southwest Texas Conference began 2007 with 97 certified welcoming congregations—28 percent of the 345 local churches in the conference.

That total is the most of any conference in the United States.

New welcoming congregations are:

■ Rolling Hills Community Church, Lago Vista, certified Dec. 18.

■ First UMC, Corpus Christi, certified Dec. 20.

■ Highland Lakes UMC, Buchanan Dam, certified Dec. 20.

■ Shepherd's Gate Community Church (formerly Palm Heights UMC),

San Antonio, certified Dec. 20.

■ St. Paul UMC, Corpus Christi, certified Jan. 2.

■ First UMC, Portland, certified Jan. 2.

■ Faith UMC, Woodsboro, certified Jan. 4.

■ Oak Meadow UMC, San Antonio, certified Jan. 4.

■ Northwest Hills UMC, Austin, certified Jan. 4.

■ First UMC, Luling, certified Jan. 4.

■ First UMC, Cuero, certified Jan. 4.

The count of welcoming congregations by district now stands at Austin, 17; Corpus Christi, 14; Kerrville, 14; McAllen, 21; San Angelo, 7; San Antonio, 15; and Victoria, 9.

Pastors, lay leaders join bishop in prayer effort

Fifty-four pastors and 14 lay leaders had pledged to join Bishop Joel N. Martinez in prayer and fasting as Epiphany began last month.

Forty-nine pastors and nine lay leaders said they would invite members of their congregations to be prayer partners in the effort as well.

Martinez called Southwest Texas United Methodists Dec. 22 to a time of prayer and fasting during Epiphany, the liturgical season running from Jan. 6 to Feb. 20.

The prayer effort is to help church leaders and members discern how God is calling the Southwest Texas Conference to start new congrega-

tions and transform existing ones.

Martinez asked each pastor and lay leader to return a covenant card to him by Jan. 10. The card had places for church leaders to indicate how they would join in prayer and fasting.

"We have a prayer hour here on Thursday and will pray together," said Linda Marceau of Alamo Heights UMC, San Antonio.

The Rev. Tina Carter of The Rock UMC, Cedar Park, said she would preach during Epiphany on new church start themes and include a written prayer in each week's bulletin.

Beverly Silas of First UMC, Austin, said she and her Walk to Emmaus

reunion group would pray about new church development.

The Rev. Steven Sweet of Manchaca UMC said he would use a prayer guide from Martinez with members and have a prayer commitment Sunday.

The Rev. Warren G. Hornung, senior pastor of First UMC, Kerrville, said he planned to use newsletter items, worship bulletin inserts, posters and announcements from the pulpit to invite children, youths and adults to be prayer partners.

Prayer guides and prayer bookmarks for the Epiphany campaign are available at www.umcswtx.org.

62 UMs fill seats as new Congress convenes

United Methodist News Service

WASHINGTON—Sixty-two United Methodists—including 10 from Texas—took seats when the 110th Congress convened Jan. 4.

That's the same number as in the 109th Congress. United Methodists remain third among all religious groups.

The 110th Congress is reported to be the most religiously diverse ever.

U.S. Rep. Mark Ellison, D.-Minn., is the first Muslim to serve in Congress. He was sworn in using an English translation of the Koran that belonged to President Thomas Jefferson.

With 10 members—the same as in the 109th Congress—Texas has the largest number of United Methodists in Congress. Florida follows with five, Ohio with four, and Indiana and Kansas with three each.

Two of the United Methodists in the House—Reps. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, and Solomon Ortiz, D-Corpus Christi—come from communities in the Southwest Texas Conference area.

Doggett is a member of First UMC, Austin. Ortiz belongs to El Buen Pastor UMC, a Rio Grande Conference congregation in Corpus Christi.

Texas has had the largest contingent of United Methodists in Congress since at least 1990.

United Methodists from Texas in U.S. House

District	Representative	Home
3	Sam Johnson (R)	Plano
4	Ralph Hall (R)	Rockwall
6	Joe Barton (R)	Ennis
7	John Culberson (R)	Houston
12	Kay Granger (R)	Fort Worth
17	Chet Edwards (D)	Waco
25	Lloyd Doggett (D)	Austin
27	Solomon Ortiz (D)	Corpus Christi
29	Gene Green (D)	Houston
32	Pete Sessions (R)	Dallas

Thirty states elected at least one United Methodist to Congress in 2006, the same as in 2004. Results of the Nov. 7 elections changed some of the United Methodist faces and party affiliations, resulting in a net gain of four Democrats.

In the House of Representatives, the United Methodist count by party is 34 Republicans and 27 Democrats. All five newly elected United Methodists in the House are Democrats:

- Tim Mahoney, D-Fla., filling the seat vacated by Mark Foley.
- Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa.
- Nancy Boyda, D-Kan.
- Betty Sutton, D-Ohio.
- Baron P. Hill, D-Ind.

In the Senate the same 13 United Methodists are to serve during the 110th Congress as were members of the 109th.

The United Methodist number in the Senate is second to Roman Catholics.

United Methodists missing from the 110th Congress are:

- Jim Kolbe of Arizona, who retired.
- Tom Osborne of Nebraska, who ran unsuccessfully for governor.
- The Rev. Ted Strickland of Ohio, a United Methodist pastor, who was elected governor of the Buckeye State.
- Donald Sherwood of Pennsylvania, who was defeated in November.

■ Rob Portman of Ohio, who resigned from Congress in 2005 to become President Bush's U.S. trade representative.

Thirty-five United Methodists represent states in the South or Border South. Sixteen hail from the Midwest, seven from the Rocky Mountain West and the Pacific Coast, and three from the Mid-Atlantic states.

No United Methodists represent New England.

In terms of strength within state delegations, the denomination is strongest in Kansas, where three of six members belong to The United Methodist Church.