

## Churches plan many ways to attract visitors

From handing out flyers to lifting individuals in prayer, Southwest Texas United Methodists are planning many ways to celebrate Open House Month during September.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez has proclaimed September to be a time when United Methodists focus specifically on extending ministry outside their congregations to offer Christ to all.

Lakehills UMC is planning a number of special events during September. Members want to make sure people in the community know about them.

"Volunteers on the evangelism committee will be at major intersections handing out flyers inviting everyone who drives by to come to church," said Diana Cluck, office administrator.

Pastor Susan Brown of First UMC, Bishop, said, "Sept. 11 is National Neighborhood Day, and we will be celebrating our neighbors."

The day provides an opportunity to invite neighbors to worship and a pot-luck supper at the church, Brown said.

"Then, on Sept. 25, we'll be honoring the civil servants of Bishop," she said.



The 189-member Bishop congregation plans to send special invitations to various groups, such as postal workers and police officers, Brown said.

Two Southwest Texas Conference congregations in Laredo plan television advertisements to invite people to church. The TV commercials are to address all residents of the area, both English- and Spanish-speaking.

Day Memorial UMC, San Angelo, hopes Open House Month activities can help bridge a gap in community diversity so United Methodists can offer Christ to all.

"Our church is in an older neigh-

borhood that is largely Hispanic," said Pastor Barbara Dyke. "We want the neighbors around us to know that we want to be part of the community."

"Our church has the image of being a 'family' that's close-knit, and we want to change that image. We want to show that we are inclusive and welcome everyone. We have open arms."

Two congregations—First UMC, Harlingen, and First UMC, Brownsville—are planning to reprise activities that were successful last year.

Members of the Harlingen congregation are to receive a small package of business-card-size invitations to worship. Church members are to hand out these "touch cards" wherever there is an opportunity—such as in stores and restaurants.

First UMC, Brownsville, has designated Sept. 11 "FRAN Day." Church members are asked specifically to bring their friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to church, said Ken McCleary, program director.

### State hasn't found cause of illnesses

A fairly common organism is thought to have caused more than 300 UMs to get sick in Corpus Christi in June. But state health officials still haven't identified a specific source.

That was the word Aug. 3 from Doug McBride, public information officer for the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Analysis continues of information collected from participants in the June 1-4 annual conference session.

Meeting participants began reporting getting sick June 1. Common symptoms were vomiting and diarrhea. At least 313 people were stricken.

## 15 from conference youth council attend jurisdictional rally July 11-18 in Oklahoma

Fifteen members of the Southwest Texas Conference Council on Youth Ministries attended "SpiLiRa" July 11 to 15 in Norman, Okla.

In addition, young people from Buda UMC, led by Steve Angle, and First UMC, Beeville, led by Trish Martin, also participated.

SpiLiRa stands for "Spiritual Life Rally."

The South Central Jurisdictional Youth Ministry Organization sponsors the event every four years.

The rally brought youths and youth leaders together from across the eight-state jurisdiction for worship, fellowship and training.

Participants experienced several kinds of worship, attended various workshops, took part in

small group and conference gatherings, and saw concerts and talent shows.

"SpiLiRa was really an amazing chance for us not only to meet people from other annual conferences but also to grow together as a (youth) council," said the Rev. Rusty Freeman, youth ministries director.

"It was a great opportunity to learn more about what it means to live as a Christian and to participate in the connectational system.

"I deeply appreciate the Southwest Texas Conference for making it possible for us to attend and for our youths to be represented on a jurisdictional level."

A conference Program Priority Fund grant paid for the trip.

## Churches seeking welcoming certification

The Rev. Kim Cape issued a prophecy in June. She described how the Southwest Texas Conference could end two years of membership and worship-attendance losses.

"Bishop," Cape said during an address to the June 1-4 annual conference session, "if each district will have at least half of their churches be certified as welcoming congregations by next annual conference, we can change this negative momentum."



With those words, the McAllen District superintendent brought to the entire assembly in Corpus Christi a challenge that conference Lay Leader Jay Brim had issued to laity: to have at least 200 conference churches certified as welcoming congregations by the 2006 session.

Since June, six Southwest Texas congregations have earned welcoming certifications from the General Commission on Communication. That brings the total—as of Aug. 1—to 17.

Southwest Texas has more certified welcoming congregations than any other conference in the eight-state

### Welcoming churches in Southwest Texas

<u>Certified congregation</u>	<u>District</u>
First UMC, Donna	McAllen
First UMC, Edinburg	McAllen
First UMC, Edna	Victoria
First UMC, Fafurrias	McAllen
First UMC, Laredo	McAllen
Los Fresnos UMC	McAllen
First UMC, McAllen	McAllen
St. Mark UMC, McAllen	McAllen
Trinity UMC, McAllen	McAllen
First UMC, Mission	McAllen
Pharr UMC	McAllen
First UMC, Port Isabel	McAllen
First UMC, Premont	McAllen
First UMC, San Benito	McAllen
First UMC, Schulenburg	Victoria
First UMC, Seguin	Victoria
Webster Chapel UMC, Victoria	Victoria

South Central Jurisdiction.

Thirteen of the 17 certified Southwest Texas congregations are in the McAllen District. The other four are in the Victoria District.

Those numbers are expected to change as churches that have committed to Brim to becoming welcoming congregations—75 as of Aug. 1—follow through.

"Becoming a welcoming congregation under the guidelines we've

worked out with United Methodist Communications only kicks a congregation into gear, to energize the congregation to do things that need to be done to welcome strangers," Brim said. "There's much, much more."

"Some of the best thinkers today working to energize congregations like to use the word 'transforming.' I believe becoming a welcoming congregation transforms the congregation."

Certification, which must be renewed annually, means a congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of inviting and welcoming newcomers. The certification program is part of the denomination-wide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign.

To earn certification, congregations must qualify for at least 100 points on a yearly checklist of welcoming activities. Those include having a designated welcoming coordinator, training church members in welcoming techniques and doing various things around the church to make it more inviting to visitors.

District superintendents must sign each checklist to confirm the information reported.

## Volunteers needed to help Hurricane Emily victims in Mexico

A coalition of church and community leaders is asking for volunteer work teams to help repair or rebuild homes in northern Mexico damaged by July storms.

Some 100 homes need repairs or rebuilding because of wind and water damage from Hurricane Emily or Tropical Storm Gert, said Susan Hellums, mission coordinator for the Methodist Border Friendship Commission. The relief coalition has prioritized the list of homes that need work.

In addition, Faith Communities for Disaster Recovery, a United Methodist-supported interfaith group assessing damage in Texas, reported 14 more homes of low-income families de-

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stroyed or with major damage.

Emily, a Category 3 hurricane, drenched northern Mexico July 20-21. Tropical Storm Gert brought more heavy rains to some of the same areas July 24.

Even if a church can't send a work team, Hellums said, monetary donations would be appreciated. Purchasing items in Mexico is easier than trying to take them across the border.

Gifts can be made to the Southwest

Texas Conference Disaster Response Fund (Advance 2050) through any local congregation or directly to the conference treasurer.

Methodist representatives from Southwest Texas and Mexico outlined plans Aug. 2 for helping Mexican towns flooded following the storms, Hellums said.

The week before, three trucks filled with 45 tons of relief supplies crossed the Texas-Mexico border. Two trucks were loaded with relief supplies, and one was outfitted as a medical clinic.

A donation from the McAllen District and volunteers coordinated through First UMC, McAllen, made possible the loading of rice, beans, blankets, candles and personal items.