

## September events boost community visibility

Congregations across Southwest Texas said Open House Month activities during September helped increase their community visibility and boost attendance.

"It's made a huge difference," said Pastor Janna Hawes of First UMC, Raymondville. "We've tried different ways to reach out to the community. We try to be intentional in doing outreach and finding ways to make this a more welcoming church. There are a lot of people in Willacy County who are unchurched."

The 152-member Raymondville congregation scheduled its annual "Invite a Friend Sunday" for Sept. 9.

This year church members intentionally invited parents of children in the preschool program and made a conscious effort to target new teachers in the community by meeting them all personally, Hawes said.

"It's about relationships," Hawes said. "When we get out there and meet people and are friendly to them, that's what the church is about. Jesus Christ taught relationships."

Bishop Joel N. Martinez has proclaimed each September through 2008 as a time for Southwest Texas congregations to plan special events that might attract visitors.



Industry UMC planned a special community social Sept. 8. Members served free ice cream and offered games to fellow citizens.

Leaders of the 256-member congregation mailed 1,000 fliers to area residents and added an announcement in the church newsletter and in the bulletin every Sunday, said Sharlene Husky, one of the event organizers.

The event featured a duck pond for youngsters, prizes, a beanbag toss, a water slide, volleyball, checkers and dominoes, sack races, and face painting. Members served ice cream sundaes, floats (root beer, Coke and Big Red) and cookies.

To further publicize the event, Husky said, members handed out busi-

ness-card size magnets to neighbors. The magnets showed the church name, address and worship times.

She said the event was the first large community gathering the church had staged.

"We've had a fall festival," she said. "But it was more for the church members and friends and family. We're reaching out and hoping we can get some new members from this."

St. Peter's UMC, Austin, encouraged church members to invite friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to worship services and other special activities from September through December.

The 272-member congregation staged a picnic and community festival Sept. 8. The event included a beanbag toss, moonwalk, ring toss, basketball, egg race and cake walk. Members served snow cones, popcorn, hot dogs, hamburgers, nachos, punch and cookies.

Gaddis Memorial UMC, Comfort, provided lunch for Comfort Independent School District educators Aug. 21 as part of a teachers' in-service day. Members passed out door hangers in the community inviting people to church. Water bottles with the church picture and address printed on them also were distributed to neighbors.

## 3 more churches join welcoming list

Three more Southwest Texas Conference churches joined the list of certified welcoming congregations during August.

Two other congregations renewed its certification. Welcoming certification must be renewed annually.

New welcoming congregations are:

- Bee Creek UMC, Austin District, certified Aug. 8.

- First UMC, Weimar, Victoria District, certified Aug. 20.

- Sierra Vista UMC, San Angelo, San Angelo District, certified Aug. 21.

Recertified congregations are:

- New Fountain UMC, Hondo, Kerrville District, renewed Aug. 8.

- St. Andrew's UMC, San Antonio,

San Antonio District, renewed Aug. 9.

Southwest Texas now has 139 welcoming congregations. That's the most of any conference in the United States.

The count of welcoming congregations by district now stands at Austin, 29; Corpus Christi, 27; Kerrville, 18; McAllen, 28; San Angelo, 8; San Antonio, 17; and Victoria, 12.

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.

## Organizers plan for Thanksgiving event

Organizers have begun planning the seventh annual Bishop's Thanksgiving Gathering for Nov. 18 in Seguin.

The event, a special time for people of the Rio Grande and Southwest Texas conferences to celebrate their many blessings from God, is to begin at 5 p.m. in the Seguin-Guadalupe County Coliseum, 900 S. Austin St.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez is to preach at the gathering.

Since 2004, Martinez has intentionally moved the gatherings around Southwest Texas.

## Delegation endorses Mike Lowry for bishop

The Southwest Texas Conference delegation to the 2008 General and South Central Jurisdictional conferences unanimously endorsed the Rev. J. Michael Lowry as a candidate for bishop Sept. 10.

Lowry, 57, executive director of new church development and transformation, was also endorsed for the episcopacy in 2004.

The jurisdictional conference, scheduled to meet July 13-18 in Dallas, is to elect four new bishops.

"I'm deeply humbled and honored that the delegation would endorse me," Lowry said. "I offer myself to the jurisdiction and to the general church in the spirit of the Wesley Covenant Prayer.

"I'm committed to a vision of the church that is both open and orthodox, truly Wesleyan, unashamedly evangelical and passionately missional through ministries of love, justice and mercy."

The 32-member Southwest Texas delegation voted to support Lowry's candidacy after a monthlong discernment process, said Jay Brim, delegation leader. The process involved prayer, studying Lowry's written responses to questions developed by the South Central Jurisdiction Committee on the Episcopacy and a group interview.

"Mike's energetic spirituality spoke to me as we interviewed him," said Brim, Southwest Texas Conference lay leader and a member of Westlake UMC, Austin.

The Rev. Kim Cape, clergy leader of the Southwest Texas delegation, said, "Mike brings intelligence, a deep love of the church and broad experience dealing with complex systems. Mike's experience in new church development makes him uniquely qualified to provide dynamic leadership for the 21st century. We're excited and grateful to be able to offer the jurisdiction and general church the quality of leadership

Mike can provide."

Lowry began his ministry in 1974 in the North Illinois Conference. He transferred to Southwest Texas in 1976.

Before joining Bishop Joel N. Martinez's cabinet in 2006, Lowry was senior pastor of the 5,500-member University UMC, San Antonio, for five years. That's the largest congregation in the Southwest Texas Conference.

From 1997 to 2001 he served the 2,500-member Bethany UMC, Austin. Before that he was pastor of Asbury UMC, Corpus Christi (1984 to 1997), Wesley UMC, Harlingen (1980 to 1984) and St. Paul's UMC, Kerrville (1977 to 1980).

Lowry graduated from Earlham College, Richmond, Ind., in 1972. He received a master of theology degree from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in 1976 and a doctor of ministry degree from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1985.

## Volunteers learn how to help disaster victims

More than 40 volunteers learned during August how to help disaster victims start putting their lives back together.

Consultants from the United Methodist Committee on Relief conducted one-day training sessions on case management at Grace UMC, Granite Shoals, Aug. 7 and First UMC, Victoria, Aug. 8.

Students included United Methodists, representatives from other faith groups, American Red Cross volunteers and Federal Emergency Management Agency employees. They are working with people affected by July flooding across Southwest Texas.

Students learned how to interview victims of natural disasters, assess needs and help clients through their trauma.

"Case management is advocacy for the survivor," said Rick Hill, a relief committee disaster-response consultant from Harlow, N.C. "It is helping

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the survivor realize they have potential inside them to recover."

Hill said case managers assess what resources and abilities families have, research what help is available in the community and match people with aid so they can better recover.

About 85 percent of disaster victims may find help on their own or pull from their own resources, Hill said. But case management helps those who have no idea where to look or no access to their own resources.

Hill and Barbara Tripp, another relief committee consultant from North Carolina, defined a disaster and discussed steps involved in the emergency, relief and recovery stages. The leaders

showed participants where they would fit into the recovery process.

Besides providing resources, Hill said, a case manager must walk alongside clients as they experience changing emotions.

Participants at each session practiced skills necessary to work with disaster victims seeking aid.

Communities always need more caseworkers, Hill said.

"Case management, like many other programs, is always reactive," he explained. "Folks don't realize they can be involved until the disaster happens. Then they see the need, and they say, 'OK, I'll respond to that.'"

"We would encourage training ahead of time to have a pool of volunteers—of early response teams, case managers and construction teams—ready. That way you can call upon people, and you can respond faster after the disaster happens and be more proactive instead of reactive."