

## Relief chief to address Thanksgiving gathering

Southwest Texans can hear the head of the United Methodist Committee on Relief at a special worship service Nov. 20 in Corpus Christi.

The Rev. Paul R. Dirdak, deputy general secretary for health and relief at the General Board of Global Ministries, is to address the 5th Annual Bishop's Thanksgiving Gathering.

The event is scheduled for 5 p.m. Nov. 20 at First UMC, Corpus Christi. A reception is to follow the service. Theme for the evening is "Seasons of Generosity."

Dirdak, who oversees the relief committee, is to share stories about how The United Methodist Church responds to natural disasters. He is expected to express appreciation for the generous way the Southwest Texas Conference has supported that work.

During the first nine months of 2005, Southwest Texas United Methodists contributed more than \$1.4 million to



disaster response. The money was designated for recovery work following the Dec. 26 tsunami in South Asia and various hurricanes in recent months along the Gulf Coast.

One hundred percent of all money given to relief committee di-

aster-aid appeals is used for relief work.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez, leader of the San Antonio Episcopal Area, has called Thanksgiving gatherings over the past five years as special times for the people of the Southwest Texas and Rio Grande conferences to celebrate their many blessings from God. He is president of the New York-based mission board.

Martinez planned the first Thanksgiving gathering—at Alamo Heights UMC, San Antonio—in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

The second Thanksgiving gathering was also at Alamo Heights. University UMC, San Antonio, played host to the 2003 event, and First UMC, McAllen, was the site of last year's service.

Martinez preached at the 2001, 2002 and 2004 gatherings. Bishop Alfred L. Norris, then leader of the Houston-based Texas Conference, was guest preacher in 2003.

## 2 more Southwest Texas churches join list of certified welcoming congregations

Two more Southwest Texas churches have joined the list of certified welcoming congregations.

First UMC, Boerne, became the first congregation in the Kerrville District Sept. 26 to earn the welcoming-congregation designation.

John Wesley UMC, Victoria, was named a welcoming congregation Oct. 3. John Wesley is the fifth certified congregation in the Victoria District.

Southwest Texas now has 20 certified welcoming congregations, the most of any conference in the eight-state South Central Jurisdiction. The 14 other welcoming congregations are in the McAllen District.

Granted by the General Commission on Communication, certification means each congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of welcoming newcomers. Congregations need to renew their certification annually.

The certification program is part of

the denominationwide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign. Certified congregations earn a special designation in the "Find a church" database at [www.unitedmethodist.org](http://www.unitedmethodist.org).

Lay Leader Jay Brim of Austin set a goal of having at least 200 Southwest Texas congregations certified by June 2006. He announced that target June 3 during his report to the Southwest Texas Annual Conference session in Corpus Christi.

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

Checklists are available at [ignitingministry.org](http://ignitingministry.org) or [umcswtx.org](http://umcswtx.org).

## Southwest Texans deliver items to relief committee

Southwest Texas United Methodists delivered some 7,600 health kits, 250 school kits and 170 flood buckets to the United Methodist Committee on Relief depot in Louisiana Oct. 4.

Volunteers loaded disaster-relief items at collection sites in Austin, Corpus Christi, McAllen and San Antonio for the trip to Sager Brown Depot, Baldwin, La., said Susan Hellums, Southwest Texas Conference Volunteers in Mission coordinator.

Volunteers carried the supplies in a trailer designed for two race cars, she said.

On their return trip Oct. 5, volunteers delivered several generators from the relief committee depot to storm-recovery projects in Vidor, Texas, Hellums said.

## Churches open doors to people fleeing storm

Southwest Texas United Methodists opened their church doors to hurricane evacuees during September for the second time in three weeks.

Hurricane Rita, which made landfall Sept. 23 near the Texas-Louisiana border, drove millions of people from the Houston area into Southwest Texas Sept. 22 and 23.

United Methodist churches along evacuation routes from Victoria and the Gulf Coast to Austin and San Antonio provided sleeping space, food and—in some cases—gasoline to weary travelers.

First UMC, Victoria, fed about 125 people Sept. 22 before city officials ordered the area evacuated.

Some 60 people had spent the night at First UMC, Seguin, Sept. 22, said the Rev. Lonnie Phillips, senior pastor. Visitors came from Bay City, Baytown, East Bernard, Victoria and other communities near the Gulf Coast.

Besides a place to sleep, the Seguin

congregation was providing three meals a day. The church fed or housed about 175 people over several days, said Lay Leader Judy Johnson.

First UMC, Gonzales, sheltered 225 people Sept. 22.

Cathedral Oaks Retreat and Conference Center near Weimar provided housing Sept. 22 to more than 75 adults, many children and several pets, reported George White, Victoria District program director.

St. Paul UMC, Columbus, housed a few evacuees, fed many others and provided gasoline to travelers running low. Church members siphoned fuel from their cars and lawnmowers to help evacuees, Pastor Charles Purnell said.

First UMC, Shiner, took in some 300 evacuees Sept. 22. That total included 89 residents of Twin Pines Nursing Home, Victoria, and more than 40 other residents and staff members from a Bay

City nursing home, Pastor Joe McManus said.

Seventeen members of Gethsemane Hispanic Church in Houston and their pastor spent the night Sept. 22 in their cars in the parking lot of Los Angeles Heights UMC, San Antonio. The church is near an exit on Interstate 10 west of downtown San Antonio.

When the Rev. Melanie Welsh, Los Angeles Heights pastor, discovered the group the next morning, she arranged for the visitors to stay Sept. 23 in the hostel at nearby Jefferson UMC.

First UMC, Junction—about 110 miles northwest of San Antonio along Interstate 10—welcomed 97 evacuees Sept. 22 and referred about 30 more to First Baptist Church.

Seventy-three stayed at the United Methodist church, said the Rev. Scott Bradford, pastor.

First UMC, Johnson City, sheltered four families from Pearland.

## Plan now to help with hurricane rebuilding, VIM leader says

Southwest Texas United Methodists who want to help repair or rebuild homes damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will have a chance—but not yet.

Nevertheless, now is the time to prepare, said Susan Hellums, Southwest Texas Conference Volunteers in Mission coordinator.

That's exactly what First UMC, McAllen, is doing, she said. Two volunteer work teams, comprising members of the McAllen congregation and the Methodist Church of Mexico, are slated to travel to Louisiana in January.

The key to making the commitment, Hellums said, was that she contacted the Louisiana Conference Storm Recovery Center to find out what help the affected area needed and when the area would be ready for recovery teams.

The McAllen teams are heeding the request from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to wait until the time comes when they can do the most good.

### UMC storm recovery centers

Recovery teams wanting to know when and where they can be of use should call the following 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
- Texas Conference: (877) 774-2700 or (713) 533-3713

Volunteers who go into an area before they're asked can add to the burdens of the community already in trauma, said Kristin L. Sachen, head of the relief committee's Emergency Services Office.

National disaster response groups have a specific plan for employing work teams, Sachen said. United Methodist volunteers get most involved in

the second and third phases of a three-stage disaster-recovery process.

The first stage is when official agencies carry out rescue efforts and infrastructure repairs.

In the second or relief phase, assistance is provided to homeowners who need to assess damage, receive emotional and spiritual care, and begin their long road to recovery.

The third phase involves long-term recovery and rebuilding.

It is during this third phase that Southwest Texas Conference United Methodists can do the most good, Hellums said.

Recovery teams wanting to know when and where they can be of use should call the storm recovery centers 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. Contact her at (956) 661-9771 or shellums@mcfirst.com.