

## Bishop extends Open House Month through '08

Bishop Joel N. Martinez has extended the annual United Methodist Open House Month observance through 2008.

In a proclamation dated July 1, Martinez declared September 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 to be United Methodist Open House Month in the Southwest Texas Conference.

The bishop called on local congregations to:

- Pray that the demonstrated hospitality of United Methodists would help people without a spiritual home to find Christ in our fellowship.

- Plan special events to attract the attention of people in the community looking for a church home.

- Encourage members to invite friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to worship and other special events during September.

"Open House Month gives us a special focus for offering Christ to all," the bishop said in an accompanying letter to all pastors and lay leaders. "I en-



courage every local church to plan special events during September specifically to offer Christ to people outside the congregation."

Fostering hospitality is one way to empower ministries that "Offer Christ to All," the proclamation says. "Offering Christ to All" is the Southwest Texas Conference vision statement.

"Hospitality is essential in offering Christ to all," Martinez said. "Let's intentionally emulate Christ's welcoming spirit as we continue to

reach out to share the gospel in our communities."

Open House Month is part of the denominationwide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign. The General Commission on Communication in Nashville, Tenn., is supporting special events by local congregations during September with commercials on a number of national cable TV networks.

Open House Month is one of three Southwest Texas campaigns carried out during the year in coordination with Igniting Ministry TV advertising. The others are Home for Christmas during December and Bring a Friend Sunday during Lent.

Martinez encouraged congregations to participate in both the Home for Christmas and Bring a Friend Sunday campaigns.

"Of course," Martinez said, "the welcoming outreach of Open House Month should be a year-round emphasis. Therefore, I support the Board of Laity's call for all our local churches to become Certified Welcoming Congregations."

## 3 more churches certified as welcoming congregations

Three more Southwest Texas churches were recognized in June as Certified Welcoming Congregations for 2005.

Two others renewed their certification for the second straight year.

St. Mark's UMC, McAllen; Pharr UMC and Trinity UMC, McAllen, became the ninth, 10th and 11th certified welcoming congregations in the Southwest Texas Conference.

First UMC, Schulenburg, and First UMC, Mission, renewed their certification.

Certification, which is to be renewed annually, means a congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of inviting and welcoming newcomers.

Southwest Texas has more certified welcoming congregations than any other conference. Only about 200 of the nearly 37,000 United Methodist congregations in the United States have

### 75 churches commit to earning status

Seventy-five churches had committed to becoming Certified Welcoming Congregations as of June 30.

Commitments by districts were Austin, 15; Corpus Christi, 7; Kerrville, 10; McAllen, 8; San Angelo, 7; San Antonio, 15; and Victoria, 13.

Lay Leader Jay Brim of Austin said during the June 1 laity session at the Southwest Texas Annual Conference in Corpus Christi that he hoped to see 200 congregations certified before the 2006 conference session.

earned certification.

Of the 13 certified congregations in Texas, 11 are in the Southwest Texas Conference. The McAllen Dis-

trict is home to nine of those. Two more are in the Victoria District.

The certification program, run by the General Commission on Communication, is part of the denomination-wide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign.

Certified congregations receive a plaque and a special designation on the Find-A-Church database at [www.unitedmethodist.org](http://www.unitedmethodist.org). That's the Web site United Methodist television commercials list for people seeking a church.

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 the majority of 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.

## Churches adding fewer members, stats show

Southwest Texas congregations didn't add as many members—especially by profession of faith—in 2004 as they did in the past.

Furthermore, local churches have removed more members by charge conference action in recent years than previously.

The result, Statistician David A. Seilheimer reported June 3 to the Southwest Texas Annual Conference session in Corpus Christi, was a net conference membership loss of 191 in 2004. Membership stood at 120,080 as of Dec. 31, down for the second straight year.

"Unfortunately, when we look at the last three years, there has been a real decline in the number of members received, not just a change in total membership," Seilheimer said. "It is clear that we are in at least an extended slump as it relates to membership."

Seilheimer used a 15-year analysis

of membership statistics to back up his conclusion.

Southwest Texas gained more members by profession of faith and transfers during the late 1990s than it has since 2000, Seilheimer noted. The annual total of new members peaked at 8,295 in 1997.

Over the past three years the total has dipped significantly, he said, to a low of 6,922 in 2004.

"The biggest change in gain during this period (1989-2004) is in the category 'Received by Profession of Faith or Restored by Reaffirmation of Vows,'" Seilheimer said.

"In 1997, when the Southwest Texas Conference had its greatest membership gain, the number received in this category was 3,337. In 2004 the number received had decreased to 2,845. That's a change of 492 members."

While total membership additions have gone down, the number of members removed annually—especially by charge conference action—has increased over the last three years, Seilheimer said. The number removed by

charge conference action varies from a low of 1,627 in 1995 to a high of 4,110 in 2003, he said.

Over the past 15 years, Seilheimer noted, "When the number removed (by charge conference) is high, the conference has a membership loss. When it is low, we have had a membership gain."

Episcopal leadership may be one key variable in the 15-year analysis, Seilheimer said. Former Bishop Ray Owen actively discouraged pastors from having charge conferences remove members.

The number of members removed by charge conference action began to fall in 1992, the year Owen succeeded Bishop Ernest T. Dixon Jr. as leader of the Southwest Texas Conference, he reported. The annual totals went from 3,500 in 1992 to 1,627 by 1995. The number then remained fairly constant through 2000.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez succeeded Owen in September 2000. The number of people removed by charge conference action began to climb in 2001, Seilheimer said.



### UM numbers in Texas rebound during 2004

Despite continued losses in Southwest Texas, total United Methodist membership across the state rebounded in 2004.

The number of Texas United Methodists went up 0.2 percent to 851,249 at the end of last year. That's based on unofficial statistics reported during the state's seven annual conference sessions in May and June.

The increase of 1,033 over the 2003 year-end total reverses the membership loss of 477 reported last year. That loss in 2003 came after seven straight years of net United Methodist membership increases across the Lone Star State.

Texas is home to more United Methodists than any other state.

## Southwest Texas congregations lead list of Methodist Mission Home supporters

Southwest Texas congregations led the list of local churches giving to Methodist Mission Home during 2004.

Rankings for top congregations were listed in the summer newsletter from the San Antonio home.

Alamo Heights UMC, San Antonio, contributed the most of any congregation in Texas to the Mission Home last year—\$25,045.

University UMC, San Antonio, ranked second among congregations with more than 500 members. University's gifts totaled \$11,088.

First UMC, Mission, topped the list of congregations with 500 members or less. It gave \$2,174.

Other Southwest Texas churches on the large congregation list were Tarrytown UMC, Austin (\$2,212); First UMC, Gonzales (\$1,787); First UMC,

Harlingen (\$1,268); and Windcrest UMC (\$1,142).

Southwest Texas churches among the small congregations were First UMC, Sterling City (\$2,000); New Fountain UMC, Hondo (\$792); Hope UMC (\$750); Monthalia UMC, Cost (\$726); Oxford UMC, San Antonio (\$579); Highland Lakes UMC, Buch-anan Dam (\$478); Faith UMC, Austin (\$412); First UMC, Columbus (\$392); and First UMC, Yoakum (\$380).

The Houston-based Texas Conference had the most local churches on the large congregation list—16. Southwest Texas came next with six.

The Southwest Texas Conference dominated the small church list with 10. The Texas Conference came next with seven. Northwest Texas followed with six.