

It's shouting time: Members challenged by resolutions and declining numbers

An afternoon debate over homosexuality coincided with a thunderstorm, threatening to dampen a day of mission and ministry celebration yesterday in Stuart Auditorium.

But by evening's end, a worship service with Bishop Larry Goodpaster seemed to cool and clear the air, similarly to the thunderstorm that went almost as quickly as it came.

Members received numerous details of the good works performed in Holston Conference and beyond, but they were also challenged to step out of their comfort zones to "offer them Christ" and live by John Wesley's rules.

"Are you willing to stop trying to control the church, and let the Holy Spirit do its work?" Bishop James Swanson said to applause, in his morning "State of the Holston Conference" report.

Swanson presented statistics on Holston's accomplishments in financial giving, young clergy recruitment, and mission work. But he lamented declining membership in regions that have experienced population growth, especially African American, Latino, and Asian.

"Evangelism – that's where I'm hurting," he said. "Before I leave Holston, I would like to say that we are beginning to turn that decline around ... Are we willing to do more than just sing, 'Red and yellow, black and white and brown are precious in his sight?'"

In her presentation, the Rev. Kim Goddard explained that "the best way to live out our vision statement is to return to our core: Offer them Christ."

Holston has lost members in 40 of her 46 years, Goddard said. In her 23 years of ministry, Holston has gained in only one of those years.

"We can say it's not really about numbers, but about ministry. We can say that. We can say it's quality over quantity," she said. "We can console ourselves about that, and go off to lunch, and nothing will change," she said.

Asking, "How is it with our soul?" Goddard urged members to return to their Wesleyan roots, preach the gospel, and watch how offering Christ will change the face of Holston in years to come.

Other news from yesterday's session:

- **Members rejected** a resolution to study and talk about homosexuality through United Methodist materials developed for that purpose. The vote was close: 339 to 314, and several of 11 speakers from the floor made emotional speeches for or against the decisions. At the end of the debate, Bishop Swanson reminded members to love each other. "Our votes have nothing to do with how we feel about each other," he said.

- **Members approved** resolutions supporting local food self-sufficiency and energy audits for parsonages, new buildings, and renovation projects. After some debate, the conference referred to the Board of Pensions a resolution that would provide treatment of the obesity through the conference health insurance plan.



After the Sequatchie Valley Combined Choir sang passionately at last night's worship service, Bishop Larry Goodpaster teased, "It's shouting time! I thought this was a Methodist worship service."

- **A joint Council on Finance/Discipleship** report used several audiovisuals to show how money fuels ministry in Holston. In the midst of frustrating technical difficulties, a bright spot was the video spoof on a computer commercial, with the Rev. Wil Cantrell as the nerdy "finance guy" and the Rev. Jimmy Sherrod as the trendy "ministry guy."

- **The Missions Team** reported the most successful Hands-On Mission Project ever, with 7,200 units of life-saving supplies collected for missions in Liberia and Zimbabwe, up from 6,300 in 2007.

- **The Congregational Development** office revealed that Cokesbury UMC, Knoxville District, will partner with the Oak Ridge District to launch a new church in West Knoxville's Hardin Valley this fall.

- **The Council on Finance** and Administration celebrated that Maryville District paid 100 percent of its Fair Share apportionment in 2007.

- **Bishop James Swanson** and Discipleship Team Chair Deb Holly rejoiced that Holston youth ranked first in the denomination for Youth Service Fund giving.

- **The General Conference** delegation report included a prayer for Jay Garrison, elected as first alternate to the Judicial Council on April 28. The Annual Conference also recognized the Rev. Jerry Russell, endorsed by delegates to run for bishop in the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference in July.

- **The Stewardship Team** announced that "Living for Giving," a new program featuring Bishop Ken Carder, will be made available to Holston churches.

- **In last night's worship**, Bishop Larry Goodpaster both teased and scolded United Methodists for dwelling on "diversions that keep us from focusing on the things Jesus calls us to do."

"We have to get over our compulsion to have all the answers," he said. "It's time for us to stop gawking, and to start talking. We need to tell the world about Jesus." ■

Please note:

- The Duke Divinity Alumni Dinner will be held tonight, 5:30 p.m., at the Foundation for Evangelism. Speaker is Associate Dean Lacey Warner. Cost: \$10.

- Local Pastors Lunch has been rescheduled to Wednesday, June 11, 12:30 p.m., in Terrace room 319.



Bob Swing, member of First Oak Ridge UMC and author of the resolution on homosexuality: "I ask you, please, let's step up to this. Let's give them – let's offer them – them – Christ."



Beverly Bastian, Oak Ridge District at large member, speaking against the resolution: "This is a tired, worn-out issue. I can't understand what part of 'no' any of us have difficulty in understanding."



When all the water bottles were gone and nothing was left but ice, members expressed their disappointment by putting ice down each other's shirts. Pictured from left to right are Rev. Henry Groseclose, Ginny West Case, and the Rev. Jim Whedbee.