



UMNS photo by David Lee, The Weinstein Co.

Denzel Washington stars in "The Great Debaters," which opened Dec. 25 in the United States. The film dramatizes the success of the 1935 debate team at United Methodist-related Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. The movie has been nominated for a Golden Globe Award for best motion picture.

'Great Debaters' movie spotlights black colleges

LOS ANGELES (UMNS) — On the 14th floor of the toney Beverly Hills Four Seasons Hotel, Denzel Washington sits back in an armchair surrounded by lights and cameras and promotes his latest film project, while also putting in a word for historically black colleges. "The Great Debaters," which opened Christmas Day, is a fictionalized account of the successful 1935 debate team at Wiley College, a small United Methodist-related, historically black school in Marshall, Texas. The story focuses on four young debaters and their mentor, Melvin Tolson, who taught at Wiley and coached the champion debate team. Washington directed the film and stars as Tolson, a poet and author.

In an interview with United Methodist News Service, Washington discussed the significance of black colleges for African Americans in the early 20th century. "It was the first time they got an opportunity to get a college education," the actor said. "I think these professors and the founding fathers of these schools understood that importance. They knew that it gave these young people more options. ... We were in the middle of the Depression, so your options were education, or sharecropping or unemployment."

Southeastern Jurisdiction tackles diversity issues

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (UMNS) — Leaders of the United Methodist Southeastern Jurisdiction addressed the challenge of churches that struggle with inclusiveness during a conference aimed at bringing varied ethnic groups from diversity into community. A sense of urgency marked the "Embracing God's Diversity" convocation Dec. 13-15 at the United Methodist retreat center in Lake Junaluska. Organizers hoped to turn years of talk into action, and for the Southeast to take on a leadership role throughout the denomination. "Across the SEJ, we're tired of talking about a more diverse and inclusive church," said the Rev. Carl Arrington, the region's director of African-American Ministries and a conference organizer. "We want people of all backgrounds to know they are welcome in The United Methodist Church as equal children of God." (See related column, "Wings," on page 2.)

Pastor becomes victim of racial threats, cross burning

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) — The Rev. Robert Utley is recovering from a heart attack after finding a burning wooden cross and noose on his front porch Dec. 10. Utley, pastor of Clark United Methodist Church, McMinnville, Tenn., reported hearing someone banging on his door shortly after midnight. When he investigated, he found a small wooden cross on a stack of newspapers burning on his porch. On his gutter a thin white rope had been tied into a noose. The Rev.

Daniel M. Hayes, a close friend and mentor, said the shock of the incident sent Utley to the hospital, where doctors determined he had suffered a small heart attack. Hayes is pastor of Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church, Nashville, Tenn.

Police are investigating the incident as a possible hate crime. Nashville Metro Police spokeswoman Kristin Mumford said a note left at the scene contained "threats of a racial nature" toward Utley and a co-worker. Utley is a supervisor at Caremark, a pharmaceutical services provider. "There is some thought that the incident may be related to his work (at Caremark), but that is still under investigation," Mumford said. "We decry any form of racism and violence against other people," said Bishop Richard Wills Jr., who leads the Tennessee Annual Conference.

Workshop teaches churches to be servants, not suckers

GREENEVILLE, S.C. (UMNS) — The woman looks lost and helpless. Tears run down her face. There she stands as you look up from your desk in the church's front office. She asks for money to buy food for her children. Or, a man approaches as you return to your car at the mall loaded with Christmas packages. "I lost my job, my car broke down," he says. "Any little bit you can spare would help." Do you hand over a few dollars and, if so, do you walk away feeling like you have just been "taken"? You are not alone, according to Beth Templeton, who has spent 25 years working with homeless and poor people. She offers a workshop called "Servant or Sucker" through her work with United Ministries, a faith-based organization of about 100 congregations that aids local people who are homeless, experiencing financial crisis or lacking education or employment skills. The ministry began in 1970 by the South Carolina Annual Conference and today involves many faith groups.

Hispanics decry hostile climate for immigrants

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) — In an open letter to United Methodists, a church-related organization is declaring that a hostile U.S. climate toward immigrants has resulted in "millions of Latinos and Latinas living in fear, threat and intimidation." The letter from Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic Americans — known as MARCHA — calls upon United Methodists to remember the plight of immigrants this Christmas and beyond. "During this Christmas season, when we remember the Christ child born to parents journeying in a foreign land for the sake of their survival, we invite The United Methodist Church to join MARCHA in standing against the negative and anti-Latino forces and voices around us," the letter says. "Let us be truly The United Methodist Church." ■