



The Rev. Charlie West (center) collects discarded electronics during the 2006 Earth Keeper Clean Sweep in Marquette, Mich. This year's Earth Day cleanup is set for April 21 and will target old medicines.

UMNS file photo by Greg Peterson

Workers target 'clean sweep' on Earth Day

MARQUETTE, Mich. (UMNS) – For the third straight year, thousands of northern Michigan United Methodists are being asked to protect the planet by participating in a hazardous materials clean sweep on Earth Day. This year, the target is out-of-date and unwanted pharmaceuticals.

The third annual Earth Keeper Clean Sweep on April 21 is sponsored by nine faith communities with 130,000 members. Upper Peninsula United Methodists are part of an environmental army that includes the vast majority of the northern Michigan religious community, university students, several environmental groups and an American Indian tribe. The previous two clean sweeps collected almost 400 tons of hazardous waste for recycling or proper disposal.

“As leftover and waste pharmaceuticals get flushed down drains, research is showing that they are increasingly being detected in our lakes and rivers at levels that could be causing harm to the environment and ecosystem,” said Elizabeth LaPlante, senior manager for the EPA Great Lakes National Programs Office in Chicago.

Pastor accepts once-rejected gay man as member

SOUTH HILL, Va. (UMNS) – The pastor of a Virginia United Methodist church has granted membership to the gay man whose 2005 denial of membership by the previous pastor prompted controversy across

the denomination on the issues of homosexuality and pastoral authority. During worship services March 11 at South Hill United Methodist Church, the Rev. Barry Burkholder accepted the man's transfer of membership from a Baptist church to South Hill United Methodist Church. The development follows a series of rulings related to the case, including one on pastoral authority, by the denomination's highest court. “The Judicial Council's ruling says that the pastor of the church is the person in authority to determine whether an individual is ready to receive the vows of membership,” Burkholder said. “And having spoken with this individual and him having professed Christ as his savior, his belief that Jesus Christ died for his sins tells me that he is ready to receive the vows of membership.”

The Rev. Edward H. Johnson had refused to receive the man into membership in 2005, saying the man would neither repent nor seek to live a lifestyle that did not include homosexuality. The man has continued to worship at the South Hill Church and to participate in its music ministry. Johnson since has been appointed pastor at Dahlgren (Va.) United Methodist Church.

United Methodists join in Sudan water mission project

TIPP CITY, Ohio (UMNS) – A four-year relief project is focusing on re-establishing water supplies and improving sanitation in refugee camps in the war-torn African nation. The ministry is an outgrowth of a continuing collaboration between Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief. The project is coming together at a time when continuing violence and political instability pose a threat to humanitarian assistance in Darfur, where at least 400,000 people have been killed and more than 2 million driven from their villages during four years of fighting between rebels and militias. “Water is absolutely the most critical health

need in Darfur,” said Karen Smith, a Ginghamburg staff member.

The Ohio church's fundraising efforts for Sudan have inspired other congregations, including a New York church where musicians and actors performed in a March 26 benefit concert called “Songs for Darfur: The Water Project.” In all, the Ginghamburg church has raised more than \$1.8 million for its work with UMCOR in Sudan, which started in February 2005. The initial focus was on providing basic needs for displaced people but now includes ministries involving education, agriculture and health.

Mississippi churches pack 102,000 meals for Africa

JACKSON, Miss. (UMNS) – Volunteers from across Mississippi packaged 102,000 meals to feed starving people in Africa through a project that brought together faith groups, civic organizations, students, and other mission-minded people. More than 400 volunteers gathered March 29-31 at three United Methodist locations and the University of Southern Mississippi to participate in Project Sharehouse and accomplish one important goal. “They saved lives,” said Mike Ward, who serves on the board of directors of Stop Hunger Now, which administers Project Sharehouse. “It was remarkable. The turnout in every instance was better than we expected.”

Stop Hunger Now tries to work with small, hunger-fighting organizations in nations where a short-term need exists. Food is shipped to those groups – such as schools and orphanages – which then distribute it. The Project Sharehouse drive included packaging operations at Galloway Memorial UMC in Jackson, Wesley UMC in Meridian, and the Starkville District Office of the Mississippi Annual (regional) Conference.

Volunteers prepared 17,000 packages – each enough for six meals – filled with a mixture of soy protein, a vitamin-fortified flavoring powder, dehydrated vegetables, and rice. The packages were sent to a warehouse in Raleigh, N.C., for shipment to Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Tanzania.

Church attorney: Keep politics out of the pulpit

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) – As election season intensifies and politicians line up at the church door to shake hands and stump for their campaigns, an attorney for The United Methodist Church advises churches and clergy against endorsing or opposing candidates for elected office. “Churches should take stands on appropriate issues, but it cannot be a substantial part of their ministry,” said Jim Allen, general counsel of the United Methodist Council on Finance and Administration. The U.S. Internal Revenue Service has stepped up efforts to enforce laws that limit churches and charities from involvement in partisan campaigns. In 2005, the IRS began warning churches and nonprofits that political campaign activism could endanger their tax-exempt status. The tax agency unveiled its Political Activity Compliance Initiative to expedite investigation of claims of improper campaigning in churches. ■