

# Guide to General Conference

## The simplest explanation of a very complicated meeting

*Maybe* you've never heard of it. Maybe you've heard too much about it already. But once every four years, United Methodists get awfully excited about a giant meeting they call General Conference. It's happening this month, and a few Holston-ites are already knee-deep in legalistic language and theological quandries that will keep them awake for many Wesleyan nights to come.

### What is it, anyway?

General Conference is the top policy-making body of The United Methodist Church, comprised of 1,000 delegates (half clergy, half lay) representing every conference. In 2008, General Conference will meet April 23-May 2 in Fort Worth, Texas. (In 2004, it met in Pittsburgh. In 2012, it will meet in Tampa, Fla.)

### What does the General Conference do?

The conference revises *The Book of Discipline* (book of church law) and *Social Principles* and adopts resolutions on current moral, social, public policy, and economic issues. It also approves plans and budgets for churchwide programs for the next four years.

### Who's representing us?

A conference's representation is based on the number of members in the Annual Conference. The Holston Conference delegation includes 14 delegates and four alternates, all elected by the Holston Annual Conference in June 2007:

**Lay delegates** – Bob Lockaby of Harrison, Tenn.; Casey Graves of Ooltewah, Tenn.; Del Holley of Knoxville, Tenn.; Anne Travis of Knoxville, Tenn.; Jean Henderson of Cleveland, Tenn.; Joyce Moore of Bluff City, Tenn.; Paul Brown of Johnson City, Tenn. (Alternates: Becky Hall of Chattanooga, Tenn.; Ginny West Case of Maryville, Tenn.)

**Clergy delegates** – Eddie Fox of Nashville, Tenn.; Al Bowles of Chattanooga, Tenn.; Carol Wilson of Maryville, Tenn.; Randall Frye of Johnson City, Tenn.; Dennie Humphreys of Chattanooga, Tenn.; Kim Goddard, of Abingdon, Va.; and Jerry Russell of Maryville, Tenn. (Alternates: Angela Hardy Cross of Kingsport, Tenn.; Stella Roberts of Oak Ridge, Tenn.)

### How much is this costing us?

The 2008 gathering is projected to cost the United Methodist Church \$6.6 million, up from the \$5.3 million price tag of the 2004 Pittsburgh assembly, even though its length has dropped from 12 to 10 days. A limited amount of accommodation expenses for Holston delegates is covered by the General Conference budget. Expenses for the four alternates are covered by the Holston Conference budget (\$7,640).

### How does the legislative process work?

At General Conference, petitions will be considered first by one of 13 legislative committees that may vote to adopt, reject, or refer. The Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order is proposing to eliminate language of "concurrence or non-concurrence or concurrence as amended."

Most of the first four days is spent considering proposals in committees. During the second week, the entire gathering considers legislation proposed by the committees.

A proposal coming from a committee is called a "calendar item."

Here are the Holston delegates' committee assignments: Church and Society 1, Dennie Humphreys; Church and Society 2, Eddie Fox; Conferences, Randall Frye; Discipleship, Casey Graves; Faith and Order, Anne Travis; Financial Administration, Paul Brown; General Administration, Kim Goddard; Global Ministries, Bob Lockaby and Jerry Russell; Independent Commissions, Joyce Moore; Judicial Administration, Del Holley; Local Church, Carol Wilson; Ministry and Higher Ed, Al Bowles; Superintendency, Jean Henderson.

### What's expected to be accomplished?

A great number of important decisions will be made at General Conference. Worship and prayer will take place, and delegates will be lifted up by, among others, the Texas Boys Choir on April 27 and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on April 29.



Holston's delegation to General Conference includes: (front row, left to right) Anne Travis, Casey Graves, Joyce Moore, Carol Wilson, Bob Lockaby, Paul Brown, Eddie Fox, Randall Frye, (back row) Bishop James Swanson, Al Bowles, Jean Henderson, Jerry Russell, Dennie Humphreys, Del Holley, and Kim Goddard.



The 2008 General Conference will be held at the Fort Worth Convention Center. UMNS photo courtesy of the Fort Worth Convention Center.

However, church leaders as well as the public already expect that activities and decisions related to homosexuality will receive the most attention – by the media as well as delegates and United Methodists at home. Many church leaders consider this hyper-focus on homosexuality a tragedy, while many other important issues and ministries seem to starve for attention and care.

Prior to the April 23 start date, delegates were charged with reviewing 1,564 pieces of proposed legislation. The highest number of documents was related to homosexuality, including petitions from 616 groups or individuals asking General Conference to make no change in the existing statements on homosexuality within the church's *Social Principles*. That statement declares homosexuals to be "individuals of sacred worth," but declares the practice of homosexuality to be "incompatible with Christian teaching." (See related story on page 9.)

### How can I keep up with what happens?

Many news articles and resources are already available at this denominational Web site: [www.gc2008.umc.org](http://www.gc2008.umc.org). Once General Conference gets started, the daily proceedings will be reported there, along with live video streaming of worship, special addresses, celebrations, and other selected sessions.

*The Call* will also be on site in Fort Worth from April 28 to May 2, providing Holston Conference coverage at [www.holston.org](http://www.holston.org) as well as through our weekly e-mail newsletter, *The Call 2*.

### What's the official theme and logo?

Here it is. Pray that it comes to be. ■

