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Delegates passed a constitutional amendment that reduces from two to one the number of years a person must be a professing member of a local church before he or she can be a member of an annual conference.

Annual conferences also will vote on proposals that provide for newly created conferences to be represented at General, jurisdictional or regional conferences on a non-proportional basis. The issue arose after the Côte d'Ivoire Conference was assigned two delegates for the 2008 General Conference.

One amendment would enable local pastors, associate members and provisional members to join ordained ministerial members in full connection in voting for delegates to General and jurisdictional conferences. To vote, local pastors must have completed the Course of Study or master of divinity degree and have served under appointment for two consecutive years immediately preceding an election. Only ordained members in full connection with an annual conference may be delegates.

If annual conferences ratify another amendment, then local churches, jurisdictional and General Conference, "organizations, groups, committees, councils, boards and agencies" will have to adopt ethics and conflict-of-interest policies. These policies will apply to both members and employees to help them "embody and live out our Christian values."

Another constitutional amendment would make it clear all persons shall be eligible to attend worship services and, upon taking vows, become church members.

Judicial Council

The Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe is the new president of the Judicial Council, becoming the first woman to lead the denomination's nine-member "supreme court." The other new leaders are Jon R. Gray, vice president, and the Rev. Belton Joyner, secretary.

Henry-Crowe is dean of Cannon Chapel and religious life at Emory University. Gray returned to private law practice in Kansas City, Mo., last fall after 20 years as a family court judge. Joyner, a retired member of the North Carolina Conference, is serving as an interim district superintendent.

Angela Brown of California-Nevada, Ruben Reyes of the Philippines, the Rev. Kathi Austin-Mahle of Minnesota and the Rev. Bill Lawrence of North Texas also were elected as new members. Beth Capen, New York Conference, and the Rev. Dennis Blackwell, Greater New Jersey, will complete their eight-year terms in 2012.

Social action

Delegates urged U.S. lawmakers to ensure that immigration laws don't tear families apart, and they advocated for "full protection of all workers."

General Conference voted 416-384 for the United Methodist Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries to continue as members in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

The assembly added a statement on abortion to the Social Principles offering "ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies" and to assist the ministry of crisis pregnancy and support centers that help women "find feasible alternatives to abortion."



UMNS photo by Mike DuBose

United Methodists refined their mission statement to infuse a mission directive into the life and work of the church. The statement, shown on this banner, now reads, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Stating that Israel continues to violate international law by building a wall on Palestinian land, the conference called upon Israelis and Palestinians to uphold U.N. resolutions and International Court of Justice rulings.

Delegates called on United Methodists to divest funds from companies that support the government of Sudan in order to end the genocide in that area.

The conference asked the Board of Church and Society to identify and publish on its Web site educational resources on stem-cell research. The resolution encourages pastors to use the resources to become informed about the use of embryonic stem cells for medical research and to offer these resources for study in local churches.

Noting that more than 400 people have been put to death in Texas since 1982, the assembly asked the Texas legislature to end executions.

The body encouraged the implementation of the universal school lunch program and also called for equal rights of men with regard to parental leave and child custody.

On the 100th anniversary of the Social Creed, delegates decided that a proposed new creed would serve the church better as a "companion litany." It has been set to music.

Other items

General Conference approved a full communion agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in which each church recognizes the other's ministry and mission, the authenticity of the other's baptism and Eucharist, and the interchangeability of ordained ministers. The ELCA's assembly will act on the agreement in 2009.

Delegates learned that church members raised \$3 million to restore churches damaged by Hurricane Katrina. More than \$60 million was given through the United Methodist Committee on Relief for humanitarian aid in the Gulf Coast.

The 40th anniversary of the founding of the

denomination also marked the 40th anniversary of the dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction, a racially based structure, and the formation of the Commission on Religion and Race. The assembly also celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Advance and the 100th anniversary of ministry to Methodist men, the Social Creed and the Board of Pension and Health Benefits.

Several health and wellness petitions sponsored by the pension board were adopted.

The assembly increased the retirement age of bishops from 66 to 68 and the retirement age of other ordained clergy from 70 to 72.

Concerned about finances, delegates approved a plan that will result in one less bishop in four of the five U.S. jurisdictions, beginning in 2012. The savings will be used to fund new episcopal areas elsewhere. The action will not affect the Southeastern Jurisdiction, which already elects one less bishop than the present formula allows.

Pastors or district superintendents may now ask the bishop to give sacramental authority to a deacon if an elder is not present. That right is confined to the location of a deacon's primary appointment. In areas where it would take a great deal of time to deliver the sacraments to people, a layperson is given the right to deliver the Communion elements.

People who join United Methodist churches henceforth will promise to be faithful in "their witness" as well as in their "prayers, their presence, their gifts and their service."

Final session

The final gavel came down May 2 at 11:15 p.m., followed by worship, which ended shortly before midnight.

The next General Conference will be in 2012 in Tampa, Fla. ■

Peck, a four-time editor of the Daily Christian Advocate, served as an editor for United Methodist News Service during the 2008 General Conference – his 11th assembly.