



Photo by Annette Spence, *The Call*

The 2006 Holston Annual Conference is one of many groups returning to Lake Junaluska, despite the controversial "Hearts on Fire" gathering there on Labor Day weekend 2005.

Lake Junaluska bounces back from last year's controversy

By Neill Caldwell

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (UMNS) — It's a new summer and a fresh start for the picturesque United Methodist retreat center here, which has continued to concentrate on its mission and ministry through the aftermath of a controversy last fall.

The Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center, home to the denomination's Southeastern Jurisdiction and long known as a favorite meeting place of the people called Methodist, came under attack last fall when its board approved a request from an unofficial church caucus to meet here. The Reconciling Ministries Network asked to rent meeting space and rooms over Labor Day weekend for its "Hearts on Fire" convocation, touching off a storm of protest. The group advocates for full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church, which is contrary to the church's *Book of Discipline*.

While some groups have decided not to return to Lake Junaluska, new groups have taken their place, and bookings for 2006 are at the same point as a year ago, officials say.

"Lake Junaluska Assembly is in a good place," says the Rev. Jimmy L. Carr, executive director of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Connectional Table.

"We have a strong staff in place and great ministry offerings. Everyone feels good and is anticipating a strong summer."

"People want to come," says Ken Howle, director of communications and marketing. "We're on a par from this time last year, and it's been a very positive thing."

The center has some 150,000 guests a year, he says. Those are people who use the facility in some way, including overnight visitors as well as people who use the golf course, attend concerts, walk around the lake or attend other events and programs at the assembly.

Surprised by reaction



Jimmy Carr

Carr says he was surprised by the level of anger that was expressed toward the staff of Lake Junaluska Assembly and the jurisdiction office at the height of the "Hearts on Fire" debate.

"We felt we were offering Christian hospitality to a group, and although we knew there would be some people who would not like it, I didn't think

we'd be so targeted. The saddest part is that people didn't have more faith in Lake Junaluska. Since 1913, this has been a place to serve people and offer hospitality. One event, which was not even ours, is not going to change that."

While there was a negative campaign against the facility, Lake Junaluska also received a tremendous amount of support from around the jurisdiction and across the general church, Carr says. And he says he was proud of the way the staff handled the controversy. "They know that what we're about is most important, no matter what is said about us."

He sees the facility's mission as being about education, leadership development and enabling people to become better disciples. "Junaluska is a faith-based assembly in the United Methodist tradition that welcomes all of God's children to come and grow in their faith in Jesus Christ. We're working to provide the best resources available to strengthen discipleship."

'A spiritual place'

Carr has been at Lake Junaluska for six years. He visited the center throughout his ministry career for continuing education events, never imagining he would be the director.

"There are few places like Lake Junaluska," he says. "With the mountains and the serenity of the water, it's one of those special places created that provides space for reflection, study, exercise. ... It's OK just to be here."

"Lake Junaluska is a spiritual place and a community of faith," adds Howle. "It's a friendly environment that creates a very positive feeling that can even be life-changing. But it has an even bigger impact as a ministry. More than 150,000 people a year interact with the programs we offer, and then they have a great impact on more people when they go home."

The assembly's promotional materials tout something called the "Junaluska Experience."

"Everyone has their own kind of experience," Carr says, "and it takes a lot of energy to make that happen. The beautiful flowers are not just there. But it is all God's creation, and people long before us have enjoyed the beauty of these mountains."

"It's something intangible and unique to each person," says Bob Ray, director of the Conference Center. "But a lot of people mention it in their feedback. People feel the peace and tranquility of the lake and the grounds."

The Southeastern Jurisdiction has made about \$750,000 in improvements to Lake Junaluska during the past two years.

The assembly includes 434 rooms, three restaurants and 90,000 square feet of meeting space. A campground across the road has 56 camp sites, and the Lakeview Motel beside the campground has been purchased and renovated.

The facilities have been spruced up for the summer season. A renovation project of the rooms in the Terrace Hotel is complete. There's a new miniature golf course near the pool, a new lodge at the campground and other small changes. The Foundation for Evangelism has moved into a new building (see related story).

Just up the road from the Foundation building, major construction is expected to get under way this summer on the Bethea Welcome Center, which will become the entrance to the grounds. The groundbreaking ceremony is set for July 2.

Reconciling racist past

The new welcome center is named for Joseph and Shirley Bethea. A South Carolina native, Bethea served churches in North Carolina for more than 30 years before he was elected as bishop in 1988 and assigned to his home state.

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