

'We are astonished,' Holston delegates say

Dear friends of Holston Conference,

Our Holston Conference delegation has been corresponding since reading the article reprinted in *The Call*, "Delegates say racism affected SEJ elections" [Aug. 13 edition]. As a group, we are astonished by the article and dismayed at the perception our decisions were based on any basis other than who would bring capable spiritual and temporal leadership to a conference. We did not see "blatant racism in the balloting and in the way delegates interacted with each other" as was suggested in the article. We feel that many in our pews have been misled into thinking the views expressed in the article are widespread because the article appeared so prominently in *The Call*.

We are aware that racism and sexism continue to be an unconscious reality for many of us in privileged communities. Several in our group have expressed their ongoing reflection upon the elections, asking God to illuminate any signs of our own denial. However, we can honestly say that we worked very diligently and prayerfully to avoid racism in the balloting process.

We feel the article was based on the personal opinions of a handful of delegates without any attempt to gauge whether this was a representative sampling. Many other issues affect Episcopal elections such as "experience" and theological perspectives. To call other people "racists" because they thought some other candidate would be a more effective bishop is simply wrong.

James Swanson was our delegation's clear first choice to be our bishop. There were other very impressive nominees from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and several of us made a point to talk to them and tell them that we hope to see them again in the future.

As a body, we continue to affirm the prayerful discernment with which Holston's delegation went about its work.

Members of the 2004 Holston Conference Jurisdictional Delegation

Mark Flynn, Randy Frye, Shelbi Wilson, Howard Hatcher, Stela Roberts, Lynn Hutton, Bob Lockaby, Jack Edwards, Jonathan Jonas, Dan Taylor, J. N. Howard, Alan Groseclose, Jean Hutcheson, Becky Hall, Joyce Moore, Kim Goddard, Anne Travis, Terry Muse, Angee Woody, Carol Wilson, Mary Frances Tucker, Jerry Russell, Eddie Fox, Jean Henderson, Ellen Moore, Charles Lippse, Clarence Shattuck

The article, "Delegates say racism affected SEJ elections" was written by Michael Wacht, director of Florida United Methodist Communications. Wacht quoted delegates from the Florida and Western North Carolina Conferences following the election of six bishops in Lake Junaluska, N.C., in mid-July.

"We feel the article was based on the personal opinions of a handful of delegates without any attempt to gauge whether this was a representative sampling," members of Holston's delegation protested in a letter

(printed at left). Twenty-seven of Holston's 32 delegates signed the statement. Three delegates responded individually.

"I am appalled that you would even print the article," stated the Rev. Jack Edwards, senior pastor of First Broad Street United Methodist Church, Kingsport District. "Was it a slow news day? ... Printing the article makes it look like some or all of us from Holston may be racist. I can assure you that I am not [and] did not vote that way."

The Rev. J.N. Howard, delegate and pastor at Signal Mountain UMC, Chattanooga District, responded, "Anyone who knows anything about the elections knows that in every election there are good nominees who are not elected."

Howard added: "Our new bishop, James Swanson, elected on the fourth ballot, was not chosen as a 'token' but because he was viewed to be the kind of leader we needed for the church today. I believe that from many good possibilities, we chose six excellent persons who will give us creative, courageous, and compassionate leaders as bishop."

Jean Henderson, head of the Holston's delegation, commented that she did not think race was a "big issue" during the elections in July.

"I thought it was a kind of liberal versus moderate/conservative issue and an 'experience' issue," she said. "I based that on what I heard others saying, not just a feeling I had." Henderson is a lay member at Wesley Memorial UMC, Cleveland District.

E-mails from other Holston readers expressed surprise that race issues remain on the table.

"It seems that every time we are disappointed, we blame an 'ism,'" wrote the Rev. Clyde Ricker, a retired pastor in Johnson City District. "Will we ever realize that we are not perfect and nothing we do is perfect? If it was not so, Christ would not have had to die."

Marty Brown, a member of St. Elmo UMC, Chattanooga District, noted that he is currently reading the book, "Blood Done Sign My Name," by Timothy Tyson. The book involves a 1970s racial killing and a local minister in North Carolina, Brown said.

"How interesting ... that racism is still being discussed," he said.

One response seemed to agree with opinions expressed by Florida and Western North Carolina delegates.

The Rev. George Odle, a stewardship consultant in Johnson City District, stated, "You need only follow the results of the successive balloting to recognize there was an obvious attempt afoot to keep both a well-qualified African-American female and a Native-American male candidate from being elected."

Odle added: "As a white male field representative with the very racially and ethnically diverse General Board of Global Ministries and working with conferences and local churches all over the U.S., I became acutely aware that the 'Bible Belters' of my home region give lip service to openness and diversity, but their practice suggests quite the opposite." ■

Complete text of reader responses are available at www.holston.org/thecall. Click on "C-Mail."

Massive hurricane

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plenty of time for Holston members to sign up, and if necessary, several teams can be assembled in the weeks and months to come.

"To be honest with you, right now is not the best time to go, because everyone else is already down there," Barker said. "The best time to go is two, three or six weeks from now, when people know what they need and other groups have left."

To participate on Holston's recovery team, contact Barker at barker42rd@comcast.net or (276) 356-2847. UMCOR is seeking its own team; call the toll-free volunteer hotline at (800) 918-3100 for more information.

Within days after the hurricane, the conference treasurer's office had received two checks in the Knoxville office, while several other Holston churches had called to ask about giving to relief efforts. In addition to the Hartman's Chapel contribution, the treasurer's office received a \$100 check from St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Knoxville District.

Church members wishing to make financial gifts to help hurricane victims may write checks to their local churches, designating "UMCOR/Hurricane Charley" on the memo line. The tax-deductible gifts may be placed in offering plates.

When submitting checks for Hurricane Charley relief, church officers may designate "Project 506" under "UMCOR" on their 2004 remittance forms, according to the finance staff.

For credit-card donations, church members may call UMCOR directly at 1-800-554-8583.

Some local churches in Holston Conference are organizing to collect hurricane-relief supplies, delivering them personally when groups other than Red Cross are finally allowed to enter the devastated area.

Five churches in Chattanooga District are joining with two or three other congregations in the North Georgia Conference to gather diapers, blankets, water, soap and other supplies designated by the Red Cross, according to the Rev. Benny Matherly, pastor at Ft. Oglethorpe UMC. In addition to Ft. Oglethorpe, Signal Crest, Grace, St. Luke's and Hixson are joining in the mission.

Matherly said that Ft. Oglethorpe's mission chair, Martha Kimsey, is leading the campaign to fill a rented or donated truck with goods. "She has a heart for reaching out through missions in so many ways. She's been doing that for 20 to 25 years."

In Johnson City District, Cherokee UMC has arranged for a tractor-trailer truck to take needed items to Florida and has invited districts to participate.

"The items most needed are nonperishable foods, water, flashlights, tarpaulins and covers," according to Bill Daugherty, Holston missions coordinator. For more information, contact the Rev. David Woody at woody@cherokeechurch.com or (423) 926-0978

UMCOR is also asking United Methodists to help replenish its supply of flood buckets in what is now the beginning of hurricane season. The buckets include such items as sponges, brushes, trash bags and various types of cleaning materials. Specifications can be found at <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/print/kits>. Completed flood buckets should be sent to UMCOR Sager Brown, 101 Sager Brown Rd., Baldwin, LA 70514.

For information on Holston Conference relief efforts, contact Missions Coordinator Daugherty at billdaugherty@holston.org or (865) 690-4080. For UMCOR updates on denomination-wide efforts, visit the web site at <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/>. ■

United Methodist News Service contributed to this report.