



United Methodist bishops congratulate President Bush



UMNS photo by Mike DuBose

Bishops Leo Soriano (right) and Clifton Ives sign leather Bibles to be presented to President Bush and first lady Laura Bush during a meeting of the church's Council of Bishops at St. Simons Island, Ga. At left are Bishops John Schol and Judith Craig.

By **Kathy L. Gilbert**

ST. SIMON'S ISLAND, Ga. (UMNS) — In a 200-year-old tradition, United Methodist bishops signed a Bible to send to President George Bush and issued a statement of congratulations following his re-election.

Meeting at Epworth by the Sea, a United Methodist retreat center, the Council of Bishops wrote a statement offering prayers and support for the president and his family as well as U.S. Sen. John Kerry and his family. The council comprises 130 bishops representing the United Methodist Church in the United States, Africa, Europe and Asia. The bishops are the top leaders of the 11 million-member denomination.

The bishops offered to work with Bush "to build bridges of understanding." They also thanked Kerry "for the gracious way he has accepted the voters' decision."

"We are grateful that President and Mrs. Bush are committed disciples of Jesus Christ, and we pray that they continue to grow in their discipleship," said Bishop Peter Weaver, council president and leader of the church's Boston Area.

Weaver said many of the issues the president listed as priority concerns are also priorities of the church — war and peace, terrorism and poverty. "There is common ground for conversation," he said. "There are different perspectives, but I believe we all grow when we hear different perspectives."

Bishop Rhymes H. Moncure, whose area includes the Bushes' home church, said he is looking forward to establishing a close relationship with the president. George and Laura Bush are members of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas.

In a prayer before one of the plenary sessions Nov. 3, Moncure said, "God, help those who might be disappointed to find peace and tranquility. Reconciliation is always possible."

"I am looking forward to whatever is in the past being in the past," he said later. "We have four more years ahead of us, and I know that it will be four more productive years for the president and his cabinet as well as the people of the church to work together to bring about the kinds of changes that he (Bush) would like to see."

"I know the Council of Bishops wants to have an open line of communication with President Bush," said Bishop John Schol, assigned to the Washington Area.

"As the bishop of Washington D.C., I too want to establish a good working relationship with President Bush and the administration."

"It helps for there to be a pastoral relationship in which we can provide pastoral care and concern but also have an opportunity to be in dialogue about the nation and the world," he added.

"There are places where we share common interest and common hope," said Bishop Hope Morgan Ward, assigned to the Mississippi Area. "The United Methodist Church has desires for children to have fullness of life. I would hope that would be one place we could come together and have common commitment. The church could be a great resource, and we are a partnering people."

The church and the bishops have always had a relationship with the president dating back to Bishop Francis Asbury and President Washington, Weaver said.

"Every time there is an election, whoever is elected, we express our prayers and invite the nation to be in prayer," he said. "We reach out to offer our counsel, our support and offer to continue to be partners in the pursuit of peace and justice and well-being for all of God's children." ■

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Bishops will emphasize disciple-making in 2005-08

ST. SIMONS ISLAND, Ga. (UMNS) — The bishops of the United Methodist Church will focus on disciple-making and world transformation as top priorities in the next four years, proclaiming "no greater calling" than to make followers of Christ.

"There is no greater calling for this council than to lead this church into being one with Christ, one with each other and one in ministry to all the world," said Bishop Janice Riggle Huie of Houston during a sermon Nov. 3.

That statement seemed to resonate with the bishops during their Oct. 30-Nov. 5 meeting as they struggled with the question: Where is God calling us to focus our leadership?

During small and large group discussions, the issues of discipleship and engagement with the world emerged as top priorities for the 2005-08 quadrennium.

One hundred thirty active and retired bishops met at Epworth by the Sea, a church-owned retreat center, for the first time since the elections of 22 new bishops last summer. The bishops are the top clergy leaders of the 11 million-member United Methodist Church.

At the end of the gathering, they affirmed a strategy document listing steps they will take to assume a larger leadership role across the church.

"We are making it clear that bishops are in alignment with the mission of the church," said Huie, council president-elect.

After the final discussion of the strategy, retired Bishop Kenneth W. Hicks of Little Rock, Ark., stepped to the microphone and declared, "I am as tickled as a pig with two tails."

Each active bishop will prepare a plan for disciple making in annual (regional) conferences. These plans will be shared during the council's May 1-6 meeting in Washington. The summaries will include methods for measuring results and suggestions on how active and retired bishops can be supportive and accountable to one another.

During the meeting, daily worship services focused on mission, unity and the role of bishops as leaders of the church.

In other action, the council:

- * Named Bishop John Hopkins, Ohio East Area, chair of the Connectional Table. The 2004 General Conference voted to create the Connectional Table to replace another agency, the General Council on Ministries. The Connectional Table will oversee coordination of mission, ministries and resources across the denomination.

- * Heard a report from the General Council on Finance and Administration that almost 70 percent of the United Methodist churches are paying 100 percent of their apportionments, while 3 percent are not paying at all.

- * Heard a report from Bishop Timothy Whitaker, Florida, on "In Search of Security," a project calling for the church "to have a public witness in the world." ■