

Nation & World

News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference



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Families:

Afghan families at a camp for internally displaced persons in Navabad, Afghanistan, face a harsh winter. Some 260,000 people inhabit this camp alone. The Rev. Ray Buchanan, a United Methodist pastor and executive director of Stop Hunger Now, traveled to Afghanistan with a relief assessment team in October. Relief activities will include the distribution of food, winter clothing and blankets, along with some health care provided by a doctor and two nurses, expected to be in place by mid-November, Buchanan said.

Violence in all forms 'contrary to God's purpose,' bishops say

By Tom McAnally

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (UMNS) — During the closing hours of their weeklong meeting Nov. 5-9, the United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a pastoral letter offering words of "hope and peace" to people struggling with the consequences and fear of terrorism.

They also expressed concern for the "thousands of people who live in fear and terror and those displaced by war and poverty." Violence in all its forms and expressions is contrary to God's purpose for the world, they declared. The letter was approved Nov. 9.

Officials of the council issued a statement within hours of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, but their semiannual meeting at Lake Junaluska was the first opportunity for all bishops to explore issues with one another and to consider what action they should take as "pastors" of the church and its nearly 10 million members worldwide.

To accompany the brief pastoral letter, the bishops are planning a list of resources, developed in cooperation with the top executives of churchwide agencies. The list, expected soon, will include official statements on war, peace and terrorism adopted by the 2000 General Conference and found in the Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions. The General Conference, a legislative assembly of nearly 1,000 delegates that meets every four years, is the only body that can speak officially for the church.

The bishops voted to ask one of the church's agencies, United Methodist Communications in Nashville, Tenn., to include a resource guide for the study of terrorism in the next edition of Interpreter, a magazine sent to nearly 300,000 pastors and local church officials.

The bishops also voted to ask the United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville to reissue "In Defense of Creation," a document on nuclear concerns, which the council produced in 1986. They asked that the reprinted document have a new introduction that will explain its relevance to "America's new war."

Each bishop agreed to take responsibility for distribution of the letter in his or her own area.

► McAnally is director of United Methodist News Service, the church's official news agency. The full text of the bishops' pastoral letter is available at <http://umns.umc.org/01/nov/525.htm>.

Unofficial church groups react to Judicial Council ruling

By United Methodist News Service

The United Methodist Judicial Council's recent decision regarding gay clergy is drawing praise and criticism from independent groups in the denomination.

The church's supreme court ruled in a lengthy decision that two passages in the denomination's Book of Discipline do not contradict each other regarding the appointment of ministers who are gays or lesbians. One passage forbids the ordination and appointment of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals," while the other states that all clergy in good standing shall receive appointments. The Pacific Northwest Annual (regional) Conference requested that the court issue a declaratory decision on the passages after two openly gay clergy members requested appointments to local churches. The two pastors are deemed in good standing by the conference.

In its Oct. 24-26 session, the court ruled that a bishop couldn't unilaterally deny a clergy person an appointment without going

through the due process outlined in the Book of Discipline. It also ruled that the acknowledgement of being in a same-gender relationship is sufficient cause for a pastor to undergo ministerial review.

The ruling was praised by some groups for upholding the denomination's prohibition against gays and lesbians being appointed in ministry. Other groups expressed concern about the implications that the ruling could have for the rights of sexual minorities in the church.

The executive committee of Good News applauded the Judicial Council's decision. Good News, based in Wilmore, Ky., is a United Methodist evangelical renewal organization, and it publishes a magazine by the same name.

"This decision strengthens the church's present position while assuring fair process,"

said the Rev. James V. Heidinger II, president and publisher of Good News. The decision guarantees that people who publicly acknowledge same-gender relationships, as the Rev. Karen Dammann did in the PacificNorthwest, "must have their ministerial

relationship reviewed by the annual conference," Heidinger said. "In that review process, she must be asked if she were involved in sexual activity with a member of her gender, and if she answers affirmatively,

it clarifies that she is what the Discipline refers to as a 'self-avowed practicing homosexual' and thus ineligible for appointment.

"This ruling prohibits a bishop from declaring unilaterally that one is no longer a 'member in good standing,' which protects all clergy from arbitrary dismissal," Heidinger said. "At the same time, it affirms the church's commitment to fair process as

well as to the conviction that the practice of homosexuality remains 'incompatible with Christian teaching.'"

John Stumbo, representing the Coalition for United Methodist Accountability, found that the Judicial Council's decision agreed with the main points of a brief that he had filed with the court. CUMA was formed in 2000 by three conservative groups, including Good News, to enforce the denomination's Book of Discipline.

Now the church must wrestle with the question of how it defines "self-avowed practicing homosexual," said Stumbo, an attorney and the mayor of Fort Valley, Ga. That is a question that he hopes will not be left up to the individual annual conferences but will be decided at the general church level, he said. "We need uniformity across the church," he explained.

"It's going to take either Judicial Council or the General Conference to bring clarity to that, and I hope it will be the Judicial Council rather than have to wait on the General Conference," Stumbo said. The

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