

United Methodists Join Forces to "Turn Worlds Upside Down"

By Jeanette Pinkston and Erik Alsgaard

(JACKSONVILLE, Florida-February 5, 2009 (GBOD) — What happens when nearly 14 million United Methodists around the world focus on a single idea with four "themes"? Denominational leaders pray that in the next four years, some amazing transformations will take place around the corner and around the world.

That's what's happening with the "Four Areas of Focus," adopted by the 2008 General Conference and rolled out in earnest at the quadrennial training event for annual conference leaders Jan. 29-Feb. 1, in Jacksonville.

More than 1,200 leaders gathered for the "Living the United Methodist Way: Turning Worlds Upside Down" event to learn how their respective places of ministry can connect with others to transform themselves and the world.

In an interview, the Rev. Karen Greenwaldt, top executive for the General Board of Discipleship said, "this is the work of the whole church. We want everybody to get clear about their roles in implementing the Four Areas of Focus adopted by General Conference, and our annual (regional) conferences certainly have a critical role to play. This collaboration is so important because we wanted participants to hear, understand and get excited about the Four Areas of Focus, then reflect on their work responsibility in response to them," said Greenwaldt. Susan Ruach, chair of the design team and staff member at the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, said the goal of the event was to give participants "the big picture" of the Four Areas of Focus.

"The design team's goal was to help annual conference elected and paid leadership learn about the Four Areas of Focus and be oriented to their particular jobs, whatever responsibilities they have in the annual conference," Ruach said. "As I've wandered around, I've seen that people are clearly connecting and absorbing the information. My prayer, my hope has been, that this event will really help us as The United Methodist Church to come together.

The Four Areas of Focus are: developing leadership, starting new churches and renewing existing ones, ministry with the poor, and global health. Each area was highlighted in a plenary session during the four-day event, followed by workshops that offered insight into that specific area of focus. Practical approaches for annual conference leaders to address the plenary topic in their area of responsibility and opportunities for annual conferences to partner with general program agencies or other annual conferences were also presented.

Held every four years, the event was cooperatively planned by all of the denominations' boards and commissions, including Archives and History, Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, Church and Society, Communications, Discipleship, General Council on Finance and Administration, Global Ministries, Higher Education and Ministry, Pension and Health Benefits, Religion and Race, Status and Role of Women, United Methodist Men, United Methodist Publishing House, and annual conference leaders.