

Most congregations labeled 'maintaining'

Most Southwest Texas congregations are in a maintenance mode, a 2007 survey shows.

Bishop Joel N. Martinez and the seven district superintendents reviewed self-assessments of congregational health from 290 of the 348 local churches in the Southwest Texas Conference during November and December. They learned that:

■ 260 congregations (90 percent) were rated as "maintaining." That means they were holding their own on such measures of church vitality as worship attendance, professions of faith, hospitality and leadership development.

■ 16 congregations (5 percent) were classified as "transforming." That means they are trying new things to advance mission and ministry.

■ 14 congregations (5 percent) were labeled "declining." That means they didn't report high scores on the 13 indicators of congregational strength.

"This is an important tool to help us in self-assessment and transformation," said the Rev. J. Michael Lowry, executive director of new church development and transformation. "It is important to compare your church with your church—not another church. The value of the tool lies in its ability to gain insight into our own congregations in

District	Transforming	Maintaining	Declining	No report
Austin	8	50	1	5
Corpus Christi	2	38	0	0
Kerrville	1	41	3	0
McAllen	2	30	0	1
San Angelo	0	36	1	0
San Antonio	3	44	3	11
Victoria	0	21	6	23
TOTAL:	16	260	14	40

A complete listing of congregational scores can be found at www.thetransformedchurch.org/survey.html

a more objective way."

Responses to the 13-item transformation questionnaire help pastors and congregational leaders "focus on core areas of health and vitality," Lowry said. That's an important first step in congregational transformation.

"The cabinet and I are enthusiastic about the value and potential of the transformation survey instrument," Martinez said. "I believe it will help inform, orient and move our congregations toward vital mission.

"The survey results will be important as we work with congregations and pastors for a more faithful and fruitful future."

The bishop said he expected all congregations to complete the survey.

"Participation of all congregations

is necessary for realizing our vision of offering Christ to all," Martinez said.

In four districts 2007 survey results provided initial benchmark data, Lowry said.

"As second- and third-year data become available, we will be able to see whether a church is improving or not," Lowry said. Annual results give an objective snapshot of church health, vitality and strength.

But in the Austin, Corpus Christi and McAllen districts—which have been working through a congregational transformation process with the Rev. Don Nations for two years—the 2007 results begin to show trends.

"Most of those churches demonstrated a rising score in the second year," Lowry noted.

2 more congregations join welcoming list; total reaches 153

Two Southwest Texas Conference churches began 2008 by joining the list of welcoming congregations.

Another congregation renewed its certification.

New welcoming congregations are:

■ Bethany UMC, San Antonio, certified Jan. 3.

■ Oak Park UMC, Corpus Christi, certified Jan. 4.

First UMC, Robstown, in the Corpus Christi District, continued its certification for a second year. Welcoming status must be renewed annually.

The count of certified welcoming

congregations in Southwest Texas now stands at 153. That's the most of any conference in the United States. Forty-four percent of Southwest Texas congregations have been certified.

The count of welcoming congregations by district stands at Austin, 33; Corpus Christi, 29; Kerrville, 18; McAllen, 28; San Angelo, 9; San Antonio, 21; and Victoria, 15.

The certification program is part of the denominationwide Igniting Ministry hospitality and image campaign. The goal is to help congregations do a better job of relating to visitors and encouraging them to return.

Granted by the General Commission on Communication, certification

means a congregation has systematically evaluated its hospitality and intentionally embraced a lifestyle of welcoming newcomers.

Certified congregations earn a plaque and a special designation in the "Find a church" database at www.unitedmethodist.org.

To earn certification, congregations must qualify for at least 100 points on a yearly checklist of welcoming activities.

To earn recertification, welcoming congregations must earn an additional 100 points doing things they didn't do the first year.

Checklists are available at ignitingministry.org or umcswtx.org.



9 churches draw 1,046 visitors to Dec. 24 services

Nine Southwest Texas congregations reporting Home for Christmas results welcomed 1,046 visitors to candlelight services Dec. 24.

Of those, nearly half—501—were worshipping with those congregations for the first time.

Those were two results from follow-up reports on last month's Home for Christmas public witness and outreach campaign.

Nine of 49 participating congregations submitted information about outreach planning and Christmas Eve attendance to the Communications and Public Witness Office by Jan. 4.

Follow-up information came from four congregations in the Corpus Christi District, three in the Kerrville District and one each in the San Antonio and Victoria districts.

"Our Home for Christmas activities serve multiple purposes in our little community," reported Bonnie Millican of Bend UMC, which welcomed 57 worshippers Dec. 24. "We focus on the people who do not have a church, but we also provide a worship service of Christ for all."

The 42-member Bend congregation didn't offer a Christmas Eve service before 2004, Millican said. That year nine people attended.

In 2005 Bend followed the step-by-step eight-week Home for Christmas



outreach plan for the first time, she said. Forty-five people came to Christmas Eve services that year.

"This (2007) was the third Christmas Eve service that we had a coordinating team and followed the eight-week planning timetable," Millican said. Twenty-seven percent more people came to the Bend church Dec. 24 than attended on an average Sunday.

Total worship attendance at the nine reporting congregations Dec. 24 was 5,378. That total was 196 more than had worshiped in those congregations Christmas Eve 2006. The figure was 50 percent higher than average Sunday worship attendance in those nine congregations.

Eight of the nine congregations reported from six to 776 visitors. First-time visitors ranged from six to 421. Only St. Paul UMC, Columbus, reported no new people among its 126 Christmas Eve worshippers.

First UMC, Kerrville, reported the top number of visitors and first-time visitors. The 2,427-member congregation used direct-mail letters, radio and television commercials, extensive

newspaper advertising, and word of mouth to make sure the community knew about its four Christmas Eve services, said the Rev. Warren G. Hornung, senior pastor.

"This is a great program that produces excellent spiritual results," Hornung said. "Bob Molder, a retired J.C. Penney executive, coordinates the program for us and does a tremendous job."

"If it were not for this program, I doubt that we would emphasize Christmas Eve the way we do."

The Board of Discipleship has sponsored the Home for Christmas campaign annually since 2000. The effort promotes Christmas Eve candlelight services as special events to which church members may invite friends and neighbors. The purpose is to help church members invite unchurched acquaintances to worship Dec. 24 and then continue the discipling process with those who come.

Annual participation has ranged from 31 to 142 congregations.

The campaign follows a step-by-step eight week plan. It includes prayer, invitation and follow-up. Promotional tools, such as yard signs, news releases and advertising, support the invitation effort.

Home for Christmas is one way the Southwest Texas Conference tries to empower ministries in local congregations so they can offer Christ to all.

Methodist Healthcare Ministries adds 5 Wesley Nurses

Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas added five nurses to its Wesley Nurse Program in January.

New nurses are:

■ Judith Arrington, working at Bethany UMC, San Antonio.

■ Kaye Clancey, working at First UMC, Goldthwaite.

■ Esmeralda Delgado, working at First UMC, Weslaco.

■ Edythe Johnson, working at San Fernando Cathedral, San Antonio.

■ Vicky Krcha, working at Karnes City UMC.

The additions bring the total of

Wesley Nurses to 70. These church-based nurses promote health and wellness in faith communities across the 78-county Southwest Texas area.

Nurses provide wellness services and promote health education in communities around churches.

Methodist Healthcare Ministries is affiliated with the Southwest Texas Conference and is the largest provider of health services to the uninsured in South Texas.

Since Methodist Healthcare Ministries was formed in 1995, it has in-

vested more than \$139 million in healthcare for low-income residents of South Texas and served more than 1.5 million individuals.

Services include primary care, medical and dental clinics, support services like counseling, parenting programs, community centers and church-based community nursing.

Methodist Healthcare Ministry owns half the for-profit Methodist Healthcare System in San Antonio and Boerne. Income from the hospital system helps fund healthcare for the underserved.