

UMMA Gathering — Chair's Report

October 2006

As we mark another year of the life of the United Methodist Missionary Association, it is my first report as chair to the annual meeting.

Many efforts have been undertaken this year by many members for the improvement of the situation of the Association and for a more vital understanding of mission in The United Methodist Church. It has been obvious for months that our former chair Norma Kehrberg and her committee were running rings around the current officers in preparation for our Mission Forum and Gathering at Garnett-Evangelical Theological Seminary on the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, not far from O'Hare or even the Milwaukee airport, if you don't mind the drive, scheduled in lieu of the UMMA Gathering next year. But not only the 2007 Mission Forum and Gathering Task Force has been active.

Richard Vreeland, who assumed leadership of the Collins Task Force last year from Howard Heiner has had quiet contacts with Treasurer Roland Fernandes. At the April 2006 GBGM directors' meeting, the decision was made to give a pay raise to missionaries retroactive to January 1, 2006, corresponding with the pay raise granted staff from January 1, 2006, according to an earlier decision of the directors last October. We can only greet the acknowledgment that missionaries as well as staff can benefit from occasional salary increases.

Obviously, we operate on different pay scales and assumptions about calling and being sent forth, but it is refreshing to experience this solidarity, especially since it required a special step after-the-fact and involved retroactive pay increases.

For our part, Helen and I registered the \$32 monthly increase in base salary to \$1113 promptly in May after the Board meeting in April. A "regular adjustment" of \$129.76 also appeared on the May earnings statements. For clergy, an additional \$11 adjustment for social security for the self-employed appeared.

Significant increases in "CoLA" are likely less related to the higher base than to weakening dollar values, at least in the "Euro-zone," something which can not be a source of joy for the Board or its missionaries.

(In contrast, Helen and I have just learned that a close relative, not quite finished with law school, will receive \$2,500 WEEKLY for his summer job this year. But, then, none of us chose to become lawyers.)

Although it is often hard to see cause and effect, we know that the comparison of clergy benefits and missionary annuity rates and a transparency in the use of Collins Funds have been a strong emphasis of UMMA and the Collins Task Force since their inception. Howard Heiner's insistence on the justice of our cause and on transparency in the GBGM administration when this was not easy to find kept our concerns before staff and directors, despite efforts to hinder this. Dick Vreeland's insider knowledge of pressures bearing down on a Treasurer who mostly must do what he is told in an often highly political context seems to have been useful, as well.

Perhaps the full awareness of the rightness of the cause enhanced by the invitation to act on one's own conscience and best judgment has brought a change of heart from "official" side. On the other hand, it is relatively clear to all that we live with a much more supportive "hierarchy" now, and, furthermore, the pressures on liquidity are much reduced from three, four, or five years ago. The improved atmosphere finds repeated mention by those who work in close proximity in "475."

We have had hints that pensions have not escaped the attention of the Treasurer, either, but we must wait and see what the will of the directors may be.

(Post-meeting addendum: In the course of the Directors' meeting, Roland Fernandes' recommendation of an increase in annuity rate by \$25 to \$445 was approved. A recent letter from Edith Gleaves indicated that another salary increase of 3% for standard support missionaries was approved effective January 1, 2007.)

A nagging ("gnawing") concern plagues many returning from lands where dental and medical care may have been dirt cheap, but in part for good reason, to the expensive medical and dental pavement of the U.S.A., where not only teeth but also streets to the dentist's office seem to be "paved" with gold. The cost of bringing dental problems in order through remedial treatment on the meager dental (as well as hearing or vision) allowances in our medical benefits program continues to be a matter of concern for which UMMA should continue to raise its voice, toothless though we may be!

As we experience the transitions in GBGM staff and program — including losses of regional secretaries, various illnesses and health issues, and the death of Mark Masters while in service on behalf of missionaries in Nepal — alongside the devastating transitions in the world outside Stamford or "475," it may be that internal issues between missionaries and staff, cabinet or directors are less central than in previous years than their common witness.

Another Task Force without which our organization and its spirit are, indeed, unimaginable is Richard Schwenk's Communications Task Force. Ric keeps busy preparing successive editions of the UMMA Update and assuring that they gain an appropriate distribution in and outside the missionary community. He works closely with Leslie Batten, our "web mistress," who keeps our web site <umma-global.org> updated with current "home page" reference to the Update and other items submitted to her from time to time.

For Ric, Communications is synonymous with "evangelism" for UMMA. He never fails to use an opportunity to let retired and active missionaries know of the work of the Association and has a convincing way of encouraging them to join the Association or catch up on dues payments, as the case may. It is not for lack of effort on Ric's part if this year's Gathering has a lower attendance than is typical of the last few years. (I can only assume that many are saving pennies for next year's Forum and Gathering.)

Spiritual Nurture Chair Carolyn (Belshe) Cowen makes frequent encouraging

contributions to the Update and to individual missionaries, whose specific needs and concerns are made known to her.

Mission Context and Relationships Chair Gene Matthews has reported that the role of this program unit has continued to be an enigma to him, but he continues to follow developments, even as MCR is merged with Evangelism and Congregational Development (ECD), and we continue to "renew his contract" for this task!

My own paper to the Gathering these days on American Imperialism and Christian Commonwealth — assuming the terminology of Cobb, Griffin, Falk and Keller — indicates where I see our problem as a United Methodist Church and as missionaries at this time. As a worldwide church with integral and autonomous partner churches worldwide, we have continued to speak for the poor and the needy of this world, to work to alleviate the pain and needs of the victims of violence, but we have failed to address one of the most central causes of that violence and that suffering, the economic and military policy of the United States of America.

As we approach a point in history where each Christian may again be called upon to offer herself or himself up for the ultimate sacrifice in the name of faith, it is time for every group with a claim to Christian faith to reflect, discuss and act upon the good news of the approaching realm of God, an approach which cost Jesus his life, but which carries with it in his resurrection the strongest word of hope any man or woman could bring to our world today.

Even as I bring my first annual report to the Gathering as chair of this body, I would like to suggest that next year would be an appropriate occasion to again seek and elect a new chair. If the process is not complete by the Mission Forum and Gathering in August, perhaps succession could be arranged for April 2008.

It has been an honor to serve. I have enjoyed the opportunity to be present for the spring board meeting, in addition to the fall meeting, and will look forward to that again in 2007. Indeed, the freedom to meet and talk with people on the fringes of the spring board meeting was very enlightening. Both Bishop Joel Hernandez, Bishop Øystein Olsen, Bishop Violet Fisher, Randy Day, Sam Dixon, Steve Goldstein, and Edith Gleaves found time for relaxed chats in the halls, which greatly assisted mutual understanding on various issues facing UMMA and the the Board.

But my tenure as your chair began in the midst of great personal upheaval and emotional hardship in our missionary assignment. Recovery for Helen and me has been difficult and continues to drain vast sums of energy from us all. The energy I would like to commit to UMMA is simply not forthcoming. Perhaps a later term as chair would be a possibility.

Thank you, nevertheless, for the joys which I have been able to take from this year in your service. I hope that the coming year may allow more efficient application of my capacities to UMMA's needs than the year just past.

James Dwyer, chair