

# A Hitchhiker's Guide to the US Delegates at the 2004 General Conference

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## Percentage Points

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Highlights from the Survey of US Delegates to the 2004 General Conference

- 95% of All Delegates Regularly Contribute 5% or More of Their Net Income to Their Local Church
- 87% of All Delegates Experience God's Presence in Worship
- 77% of All Delegates Invited a Friend or Relative to Worship Who Does Not Regularly Attend in the Past Year
- 74% of All Delegates Read *Interpreter* Magazine to Stay Abreast of Church News and Issues
- 72% of All Delegates Are Life-Long United Methodists (Of those who are not life-long United Methodists, 33% are former Baptists.)
- 61% of All Delegates Serve or Attend Churches with 500 or more members (69% of Clergy Delegates and 50% of Lay Delegates)
- 56% of All Delegates are Age 55 or older
- 54% of All Delegates Live In Households with No Children Still At Home
- 43% of All Delegates "Ranked" Sermons as the most valued aspect of their congregation
- 35% of All Delegates Live in Households Where the Total Household Income is \$100,000 or more
- 30% of All Delegates Are Retired

## **A Hitchhiker's Guide to the US Delegates at the 2004 General Conference**

And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, a girl sitting on her own in a small café in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything.—Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

### **Introduction**

On April 27, 2004, 998 delegates from around the world will convene the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These delegates, members of The United Methodist Church, have faith in Jesus, who was “nailed to a tree,” buried in a tomb, and rose on the third day. They also believe that by their gathering and by their actions that they can begin the process of making the world “a good place,” and this time it will be right, it will work, and “no one will have to get nailed to anything.”

But, who are these delegates? Where do they come from? Are they old? Are they young? Do they go to church? Do they participate in Sunday School? Do they have any friends in church? Are they active in their local community? How much do they tithe? Have they ever invited anyone to church?

These and many more questions are answered in the *Guide* that follows. So, begin reading and thumb your way through *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the US Delegates at the 2004 General Conference*.

## **A few words about the data and analyses in this report**

In September 2003, the Survey of General Conference delegates was mailed to the 800 US delegates. (Lack of addresses of Central Conference delegates, at that time, prevented a mailing of the survey to them.) The survey was officially closed on October 31, 2003, at which time 72% or 573 delegates had responded.

Many of the questions used in this survey had been used in previous Surveys of General Conference delegates. The 2004 Survey, however, asked new questions, from the US Congregational Life Survey (USCLS), in order to (1) provide a religious faiths and practices profile of the delegates and (2) provide a comparison with attenders in United Methodist congregations.

The US Congregational Life Survey surveyed over 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations in April 2001. Over 15,000 worshipers in over 150 United Methodist congregations participated in the project.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this document, the findings of the US delegates will be divided into lay and clergy and compared against one another. Where appropriate, the findings from the Survey of General Conference Delegates are compared with findings from the USCLS, both United Methodist and US samples.

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<sup>1</sup> For results and a complete discussion of the USCLS project, see Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Field Guide to US Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). For results of the United Methodist sample, see “Who Attends United Methodist Congregations” <<http://www.gcom-umc.org/research>>

*The comparisons are not for prescriptive purposes, but rather descriptive purposes. The intent is to show similarities and differences between the various samples.*

### **Composition of the 2004 General Conference**

As noted above, 998 delegates from around the world will gather in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, April 27-May 7, 2004, for the 2004 General Conference. As the official decision-making body of The United Methodist Church, the General Conference will decide the ministry and missional directions for the 2005-2008 quadrennium and beyond. Additionally, statements for inclusion in the *Social Principles*, positions on other religious and societal issues, and the general church budget will be adopted.

Delegates to the General Conference are elected by their annual conferences in the year prior to the quadrennial session; thus, in 2003, delegates were elected by their annual conferences to the 2004 General Conference. The 2004 General Conference, the tenth, since the establishment of The United Methodist Church, will have a total of 998 delegates.

The number of delegates from each conference is determined by a formula taking into consideration the number of clergy members and the total church membership within each annual conference. The total number of delegates may not exceed 1,000 with an equal division between clergy and lay United Methodists as prescribed by *The Book of Discipline, 2000*.

As in previous quadrennia, the total number of delegates is near the allowable limit. Growth in church membership outside the United States has

increased the percentage of Central Conference delegates from 6.8% in 1984 to 19% in 2004. Likewise, a decline in church membership inside the United States has decreased representation of four of the five jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup> (Table 1 displays the distribution of delegates and Table 2 displays the change in distribution of delegates between 1996 and the 2004 General Conference).

### **Demographics of the Respondents to the Survey**

- **First Timers**

Slightly more than one-third (35%) of the respondents reported that this would be their first General Conference as an elected delegate, which is lower than the 38% who reported that the 2000 General Conference would be their first. Nearly one in four (39%) of the lay respondents report this will be their first General Conference while nearly one in three (32%) of the clergy respondents report this will be their first (Table 3).

- **Gender**

While clergywomen continue to rise in their representation, the number of laywomen appears to be declining (Table 4). Responding to the survey, 57% of the respondents are male and 43% are female (Table 5). Of the clergy respondents, 65% are male and 35% are female while 51% of the laity are female and 49% are male.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the changes in membership in the United States and the Central Conferences, please see *Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: A Statistical Review* available at the General Council on Finance and Administration's website  
<<http://www.gcfa.org/MakingDisciplesForJesusChrist.pdf>>

**Table 1: Number of Delegates By Jurisdiction**

	<b>Number of assigned delegates</b>	<b>Percent delegates in each jurisdiction of total</b>	<b>Number of respondents by Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Percent of responses</b>
North Central	164	21%	117	20%
Northeastern	144	18%	108	18%
South Central	170	21%	128	22%
Southeastern	278	35%	203	35%
Western	44	6%	17	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>72%</b>

**Table 2: Quadrennial Change in Number of Delegates**

	<b>Total Delegates 2004</b>	<b>Total Delegates 2000</b>	<b>Total Delegates 1996</b>
North Central	164	182	190
Northeastern	144	162	168
South Central	170	160	166
Southeastern	278	270	264
Western	44	56	62
Central Conferences	188	152	138
Concordat Churches	10	10	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>998</b>	<b>992</b>	<b>998</b>

Source: General Council on Finance and Administration, <http://www.gcfa.org>

**Table 3: First Time Clergy and Lay Delegates by General Conference**

<b>General Conference</b>	<b>Clergy</b>	<b>Lay</b>	<b>All</b>
2004	32%	39%	35%
2000	37%	40%	38%
1996	44%	43%	44%
1992	41%	44%	43%
1988	n/a	n/a	34%

**Table 4: Clergy Women and Lay Women Delegates by General Conference**

<b>General Conference</b>	<b>Clergywomen</b>	<b>Laywomen</b>	<b>Total</b>
2004	137	206	343
2000	112	212	324
1996	107	221	328
1992	81	222	303

*Source: General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*



- **Race and Ethnicity**

The respondents to the survey are 79% white/Caucasian and 21% of racial/ethnic. Of the racial/ethnic groups, 14% report they are black or African American; 3% report they are Asian or Pacific Islander; 2% report they are Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin; and 1% report they are Native American (Table 5).

In comparison with denominational figures, the various racial and ethnic groups tend to have better representation at General Conference than they do across the denomination (Table 6). *It must be noted, however, that the denominational statistics are self-reported by local churches and there is a gap in the total racial/ethnic members reported and the total denominational members reported.*

The Asian and Pacific Islander and African American numbers at General Conference reflect those of the US population (Table 6). The Hispanic percentages, both for General Conference and the denomination, lag behind those of the national numbers while those of the whites tend towards over-representation (Table 6).

In terms of race and ethnicity, The United Methodist Church tends to reflect that of other mainline denominations (Table 6). The Assemblies of God, while not considered a “mainline denomination” in the US, best mirrors the population of the United States when it comes to race and ethnicity (Table 6).

**Table 5: Demographic Profile of US Delegates to the 2004 General Conference**

	<b>Clergy Delegates (n=291)</b>	<b>Lay Delegates (n=302)</b>	<b>General Conference Delegates (n=593)</b>	<b>UMC Sample (n=15,084)</b>	<b>US Population (n=292,916,398)</b>
<b>First General Conference</b>					
Yes	32%	39%	35%	n/a	n/a
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	65%	49%	57%	37%	49%
Female	35%	51%	43%	63%	51%
<b>Generations*</b>					
Years Born: (1905-1925)	0%	1%	0%	17%	n/a
Years Born: (1926-1945)	26%	56%	41%	31%	n/a
Years Born: (1946-1964)	72%	30%	51%	30%	n/a
Years Born: (1965-1982)	1%	10%	5%	10%	n/a
Years Born: (1983-present)	0%	4%	2%	12%	n/a
<b>Age</b>					
Ages 20-34	n/a	n/a	4%	8%	21%
Ages 55 and over	n/a	n/a	56%	49%	21%
Average Age	53	56	54	56	35
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>					
Asian and Pacific Islander	2%	3%	3%	1%	4%
Black or African American	15%	13%	14%	2%	13%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	3%	2%	2%	1%	14%
Indian (American) or Alaska Native	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%
White/Caucasian	78%	80%	79%	91%	69%
Other	0%	1%	1%	1%	n/a
<b>Physical Disability</b>					
Physical Disability (ages 21 to 64)**	4%	1%	3%	n/a	19%

	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)	US Population (n=292,916,398)
<b>Marital Status</b>					
Always single	7%	14%	10%	10%	27%
Married	88%	76%	81%	71%	54%
<i>In first marriage</i>	76%	60%	68%	55%	n/a
<i>Remarried after divorce</i>	10%	13%	11%	13%	n/a
<i>Remarried after death of spouse</i>	2%	3%	2%	3%	n/a
<i>Living in a committed relationship</i>	1%	2%	2%	2%	n/a
Divorced	4%	4%	4%	4%	10%
Widowed	1%	4%	2%	14%	7%
<b>Household Status</b>					
I live alone	8%	12%	10%	16%	n/a
A couple without children	49%	58%	54%	37%	n/a
One adult with children	3%	2%	2%	4%	n/a
Two or more adults with child/children	40%	21%	29%	35%	n/a
Some adults living in the same household	3%	7%	5%	7%	n/a
<b>Household Income</b>					
Less than \$10,000	0%	3%	1%	7%	10%
\$10,000-\$24,999	0%	5%	3%	19%	19%
\$25,000-\$49,999	6%	16%	11%	27%	29%
\$50,000-\$74,999	27%	28%	27%	21%	20%
\$75,000-\$99,999	31%	15%	23%	12%	10%
\$100,000 or more	36%	35%	35%	14%	12%
<b>Education</b>					
Completed High School or GED	n/a	13%	7%	37%	29%
Bachelor's degree from a college or university	1%	37%	19%	24%	16%
Master's, doctorate or other degree	99%	39%	69%	14%	9%

	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)	US Population (n=292,916,398)
<b>Employment</b>					
Employed full-time, part-time, self-employed	n/a	55%	55%	46%	n/a
Unemployed	n/a	1%	1%	2%	n/a
Full-time homemaker	n/a	7%	7%	10%	n/a
Retired	n/a	30%	30%	39%	n/a
Student	n/a	6%	6%	6%	n/a
<b>Clergy Status</b>					
Sole Pastor	7%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Senior Pastor	42%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Associate Pastor	2%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Other local church appointment	1%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
District Superintendent	30%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Extension Ministry within Annual Conference	7%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Extension Ministry Beyond Annual Conference	4%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Life-long United Methodist?</b>					
Yes	74%	70%	72%	49%	n/a
<b>If not, what other denominations?</b>					
Baptist	27%	38%	33%	10%	n/a
Catholic	8%	6%	7%	4%	n/a
Lutheran	5%	6%	6%	5%	n/a
Presbyterian	8%	10%	9%	7%	n/a
UCC	3%	4%	4%	2%	n/a

**Table 6: Race and Ethnicity by Religious Body**

	Period Ending	Asian/Pacific Islanders	Black/African American	Native American/ American Indian	Hispanic	White	Other	n=
2004 General Conference***	12/31/2003	3%	14%	1%	2%	79%	1%	573
The United Methodist Church***	12/31/2002	1%	5%	0%	1%	93%	0%	7,786,811
United States	12/31/2003	4%	13%	1%	14%	69%	0%	292,916,398
<b>Other Denominations</b>								
Assemblies of God	12/31/2002	4%	7%	1%	17%	69%	3%	2,687,366
The Brethren Church	12/31/2001	0%	1%	0%	1%	98%	0%	10,381
Church of the Nazarene	9/30/2002	1%	4%	0%	3%	89%	2%	552,893
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America		0%	1%	0%	1%	97%	0%	5,118,675
International Pentecostal Holiness Church	12/31/2002	3%	0%	0%	10%	85%	2%	213,348
Mennonite Church* <sup>1</sup>	12/31/2001	0%	5%	0%	4%	90%	0%	117,316
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**	12/31/2002	3%	3%	0%	1%	93%	0%	2,441,928
Roman Catholic Church	12/31/2001	2%	3%	1%	16%	78%	0%	62,200,000
United Church of Christ	12/30/2002	2%	5%	0%	1%	91%	1%	1,330,985

Source: Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, <http://www.asarb.org>

\*Includes United States and Canada

\*\*Includes Puerto Rico

\*\*\*United States figures only

<sup>1</sup> Includes data for Mennonite Church USA only

- **Marital Status**

Eight out of 10 of the respondents report being married. Of those who are married, 68% are in their first marriage while another 13% report being remarried after divorce or following death of a spouse (Table 5).

In comparison, the United Methodist sample from the USCLS reported 55% of those in attendance at UM churches as being in their first marriage and another 16% report being remarried after divorce or following death of a spouse. Further, attenders tend to be widowed (14%) more so than the delegates (2.4%). Interestingly, the percentages of “divorced, not remarried” are identical at 4% between the two samples. Likewise, 2% of both the attenders and the delegates report living in committed relationships (Table 5).

*Individuals were not asked to elaborate on their “committed relationships” nor was the term “committed relationship” defined. Therefore, “committed relationship” is subject to interpretation by those completing the survey and those reading the survey results.*

- **Education and Income**

Those serving at General Conference tend to be more educated and have higher household incomes than both the US population and the average attender at a United Methodist congregation (Table 5). Of course, education and income are strongly correlated, such that higher education creates higher income, so the results are skewed in that direction. Further, the emphasis on an educated clergy

in The United Methodist Church further skews the percentage of highly educated individuals attending General Conference.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that 12% of the households in the US population have incomes of \$100,000 or more whereas 35% of the delegates have household incomes of \$100,000 or more. Further, households of \$50,000 or less income are represented by 58% of US households but only 15% of delegates to General Conference. The average person who attends a United Methodist congregation tends to reflect that of the US population (Table 5).

### **Qualities of the General Conference Delegate**

What are the qualities that a General Conference delegate brings to General Conference? A common perception is that General Conference delegates are nothing more than politicians elected to General Conference to represent the needs of their constituency and vote for the interests of their constituency. This perception views the delegates as political animals—trading votes, meeting in caucuses, and so on and so forth.

Yes, General Conference delegates, by the vary nature of their work, are called to be political—to debate, to caucus, to vote—but they bring to General Conference the qualities of individuals who are well-prepared to discern the will of God for The United Methodist Church. The survey responses show that the delegates are truly people of God. They are faithful worshipers, believers, and disciples of Jesus Christ.

What then are those qualities? Using the “strengths profile” of US worshipers developed by the USCLS project, the qualities of General Conference delegates can be viewed in five areas: (1) participation in their congregation; (2) sense of belonging to their congregations (3) growing spiritually; (4) focusing on their community; and (5) sharing the faith.<sup>3</sup>

In their discussion of strengths and the role of congregations in developing strengths, sociologists Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce note that “congregations convey to their worshipers and others that life has ultimate meaning. The day-to-day lives of worshipers and the mission of the congregation speak to something that transcends today’s realities and challenges” (Woolever and Bruce, 2004, p. 3).

It can be argued, as well, that congregations that are part of a denominational system convey to their worshipers and others a particular interpretation of that ultimate meaning. These congregations, in turn, develop a culture, based on the denomination, of what it means to be a member of that denomination. That culture, as all cultures, has a certain set of values, beliefs, and social outlook. Once socialized into that culture, the members support and perpetuate those values, beliefs, and social outlook.

Clearly, the delegates, to use the words of sociologists Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof are “dwellers” in their congregations. “Dwellers,” they write,

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<sup>3</sup> For a complete discussion of these strengths as well as three more (welcoming new people, empowering leadership, and a vision for the congregations future) see Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond Ordinary: 10 Strengths of US Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).



“live in a stable place and feel secure within its territory; for them the sacred is fixed and within the familiar world a particular tradition. Not that they are untouched by social change, but they are relatively well anchored amid the flux.” (Carroll and Roof, p. 39). The delegates, as dwellers, have come to live, learn, and perpetuate the habits, role, and culture of The United Methodist Church.

- **Participating in the Congregation**

The quality, “Participating in the Congregation,” reinforces the perception of delegates as “dwellers” in their congregations. Nine out of 10 delegates “attend worship every week,” “are involved in a small group,” “have a leadership role,” and “give 5% or more of their net income.”<sup>4</sup> The delegates are clearly involved in their congregations (Table 7).

- **Sense of Belonging**

Interestingly, though, the strength “sense of belonging” does not score as high, percentage-wise, as “participating in the congregation.” Slightly more than half (55%) report their sense of “belonging to the parish is growing” and less than one-third (29%) report they are “participating more in the activities of their congregation” (Table 8)

However, it must be noted, that the level of participation in the congregation in the previous strength minimizes the impact of this strength. With 90% of the respondents reporting high levels of activity, it is not clear how much more they could get involved in their congregation or improve their sense

**Table 7: Participating in the Congregation**

<b>Do worshipers in United Methodist congregations participate in the congregation? The chart below displays the five questions that make up this strength.</b>	<b>Clergy Delegates (n=291)</b>	<b>Lay Delegates (n=302)</b>	<b>General Conference Delegates (n=593)</b>	<b>UMC Sample (n=15,084)</b>	<b>US Sample (n=294,077)</b>
Attend worship usually every week or more than once a week*	n/a	89%	89%	69%	81%
Are involved in one or more small groups (e.g. Sunday School, prayer, or Bible Study, discussion groups)*	n/a	93%	93%	69%	67%
Have one or more leadership roles in the parish (e.g., council member, teacher, leading worship)*	n/a	93%	94%	59%	57%
Often participate in important decision making in the congregation*	n/a	74%	74%	47%	33%
Regularly give 5% or more of their net income to the congregation	99%	90%	95%	57%	63%

\*Question only asked of laity

**Table 8: Sense of Belonging**

<b>Do worshipers in United Methodist congregations have a sense of belonging? The chart below displays the three questions that make up this strength?</b>	<b>Clergy Delegates (n=291)</b>	<b>Lay Delegates (n=302)</b>	<b>General Conference Delegates (n=593)</b>	<b>UMC Sample (n=15,084)</b>	<b>US Sample (n=294,077)</b>
Report they are participating in the activities of the congregation more than they did two years ago	28%	30%	29%	29%	33%
Say most of their closest friends are part of this congregation	21%	23%	22%	14%	19%
Feel their sense of belonging to this parish is strong and growing	58%	51%	55%	50%	58%

of belonging. While the relevancy of this strength, for the delegates, must be questioned, it does provide an interesting comparison with that of both the US sample and UMC sample, both of which have nearly identical numbers to the delegates in this strength.

- **Growing Spiritually**

The strength, “Growing Spiritually,” provides some interesting numbers. Nine out of ten US delegates report spending a few times each week in private devotional activities (prayer, Bible study, fasting) and 78% report their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation. Oddly enough, though, 24% report they are growing in faith through the activities of their congregation (Table 9).

However, given the high number of respondents who spend a few times each week in private devotions, it might be difficult for them to “grow” in the faith of their congregation. Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents reported that they considered themselves a very or extremely spiritual person, and another three-quarters (78%) report they feel very close or extremely close to God. It must be concluded, then, that the respondents interpret “spirituality” and “faith” somewhat differently.

Further, 36% report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the *three* most valued aspects of their parish and another 10% report the prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the *three* most valued aspects of their parish (Table 12). It must be noted that for the “most valued aspects” the respondents could choose

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<sup>4</sup> The 5% contribution was set as the benchmark for comparison by the USCLS project.

**Table 9: Growing Spiritually**

Are United Methodists growing spiritually? The chart below displays the five questions that make up this strength.	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)	US Sample (n=294,077)
Are growing in their faith through participation in activities of their parish	25%	23%	24%	34%	43%
Spend time at least a few times a week in private devotional activities	95%	90%	92%	70%	72%
Feel their spiritual needs are being met in their parish	78%	78%	78%	73%	84%
Report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the three most valued aspects of their parish	35%	38%	36%	14%	21%
Report the prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the three most valued aspects of their parish	8%	12%	10%	13%	16%

**Table 10: Focusing on the Community**

<b>Do United Methodist congregations focus on the community? The chart below displays the seven questions that make up this strength.</b>	<b>Clergy Delegates (n=291)</b>	<b>Lay Delegates (n=302)</b>	<b>General Conference Delegates (n=593)</b>	<b>UMC Sample (n=15,084)</b>	<b>US Sample (n=294,077)</b>
Are involved in social service or advocacy groups through the congregation (community service, social justice, or advocacy)	79%	71%	75%	27%	26%
Are involved in social service or advocacy groups in their community (community service, social justice, or advocacy)	68%	67%	67%	43%	28%
Contribute to charitable organizations other than their parish	97%	94%	95%	75%	66%
Report wider community care or social justice emphasis as one of the three most valued aspects of their parish	46%	28%	37%	13%	11%
Report openness to social diversity as one of the three most valued aspects of their parish	20%	14%	17%	6%	8%
Worked with others in the last year to try and solve a community problem	74%	65%	69%	22%	21%
Voted in the last presidential election (2000)	92%	89%	90%	79%	71%

**Table 11: Sharing the Faith**

Do worshipers in United Methodist congregations share their faith? The chart below displays the four questions that make up this strength.	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)	US Sample (n=294,077)
Are involved in outreach or evangelization activities in the congregation	77%	67%	72%	18%	23%
Feel at ease talking about their faith and seek opportunities to do so	48%	35%	41%	13%	24%
Have invited to a worship service I the past year a friend or relative who does not currently attend	80%	74%	77%	52%	60%
Report reaching those who do not attend as one of the three most valued aspects of the congregation	37%	20%	28%	13%	22%

**Table: 12 Delegates' "Most Valued" Aspects of Their Congregation\***

<b>Which of the following aspects of this congregation do you personally value most?</b>	<b>Clergy Delegates (n=291)</b>	<b>Lay Delegates (n=302)</b>	<b>General Conference Delegates (n=593)</b>	<b>UMC Sample (n=15,084)</b>
Sermons, preaching, homilies	43%	43%	43%	39%
Wider community care or social justice	46%	28%	37%	13%
Bible study or prayer groups, other discussion groups	35%	38%	36%	14%
Reaching those who do not attend church	38%	20%	28%	13%
Sharing in Holy Communion	20%	26%	23%	35%
Traditional style of worship or music	20%	23%	22%	40%
Ministry for children or youth	17%	23%	20%	19%
Practical care for one another in times of need	15%	19%	17%	18%
Openness to social diversity	20%	14%	17%	6%
Adult church-school or Sabbath school-class	5%	23%	14%	9%
Contemporary style of worship or music	14%	12%	13%	12%
Prayer ministry for one another	8%	12%	10%	13%
Social activities or meeting new people	2%	7%	5%	15%
The congregation's school or pre-school	1%	3%	2%	3%

*\*Respondents to both the Survey of General Conference delegates and the USCLS survey were asked to select three from the list.*



only three items. Thus, when reviewing the complete list of “most valued aspects,” Bible study ranks third overall (Table 12).

- **Focusing on the Community**

The number of respondents who have close friends in the congregation seems low, but, again, when another strength, “focusing on the community,” is reviewed, it must be noted that the respondents are as active in their community as they are in their congregation. Three-fourths (75%) of the respondents report involvement in a social service or advocacy group of their congregation and two-thirds (67%) report involvement in a social service or advocacy group of their community. Further, 95% report giving to charitable organizations other than their congregation and 69% report having worked with others in the last year to try and solve a community problem (Table 10). It comes as no surprise, then, to see that 17% report openness to social diversity as one of the top three most valued aspects of the congregation (seventh on the list, see Table 12).

- **Sharing the Faith**

The openness to others is reinforced in the strength, “Sharing the Faith,” where 72% of the respondents report that they are involved in outreach or evangelization (Table 11). Another 77% report having invited to worship service, in the past year, a friend or relative who does not currently attend their congregation. Further, 28% of the respondents reported reaching the unchurched as one of the three most important aspects (fourth overall, see Table 12). A troubling response in this strength is 41% feeling at ease talking about

their faith, particularly the 48% of the clergy respondents who agreed with this statement.

### **Issues Facing General Conference, Society, and the Denomination**

“The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world,” according to *The Book of Discipline, 2004*. “It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world” (p. 123). With this in mind, the delegates were asked, as in previous years, what are the most important issues facing the General Conference, society, and the denomination.

Sociologists David Roozen and Jackson Carroll, in their essay on factors influencing denominational growth and decline, provide a good framework for interpreting the delegates’ responses to this question. Roozen and Carroll state that denominational growth and decline is influenced by local factors internal and external to the congregation and national or regional factors internal and external to the denomination. (Roozen and Carroll, pp. 39-40.)

These can be revised for the survey of General Conference delegates to interpret the responses of the delegates:

- local factors internal to the congregation: With which issues are local churches struggling?
- local factors external to the congregation: What issues are communities, in which congregations are located, struggling with that impact the local congregation?

- national or world factors internal to the denomination: With which issues is the denomination struggling?
- national or world factors external to the denomination: What issues are the nations and regions of the world, in which congregations are located, struggling with that impact the denomination?
- **Issues Facing the Church**

The issues facing US society are clearly the local and national contextual factors that face the local church and the denomination: (1) homosexuality; (2) war/violence; (3) racism; (4) poverty; and (5) engaging a changing world.<sup>5</sup> The “last” issue probably best summarizes the topic issues facing US society. We live in an ever-changing world and the past events of the past four years have brought that into focus. As noted in *Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized: 2004 Political Landscape*:

Over the past four years, the American electorate has been dealt a series of body blows, each capable of altering the political landscape. The voting system broke down in a presidential election. A booming economy faltered, punctuated by revelations of one of the worse business scandals in US history. And the country endured a devastating attack on its own soil, followed by two major wars. (p. 1)

The “devastating attack” reminded Americans that they are a part of a global community, and this process of globalization is occurring at a faster and

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<sup>5</sup> Delegates were asked to list what they believed to be the top three issues facing society, the 2004 General Conference, and The United Methodist Church. The responses were tallied and the five with the most responses were listed as the “top five.”

faster rate. As historian Eric Foner has written, “the dimension and speed of globalization have certainly accelerated in the last two decades” (Foner, p. 52).

And, by remaking our present, globalization invites us to rethink our past. All history, as the saying goes, is contemporary history. Today our heightened awareness of globalization—however the term is delimited and defined—should challenge historians to become cognizant of how past events are embedded in an international, even global context. (Foner, p. 52)

While Foner does not attempt to define globalization, it is clear that his concern is that individuals understand how events are embedded in an international context. Thus, the delegates report that key issues facing the US deal with those issues of being embedded in a global context—war/violence, racism, and poverty.

- **Issues facing the General Conference**

Since the delegates come from local churches that “exist in and for the world,” it comes as no surprise that those issues that are most confronting the local church would be those that are confronting General Conference. The struggles with racism and homosexuality by local churches and their members surface as issues around “inclusivity and diversity” and “homosexuality,” respectively, for the General Conference. The delegates anticipate that the General Conference, the only body able to speak for the denomination, will give them guidance as to how their local church, a connected part of The United Methodist Church, will address issues related to homosexuality and inclusivity and diversity.

Furthermore, the remaining “top” issues—church finances, restructuring, and membership loss represent internal factors influencing local congregations. These factors, in turn, become issues that must be addressed by the General Conference, again to provide guidance as well as resources to local churches.

The United Methodist Church is a “connectional church.” Being connectional means, that among other things, there is an interrelationship, an interdependence, between the local church and the general church. What affects the local church affects the general church and what affects the general church affects the local church.

Thus, when the delegates report the top five issues facing the General Conference, as indicated by the General Conference delegates, they are in essence saying what the local church is struggling with: (1) church finances; (2) homosexuality; (3) restructuring; (4) diversity and inclusivity; and (5) membership loss. These issues are the result of the local and contextual factors affecting the local church.

- **Top Five Issues Facing the Denomination**

The top five issues facing the denomination are (1) church finances; (2) homosexuality; (3) church restructuring; (4) membership loss; and (5) unity for the denomination. With the exception of unity for the denomination, the top five issues facing the denomination are the same as the top five issues facing General Conference.

However, it might be argued that “diversity and inclusivity” and “unity for the denomination” are two sides of the same coin. Or, they might not be.

*Webster’s Dictionary* defines unity as “the quality or state of not being multiple: oneness” and it also defines it as “a condition of harmony” and “a totality of related parts—an entity that is a complex or systematic whole.” It is not clear how the respondents intended the phrase “unity for the denomination” (and, for that matter, “diversity and inclusivity”).

It could be argued that some delegates would like the denomination to be “one and not be multiple” in the areas of doctrine, interpretation of Scripture, and church discipline. Other respondents, it could be argued, would like the church to be a “totality of related parts—an entity that is a complex whole.”

Sociologist James Wood argues that these “contested values” are part of “a noisy, visible, occasionally disorderly and uncivil struggle over the fundamental identity of the church” (p. 17). At the center of this struggle is “the meaning and priority of Biblical authority and, consequently, on the nature and scope of the church’s mission” (Wood, p. 17). One faction in the struggle is “confident that the Bible provides clear guidance on the issues that face the church today” and this faction, according to Wood, “typically focuses more on individual salvation than on societal reform” (pp. 17-18). The other faction in the struggle, while acknowledging the authority of the Bible, believes “that some of the culture bound injunctions in the Bible contradict some of its most basic teachings about love and justice” (p. 18). This faction, notes Wood, focuses “principally on

societal reform and social justice with little emphasis on personal salvation” (p. 18).

The sincerity and passion, which both groups bring to their views, argues Wood, makes it difficult, at times, for the two sides to engage in dialogue. If, Wood further notes, The United Methodist Church were this polarized, “the church’s unity would certainly be in jeopardy” (p. 18). However, he argues, neither faction has the followers they imagine. Instead, concludes Wood,

most United Methodists, drawing on their rich Wesleyan heritage, have a great deal in common with both groups described above, hence cherish a diversity that encompasses both poles. *Still this struggle over values hijacks the agenda and consumes the energy of the church* (emphasis added) (p. 18).

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the delegates to the 2004 General Conference find themselves four years into a new century, attempting to engage a changing world while maintaining the “unity of the denomination.” Further, they must engage the challenges of a dwindling membership base, limited financial resources while all the time seeking to fulfill the Great Commission.

Clearly, though, the delegates, as shown by their survey respondents, are disciples of Jesus Christ and committed to their local church and The United Methodist Church. Despite the political roles they must play at General Conference, the delegates are qualified to discern the will of God, through prayer and Bible study, as they prepare The United Methodist Church for the next four

years and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And, as they prepare for the 2004 General Conference, it might be asked of the delegates, as it was of Queen Esther, “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:16, KJV)



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## Appendix A: What the Delegates Read\*

What sources of information do you use to keep abreast of issues within The United Methodist Church?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)
Annual Conference Publications	96%	97%	96%
<i>Interpreter</i>	82%	66%	74%
Local Church Publications	67%	75%	71%
<i>Newscope</i>	72%	57%	65%
General Agency Publications	67%	59%	63%
umns.umc.org	62%	57%	59%
<i>Circuit Rider</i>	82%	20%	51%
www.umc.org	45%	46%	46%
General Agency Websites	45%	41%	43%
<i>United Methodist Reporter</i>	49%	38%	43%
<i>Response</i>	27%	39%	32%
<i>Christian Social Action</i>	32%	24%	28%
<i>World Outlook</i>	18%	32%	25%
www.umtv.org	2%	4%	3%

\*Delegates were asked to check all that apply.

## Appendix B: Where Delegates Serve the Church\*

On which committees and task forces do you currently serve?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)
Annual Conference Committee	90%	89%	90%
Local Church Committee	53%	80%	67%
District Committee	68%	58%	63%
Jurisdiction Committee	38%	37%	37%
General Church Committee	23%	26%	24%

*\*Delegates were asked to check all that apply.*

Are you currently or have you served as a member of one of the 14 general agencies?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)
Current Service on General Agency	21%	27%	24%
Past Service on General Agency	21%	26%	23%

## Appendix C: Delegates' Views of God\*

With which view of God do delegates most identify?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)
Creator	91%	93%	92%
Redeemer	85%	87%	86%
Healer	70%	81%	76%
Liberator	64%	67%	66%
Lover	66%	56%	61%
Friend	52%	69%	61%
Master	42%	59%	50%
King	31%	47%	39%
Judge	10%	27%	19%
Mother	15%	16%	16%
Spouse	3%	3%	3%
Self	1%	4%	2%

*\*Delegates were asked to check all that apply.*

## Appendix D: Delegates' Preferences in Styles of Music\*

While you may value many different styles of music, which of the following do you prefer in congregational worship?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)
Traditional Hymns	78%	79%	78%	75%
Praise Music or choruses	27%	38%	33%	37%
Contemporary Hymns	32%	25%	28%	22%
Music or songs from a variety of cultures	19%	18%	18%	5%
African-American gospel music	15%	10%	13%	4%
Other contemporary music or songs (not hymns)	10%	11%	10%	11%
Classical music or chorales	6%	8%	7%	10%
Contemplative chants (Taize, Iona)	5%	2%	4%	0%
Sung responsorial psalms	2%	3%	2%	2%
No music or songs	0%	0%	0%	0%
Don't Know	0%	0%	0%	2%

*\*Respondents to both the Survey of General Conference Delegates and the USCLS were asked to select two options from the list above.*

## Appendix E: Meaningful Worship

Do worshipers in United Methodist congregations experience meaningful worship? The chart below displays the eight questions that make up this strength.	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	UMC Sample (n=15,084)	US Sample (n=294,077)
Experience God's presence during worship always or usually	90%	82%	87%	75%	78%
Experience inspiration during worship always or usually	83%	75%	79%	73%	78%
Experience joy during worship always or usually	83%	77%	80%	76%	79%
Experience awe during worship always or usually	56%	30%	43%	18%	25%
Experience boredom during worship rarely	57%	65%	61%	43%	69%
Experience frustration during worship rarely	45%	46%	45%	46%	73%
Report the sermons as one of the two most valued aspects of their parish	43%	43%	43%	39%	39%
Report worship services and other congregational activities help them to a great extent with everyday life*	n/a	69%	69%	47%	56%

## Appendix F: Delegates by Church Size and Size of Community

What size church do you attend or serve?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)	Percent of Churches in Each Size Category* (n=35,275)	Percent of Membership in Each Size Category* (n=8,249,579)
1-199 Members	10%	24%	17%	68%	24%
200-499 Members	20%	26%	23%	21%	28%
500-999 Members	22%	19%	21%	8%	22%
1000-1999 Members	22%	17%	20%	3%	14%
2000 or more members	25%	14%	20%	1%	11%

**\*Source: General Minutes of the annual conferences of The United Methodist Church, 2002.  
Evanston, IL: General Council on Finance and Administration.**

## Appendix G: Delegates by Size of Community

How would you describe the community where you live?	Clergy Delegates (n=291)	Lay Delegates (n=302)	General Conference Delegates (n=593)
Rural or Open Country	4%	12%	8%
Town or Village Less than 10,000	10%	16%	13%
In or Around a City of 10,000 to 49,999	20%	21%	20%
In or Around a City of 50,000 to 249,999	30%	23%	27%
In or Around a City of 250,000 or more	37%	28%	32%