

The numbers

The Rev. David Seilheimer, conference treasurer and secretary, reported that membership in the conference was down by 50 this year to 118,733 members, even while the conference sits in one of the “fastest growing population centers of the United States.”

“The trend of that loss is unconscionable in my mind,” Seilheimer said.

Hispanic membership, however, increased by 123 from last year, he added—a 2 percent increase up to 6,173 members, which he finds to be a “very helpful sign,” Seilheimer said. The conference has doubled the number of Hispanic members in the last decade, “doing something good that we need to do better.”

He reminded delegates that 50 percent of the elected General Conference delegation is comprised of Hispanic leaders.

“We have tremendous leadership among the Hispanic population,” Seilheimer said. “The Hispanic population in South Texas is the youngest population. Sometimes I think our failure to bring in Hispanics is not the difference of race or language. It’s that we’re not very good right now at dealing with young people. We need to be reaching out to those people who are younger.”

Worship attendance is down by almost 1,000, which Seilheimer labeled “troubling because worship attendance usually foreshadows membership.” Baptisms are down by 131 to 1,622. Confessions of faith are up by 40 to 2,226.

He said medium churches—those with a membership of 100 to 1,000—are the most effective in producing confessions of faith.

Non-capital local church expenditures from 1989 to 2009 increased from 70.2 million to 107.3 million.

“One of the reasons I mention that figure is that 107 million is a lot of money,” Seilheimer said. “We have a lot to work with. We are not a poor church. If our stewardship were better, we’d be even stronger in this area. We have financial resources that will allow us to do our work.”

The amount of money churches spend per member has increased at about 1.5 percent per year, but giving has not increased relative to inflation, Seilheimer said. Apportionment giving has remained virtually steady.

Statistics show a trend toward lay staff increasing and clergy staff decreasing, although compensation for both lay and clergy has remained steady between 40 and 50 percent of church budgets. Program expenses have remained flat at about 5 percent, Seilheimer said. The number of churches per pastoral charge has decreased.

This has increased the number of part-time local pastors appointed in the conference over the past 20 years, he added. The number of elders appointed has decreased while the number of full-time local pastors continues to increase, doubling in the last 30 years.

The age of clergy elders had increased significantly, Seilheimer said, with a large number of them eligible for retirement. The average age of full-time local pastors has begun to decrease. Part-time local pastors tend to be much older.

“There is always more to be seen,” Seilheimer said. “And our future is not necessarily dependent on our past. There can be important things in the rearview mirror, but there are more important things in what’s ahead. We write our own future.”

“The time is now,” said Bishop Jim Dorff. “The declines in worship attendance and membership in our annual conference, in this mission field God has provided, they’re just not what God wants from us. This is a spiritual issue. This just isn’t what God needs and expects from us in terms of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“I fully anticipate and expect that all of us will put our shoulders to the plow. When we gather here in this place next year, our report will look different. Our work is not done. There is room to grow in Christ. Unless you are laboring in a mission field in which every single person in that mission field is in a vital, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, we are not done. I have yet to find such a community or such a place.”