

Methodists ponder cost, size of their quadrennial convention: Rising expenses

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The United Methodists gather as a legislating body only every four years, but officials say the General Conference is becoming so costly that they are thinking about new ways to function as an increasingly global church.

The 2008 meeting April 23–May 2 in Fort Worth, Texas, is expected to cost \$6.6 million—a jump from the \$5.3 million it took to hold the 2004 assembly in Pittsburgh. That higher bill is expected despite the fact that the length of the General Conference will be cut from 12 to 10 days.

The event's planning commission, meeting in mid-November near the site of the 2012 convention in Tampa, was told that the General Conference in Florida could exceed \$9 million in expenses, according to the United Methodist News Service.

The rising costs are partly due to membership growth in Africa and nations such as the Philippines. A steady membership decline in U.S. churches means that one-third of United Methodists now live outside the United States, the UMC finance and administration agency reported in October.

At the end of 2005, the denomination had nearly 13.8 million baptized and professing members worldwide; the U.S. figure was 8.9 million. (Professing membership is nearly 11.5 million worldwide and nearly 8 million in the U.S.)

The number of international delegates has risen from 14 percent in 1966 to 29 percent for the 2008 convention. That figure is estimated to reach 40 percent in 2012 at Tampa, said Alan J. Morrison, commission business manager. The influx of international delegates adds to the cost of interpreters and written translations.

“The challenge for us is the rising cost of what it means to be a global church,” David Wilson of Oklahoma City, vice-president of the planning commission, told

United Methodist News Service. “We thought we would save money [\$250,000] by cutting a day and a half from this conference,” he said. “But there are other financial issues we can’t control.”

In the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, as convention business declined, some cities offered lower rates, but this is no longer true, Wilson said. In addition, the 2008 General Conference may run \$750,000 in the red because, say church officials, not enough funds were allotted for the Fort Worth meeting.

The commission has considered holding the gathering every six years rather than at four-year intervals, and meeting in summer on campuses where delegates would stay in dormitories rather than hotels. A petition submitted to the 2008 assembly would reduce the number of delegates from 1,000 to 500 or 600.

“How do we maintain the unity of the United Methodist Church and pay for that, as well as remain faithful to those in the pews who pay the apportionments to make this happen every four years?” asked Wilson.