

National WMU board agrees to explore sale of building

January 15, 2021

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—In response to the economic downturn that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, the executive board of national Woman’s Missionary Union agreed to explore the sale of the WMU building and/or property.

About 170 missions leaders—from Hawaii to Maine—participated in the Jan. 8-9 online board meeting.

Linda Cooper, president, and Sandy Wisdom-Martin, executive director, acknowledged 2020 could be characterized as a year of “overwhelming, catastrophic loss,” yet went on to speak of God’s faithfulness.

“The emotions and exhaustion of 2020 have taken a tremendous toll leaving us all feeling unsettled,” Wisdom-Martin said. “It could almost be tempting to forsake our call and pack it in, but God was with us every moment.”

Despite the COVID pandemic that sharply impacted sales as many churches suspended in-person gatherings, WMU affirmed the “mission matters most” and quickly adapted in 2020, she said, making mid-course corrections to ensure the organization ended the year in the black, including a voluntary retirement offer elected by 12 staff members.

With fewer staff members and present personnel effectively working remotely since March due to the pandemic, WMU leaders said it has become a more agile organization.

“In the midst of the noise and chaos of 2020, it was beautiful to hear the national WMU board speak with compelling clarity,” Wisdom-Martin said.

“In one unified voice, they proclaimed the missions mandate of WMU matters most. We make disciples of Jesus who live on mission.

“They backed their words with a decision to explore selling the current national WMU building in Birmingham. WMU has always sought to steward well the resources entrusted in our care, and we are leveraging our resources to make the largest impact possible for the kingdom. Together, we are committed to making a difference through missions discipleship, leadership development and compassion ministries.”

WMU’s first headquarters was in Baltimore, Md., in 1888. The organization relocated to Birmingham in 1921 and operated from two different locations downtown. The current headquarters, which is more than 137,000 square feet on 22 acres, was constructed in 1984.

In addition to financial adjustments, WMU developed new ways to engage all ages in missions even amid a pandemic, leaders of the missions organization reported.

New initiatives included:

- Reaching out to SBC seminary presidents to offer help to international students stranded on campuses. WMU members quickly “adopted” students.
- Engaging WMU leaders across the country to send more than 18,000 handwritten letters asking churches to support the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering.
- Sending daily prompts encouraging prayer for pastors and missionaries.
- Working with International Mission Board and state WMUs to offer assistance with a surge in requests for missionary housing.
- Offering Girls in Action and Royal Ambassadors lessons on Facebook Live over the summer. The first lessons had more than

11,000 views.

- Providing weekly preschool stories online to Mission Friends. The first one had 8,000 views.
- Ministering to senior adults sheltering in place or living in assisted care facilities by delivering books to them in partnership with the WMU Foundation and Iron Stream Media.
- Launching a new podcast with 31 episodes in 2020. On the Journey Conversations, hosted by Wisdom-Martin, features inspirational interviews. New episodes will be available bi-weekly in 2021.

In other business, the finance committee approved \$167,230 in Pure Water, Pure Love grants to provide wells and water filtration in Rwanda, Burundi, Haiti, Guatemala, and Liberia.

The executive board approved \$185 million as the goal for the 2021 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and \$65 million as the goal for the 2022 Annie Armstrong Easter Offering.

‘Lifeline of international missions’

In a video presentation, IMB President Paul Chitwood offered thanks to God for “his faithfulness time and time again in this past year as he has maintained our collective missions efforts despite COVID-19 and many other challenges that affect international work.”

He expressed appreciation for the longstanding support from WMU, saying Southern Baptists “held the lifeline of international missions through WMU-led prayers, WMU-led financial support and WMU-led opportunities to go to the lost, both at home and abroad.”

More than 3,500 missionaries reported more than 535,000 people heard a gospel witness as IMB missionaries and their close indigenous partners shared the gospel boldly this past year, Chitwood said.

“More than 89,000 people came to faith, committing to follow Jesus Christ with their lives. Nearly 48,000 of those followed through with believer’s baptism and over 12,000 new churches were planted.”

Also addressing the group via recorded video, North American Mission Board President Kevin Ezell acknowledged the pandemic hit in the spring, causing many churches to close their doors about the same time they typically would have been receiving gifts to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering.

The 2020 offering total dropped from \$61.6 million in 2019 to \$49.3 million, representing a 20 percent decline, but Ezell said there is still great reason to celebrate.

“God’s faithfulness and the generosity of Southern Baptists is remarkable and we are deeply grateful,” Ezell said. “It’s a great testimony to your work and your commitment. Your missionaries have continued to make an impact for the gospel and meet needs during the most exceptional year. What you are doing is making an eternal difference, and we are blessed to be your partner in reaching North America for Christ.”