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## United Methodists Partner to Eradicate Malaria

*The unlikely combination of church leaders, Sports Illustrated, the National Basketball Association and the United Nations has raised \$23 million for the campaign.*

by [Jason Byassee](#)

March 9, 2009

United Methodists are proud of their part as founding partners of [Nothing But Nets](#). But the collaboration almost didn't happen.

Some in the church's leadership wanted to wait for a quadrennial General Conference to approve a mission of such scope and cost. Others feared it would compete for time and talent with their own mission projects. Still others worried about partnering with secular organizations like the United Nations and Sports Illustrated. (Would the cross-and-flame logo appear in the swimsuit issue?)

"It all moved faster than we like to move," Bishop Tom Bickerton said. "Because we had not actively partnered with a secular agency in the past, there were several issues that had to be ironed out in order to move forward."

Between Bickerton's leadership and Nets' record of success, opposition within the church dissolved. To date, United Methodists have contributed more than \$6 million of the \$23 million the campaign has raised.

The Nothing But Nets brand began as the headline for a May 2006 Sports Illustrated column about malaria by Rick Reilly, who urged his readers to "Buy a net and save a life." In response, contributions poured in, eventually reaching \$1.2 million.

It helped that support from United Methodists began rolling in before Nets became an official ministry. Part of the campaign's appeal is its price point. A \$10 contribution buys and distributes a net that can protect a family for up to four years. The \$60 average contribution from someone in a United Methodist pew -- about the cost of dinner out for a U.S. family -- can save six families in Africa.

And the church didn't have to launch the campaign, Bickerton added. "The United Nations Foundation

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approached us.”

It did so largely because of Elizabeth Gore, executive director for Global Alliances at the United Nations Foundation. A lifelong United Methodist and member of Foundry Church in Washington, D.C., Gore recognized the potential of Nothing But Nets to take her foundation’s Malaria Initiative to a new level. She quickly had Sports Illustrated and the National Basketball Association (NBA) signed on.

The problem, Gore soon realized, was that malaria has no constituency. The NBA has millions of fans, but no members. Her church had those -- with more than three million professing Methodists in Africa, with able leaders on the ground in the form of bishops, and distribution networks in the form of congregations.

Gore contacted United Methodist Communications, where both general secretary Larry Hollon and Bickerton, who served as president, quickly saw the campaign’s promise and soon had colleagues on board. During 2007, the campaign’s first year, Bickerton traveled the country, rallying grassroots support among United Methodists in Miami, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Houston, Detroit and Minneapolis.

“Bishop Bickerton has worked tirelessly for this,” Gore said. “He hasn’t slept in two years. We really need to thank his wife, Sally.”

Part of the campaign’s strength is its uniting effect on the whole church.

Gore said that her grandmother’s tiny, rural, conservative church in Whitesboro, Texas, and her own Foundry UMC “could not be more different.” One is conservative, the other liberal; one rural, the other urban; one “closed-minded, the other open.”

And “both are so into this campaign,” Gore said.