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## 'God's got your back'



Kidaakasha Ayers, 5, and her brother, Willie, 6, receive backpacks at St. Andrew UMC in Little Rock.

Photo by Heather Hahn

## Churches help kids start school year with right supplies

HEATHER HAHN  
Editor

At First United Methodist Church in Conway, the atmosphere is festive on the Sunday morning before the first day of school. Children bound into worship ahead of their parents and pick seats near the front. Most wear smiles as bright as the assortment of colorful new backpacks they tote.

The kids have come for First UMC's annual "Blessing of the Backpacks" celebration, the church's third best-attended day of worship after Easter and Christmas Eve. At the end of each morning service, youngsters come to the front of the congregation with their book bags in tow and bow their heads.

"Lord, bless these backpacks and book binders and the children who carry them into school halls," the worshippers pray in unison. "As they grow and learn, show our children ways to serve and live with Your love."

After the blessing, the children receive tags to attach to their bags or binders. The tag shows the church's address, the Bible verse Jeremiah 29:11 and an illustration of a blue backpack emblazoned with the message "God's Got Your Back."

This was 8-year-old Grace Ann Thone's third year to participate in the late-summer rite. On bad days at school, the third-grader says looking at the church's tag makes her feel better.

"It makes the school year easier for me," she says. "I know that God's watching out for me, and I don't have to worry about it."

[See BACKPACKS, page 10A]

## Longtime consultant will advise Imagine Ministry effort

HEATHER HAHN  
Editor

For more than 20 years, Gil Rendle has advised leaders in the United Methodist Church and other denominations in dealing with the nation's changing religious landscape.

Now, Rendle — an ordained United Methodist elder — is working with the Imagine Ministry team members as they embark on a two-year process to examine how the Arkansas Conference does church.

"I really see my role as a consultant," Rendle said, "not as a leader."

He hopes to guide the ministry team in the process of the review but

also offer "a kind of balcony perspective."

"I'll try to offer the bigger picture that goes beyond Arkansas or goes beyond even the United Methodist denomination," he said. "Much of what we're experiencing is shared across our culture."

The group's first meeting was on Aug. 28, after this issue went to press.

Last year, the Arkansas Conference saw its membership decline by 839 and its attendance drop by 1,353. The conference is also dealing with a graying membership.

### See pages 8-9 for short biographies of Imagine Ministry team members

The conference's death rate between 2005 and 2007 was 17 percent higher than the general population, according to a recently released report by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Bishop Charles Crutchfield secured Rendle's services to work with Imagine Ministry team members as they evaluate the effectiveness of conference's operations and structure. The group will make a progress report to the 2010 Annual Conference. Any

proposals that grow out of the process will be taken up at the 2011 Annual Conference.

"I have no preconceptions on where we will end up," Crutchfield said during his episcopal address in June's Annual Conference.

"Conclusions are not fore-ordained by instructions to the committee, which is precisely the point."

Rendle comes to this endeavor after previously consulting the United Methodist Church's Council of Bishops as well as about a dozen United Methodist conferences on strategic planning and assessments of

[See RENDLE, page 9A]



# A leader's a leader, no matter how young

In Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*, Horton the elephant discovers a town of Whos residing on a dust speck. Because he's the only animal in the jungle of Nool who can hear the Whos, the rest of the animals believe he's crazy. They cage Horton and aim to "boil [the dust speck] in a hot steaming kettle of Beezle-Nut Oil!"

The Whos realize their predicament and, after every Who down in Whoville shouts "We are here!" with the utmost Whoness, the other citizens of Nool realize that Horton was right and Whos live on the speck, on the clover.

Here, the animals face two choices. Although they hear the Whos, they can pursue their mission and make Whoville a tasty addition to their Beezle-Nut stew. Or they can hear the Whos, utilize the newly acquired information concerning the Whos' existence, and find boiling them is obsolete.

Oddly enough, the United Methodist church faces the same two choices as the emerging generation stands up and says "We are here." We can nod toward the young persons' noble attempts at entering the ministry but proceed down the preordained path, sending young adult ministry and, consequentially, the denomination tumbling into a



**Mary Faith "Zoe" Miles**

big boiling pot of Beezle-Nut Oil. Or we can hear out the cries of the young church, utilize their gifts and let the church shine as a city on a hill.

Dooming the entire denomination appears drastic, but it's inevitable if we disregard the voice of the younger generation. Twenty-four-year-old Sally Jones desires to be a part of Christ's body. She calls her local United Methodist church's Sunday School superintendent, offering help and suggestions concerning the new young adult Sunday school class. He kindly informs her that her assistance is unnecessary; although, she was welcome to join them. Sally attends the church but is one of three people to ever visit the class. When she moves away, the church's membership steadily declines and its parishioners wonder why young people today don't believe in anything.

This hypothetical situation reveals a severe reality that, without a young adult community, the United Methodist Church faucet is

turned off, leaving what's left in the sink to drain out.

To redirect ourselves from this Beezle-Nut Oil path, we must realize two things.

Firstly, as situations change, pruning a particular ministry, worship service, etc., may be in order "so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2) rather than dead weight.

Secondly, Horton is a compassionate elephant, worthy of his companions' trust. Likewise, my generation is not ignorant of the church's tradition or the doctrine's delicacies. We cherish it, desiring to see Methodism thrive.

We don't leave the denomination because we want to. We leave because, oftentimes, when we cry out "We are here! We are here!" nothing happens as a result of our presence and we're thrown into the pot as seasonings.

Like the animals in the jungle of Nool, listen. There are voices in your community. Rescue them from the Beezle-Nut stew because their rescue is your own.

*Mary Faith "Zoe" Miles is a junior at Oklahoma City University in Oklahoma, a United Methodist institution. She can be reached at mmiles.stu1@okcu.edu.*



## EDITOR'S CORNER

BY HEATHER HAHN

# Meet the ELCA

After a troubled stint as a pastor in Georgia, John Wesley returned to his native England deeply discouraged and even questioning his Christian faith.

Then one night in 1738, Wesley attended an evening worship service on Aldersgate Street in London and had a life-changing experience. As he recounted in his journal, he found his heart "strangely warmed" while listening to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. In Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, Wesley found the assurance of Christ's salvation he sought.

More than 270 years later, the largest Wesleyan body in the United States — the United Methodist Church — and the largest Lutheran body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, are still learning from each other. And their relationship will likely only grow stronger.

On Aug. 20, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA adopted a full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church. United Methodists approved the same pact last year at its General Conference in Fort Worth.

"Full communion" means each church recognizes the other as a partner in Christian ministry and acknowledges the authenticity of each other's sacraments.

The agreement also makes possible the interchangeability of clergy. The United Methodist News Service reports that some church leaders are already looking forward to sharing clergy in underserved areas.

That doesn't mean the two denominations are without their differences. But as the United Methodist Book of Discipline says in its definition of "full communion," "these differences are not church dividing."

For many individual ELCA and United Methodist congregations across the country, the formal vote only reinforces already-existing partnerships in mission and ministry.

I've been looking forward to this vote all summer. You see, the ELCA is the denomination of my baptism and confirmation vows. I can attest that the two denominations share much in common.

That being said, I know the ELCA is largely unknown to many Arkansans. Most Lutheran churches you see in the Natural State are part of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, a separate denomination that restricts Communion to fellow members of the Missouri Synod.

The ELCA, like the United Methodist Church, practices open Communion, welcoming all baptized Christians to the Lord's Table.

Also like the United Methodist Church, the ELCA has women clergy and a similar understanding of ordination. Another thing the churches share — both say "trespasses" during the Lord's Prayer.

Perhaps most importantly, both denominations share a commitment to witness to the Gospel. It's a witness that no doubt will be strengthened by the two churches working together in Christian unity.

# Letters To The Editor

*My husband, Don, and I were privileged to have attended Annual Conference in Rogers. Our daughter, Amy, graciously invited us to stay with her, which was a blessing for us.*

*We attended the evening service at Central United Methodist, and her fiancé wanted to attend also, as he had never attended a United Methodist evening worship nor was he familiar with all of our conference activities. It was a joy to have them sit with us.*

*Upon us going forward to accept the bread and wine, her fiancé sat in his seat. The gentleman who was sitting behind us told him he should have taken Communion. We were so upset with this person. Who was he to place*

*judgment on another? We by no means point fingers nor do we know what is one's heart. That decision should be between that person and God.*


*It was a joy to have our daughter's fiancé worship with us. We will pray for this gentleman's heart...*

Mary Johnson  
Rison

The Arkansas United Methodist welcomes letters to the editor. Letters should be no longer than 200 words and include the address and a phone number where the writer can be reached.

## FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE by Mike Morgan






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# Developing leaders is easier than brain surgery



BUD REEVES  
Special contributor

Developing leadership is crucial to any organization, secular or spiritual. One of the cries that ascends from almost every organization is for more and better leadership. It's a constant complaint: "We need more leaders! Better leaders! Younger leaders!"

We have tremendous human potential within our ranks — lots of good people. Yet we struggle to fill the positions of leadership we need: teachers, children and youth workers, committee members, etc. In the majority of churches, it seems the same few people end up doing most of the work.

How do we avoid or overcome that dynamic? How do we develop a large contingent of passionate ministry leaders?

Briefly, eight ideas come to mind.

## Pray for good leadership:

Make leadership development a part of your "prayer agenda" with God. The Spirit will give you names. I've received some great people ideas during prayer.

Pray publicly for the leadership needs of the church. And when you have a new leadership group start — missionaries, committee members, teachers, any new ministry — commission them in worship with a word of prayer.

## Preach and teach lay ministry empowerment:

It's not a new idea any more, but sometimes the old paradigms die hard. Pastors and staff are not hired to do ministry; their job is to empower the members to be in ministry for Jesus Christ. Until the concept of lay ministry becomes part of the DNA of a church, leaders will never develop because everyone expects the professional Christians to do what gets done.

## Find and claim their spiritual gifts:

People thrive when they minister according to their spiritual



Bud Reeves

giftedness. When you work as you are wired, service in the church is fulfilling and energizing — not a chore. Teach the concept of spiritual gifts; do spiritual gift inventories such as Network and Serving From the Heart with your leaders. Be prepared for some leaders to change directions and be happier for it!

## Don't push them in the pool:

"Glad you joined our church! Can you teach junior high Sunday School next week?" This is not the way to develop leaders. Most folks need to dip their toe in the pool before they plunge in headfirst. Invite a potential leader to observe a singular event, then to help out occasionally, then on a more regular basis, eventually working up to a responsible commitment. Gradually increasing commitment allows a leader to progress with confidence into uncharted waters.

## Committee assignments are not necessarily leadership development:

How many times have we heard in nominating committees, "He/she is a promising young leader. Let's put him/her on the board"? It's the quickest way to arrest the development of a leader.

Leadership develops through hands-on involvement with ministry. Especially in the younger

generations, they want to be involved in something bigger than themselves that makes a difference in somebody's life. Keep the young people off committees until they have ministry experience.

**Mentoring works:** Pastors need to spend time consciously developing the promising leaders in the congregation. The pastoral radar should always be set on "seek new leadership."

Existing church leaders need to be on the lookout for potential leaders to take under their wing. Young people have been shown to value mentoring or coaching relationships with an older person.

If current ministry leaders would take a season to mentor a new leader, rather than handing it off with the too-often-used prison analogy — "I've done my time" — the new leaders will last longer.

**Accept new leadership:** If you get new leaders, an unfortunate side effect is that things might change. New leaders bring new ideas and approaches, and such innovations might actually help a church be in better ministry to the community. Sadly, when new leadership is actually recruited, they are often met with the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that

way before." Let the new leaders lead!

**Encourage and appreciate:** Nothing makes new leaders feel good like praise and gratitude. Even though they are serving the Lord, it doesn't hurt for someone else to notice they are in ministry.

Pastoral notes and calls, appreciation events, recognition gifts — anything we can do is good if it shows leaders when they commit to a responsibility, they are not forgotten. And encouragement will bear fruit in next year's recruitment as well.

The pastor and staff and the same faithful few can add to the ministry of the church by working themselves into exhaustion. But developing a larger contingent of passionate leaders can multiply ministry.

Lay ministry can have an exponential Kingdom impact. It's not that hard. Leadership development is not brain surgery. But in a church or organization, it might be just as critical to saving its life.

*William O. "Bud" Reeves is senior pastor of First UMC, Hot Springs. He can be reached at brobud@fumchs.com.*

# When we mess up, we need to be willing to step it up

DEENA MARIE HAMILTON  
Special Contributor

Being a pastor makes me speculate about the wonderful ways God will inspire me. I'm always looking for the next subtle occurrence to remind me of the lessons of life. I'm not ever disappointed when it comes to God's subtle way of revealing His truth to me.

I was in church one Sunday, and one of my lay members was doing the children's sermon that Sunday. It was something that I just kept thinking about for the entire week.

She talked about "passing the buck" and her biblical reference was the third chapter of Genesis. Is this chapter familiar? It should be because this is the chapter where Adam and Eve are confronted about eating fruit from the forbidden tree.

As I sat and listened to her impart knowledge to the children and youth of my congregation, I begin thinking about how people just don't want to take responsibility



Deena Marie Hamilton

for their actions. This is not a new issue of concern, but an ancient one. When reading about the showdown between God, Adam and Eve, it just seemed that once it all hit the fan, everything was exposed. Nobody wanted to take responsibility for the damage that had been done. Adam says in Genesis 3:12, "The wife you made gave it to me to eat!" And so to defend herself, Eve just had to interpolate with "But the serpent tricked me into eating it!" in verse 13 in the same chapter.

We are living in a society where people act before thinking about the consequences of their actions. I would not be honest if I did not admit to being guilty of the same thing at one time or another in my life. But

eventually it comes to a point where enough is enough. All our actions have a ripple effect on the lives of the people around us either directly or indirectly.

What is most important in life as Christians? Luke 10: 27 states that we need to love God and others. If we are striving to live lives pleasing to God we will not vandalize or damage other people's property. We wouldn't do malicious things to spitefully hurt people.

We would not lie to others, hurt others physically, mentally or spiritually, keep up drama that is meaningless or do anything to other people that we know would be devastating to ourselves. But still we pass the buck, and when we are confronted with the issue we blame others for our actions. The only thing we can ever control is our reaction in situations that we find ourselves in.

When you've wronged someone, which I have done before, have the courage to apologize or do something

to amend the situation.

Apologizing for something that I've done wrong is the hardest thing that I have ever done. Admitting my part in a situation can seem debilitating. Truly forgiving someone for hurting me seems almost impossible because the pain is so deep. But it's just the right thing to do. It's the Christ thing to do.

Before I accepted God's calling in my life, I had friends for most of my life with whom I have had spiritual differences. Some claim to be agnostic or atheist. It didn't matter to me at the time because they always treated me with respect and kindness.

I noticed the way that they lived, and whether they wanted to admit it or not, they were living their lives according to the teachings that were found in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the words of wisdom imparted in the epistles and some of the parables I learned from the New Testament in Sunday School. So, in my opinion, that proves that living according to

what's pleasing to God works, and it's an example that we especially as Christians should follow.

It's time to step it up, stop passing the buck and show the world why we are who we are. If we have the boldness to take on the name of Christ and call ourselves Christians, then it's time to step it up so that the world will see the Light of Christ within us not the darkness of the world. If Christ could step it up for us on Calvary, then let's show our appreciation by not passing the buck anymore.

*Deena Marie Hamilton is the senior pastor of McCabe Chapel United Methodist Church in North Little Rock. She can be reached at rev. deenamarie@gmail.com.*

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## Change needed to make next Christian disciples

WILL CHOATE  
Special Contributor

The following is an excerpt from an address Choate gave at Annual Conference.

On behalf of every new church start pastor, let me begin by saying thank you.

It is because of your apportionment dollars and Catch the Vision offerings that we are able to engage in these different and unique ministries across our conference. Your support — whether that has been financially, prayerfully or through the donation of some old chairs or Bibles — has enabled us to try some new and creative ways of inviting, or re-inviting, people within our contexts to experience the saving grace of God through the lens of the United Methodist Church.

As the research and development arm of our church, we have embraced what we commonly refer to as “a willingness to fail.” In stepping forward to create new kinds of places for new kinds of people we must first look the possibility of failure in the eye and determine that the themes of hope, change and creativity are greater than our fear of failure. ...

Now, I assume it's nothing new for the 27-year-old pastor to stand up and say that times are changing and that we must do the same — I recognize that 27-year-old pastors have been doing this for centuries. But I don't think this should trivialize nor negate the reality that we live in a culture that is always evolving and as people within that culture we are continually finding new ways to organize and empower ourselves.

When the fabric of our culture was predominately the family farm, those values shined through in our churches — small, relationally and geographically based communities of faith where potlucks and hymn sings ruled the day.

With the industrial revolution our culture shifted, and some 27-year-old pastor came forward and said, “The church must change.” At which point the values of the industrial world took hold and churches began to run on the values of large hierarchal



**Will Choate**

organization, efficiency and production. Around the time that I came into this world, yet another 27-year-old pastor was crying for change.

This time it was that our culture had shifted from an industrial-based society to a consumer-based society. The values of the business world began to infiltrate the church — CEO pastors, marketing strategies, “bigger is better” and a bottom-line understanding of discipleship.

I would like to suggest we are entering into a new era of our always-evolving culture. An era that values relationship over geography, creativity over efficiency, empowerment over hierarchal organization, contextual and local over “bigger is better,” and conversation and a sense of journey over bottom-line understandings of discipleship.

I believe this emerging culture is rapidly becoming the predominant culture, and that we are going to need more and more individuals and churches to be willing to create new kinds of places for these new kinds of people.

And as individuals and churches — not just new churches, all churches — we are going to need to be more willing to fail.

As our denomination rethinks United Methodism, and our Bishop is creating a committee to rethink our Annual Conference (and for that matter as car companies rethink car companies, and Wall Street rethinks Wall Street, and hospitals rethink hospitals), I stand before you and as a stereotypical 27-year-old pastor, I say, “The world is changing, and we must do the same.”

*Will Choate is an associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in North Little Rock and pastor of new church start Argenta UMC. He can be reached at will@argentaumc.org.*

## Sunday School class resurrects old church

HEATHER HAHN  
Editor

When Walnut Grove United Methodist Church ceased being a house of worship in the early 1970s, it did not cease serving the people of God.

The small white country church erected in 1885 on the banks of Fletcher Creek in far western Pulaski County became a place for occasional council meetings and gospel sings. In 1977, the structure — the oldest original Methodist church building in Pulaski County — was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

But after decades of limited use and considerable neglect, the old church had fallen into severe disrepair by the spring of 2008 and was on the verge of collapse.

That's when members of the Ben Miller Sunday School class at Highland Valley United Methodist Church in Little Rock resolved to restore the country church near Ferndale to its former glory. Since the 1970s, Highland Valley UMC has been the main caretaker of the site.

“We accepted the challenge that the church on Walnut Grove Road presented because we believed that this church could once again serve as a center for worship, fellowship and outreach,” class member Gay McDaniel said.

Visitors can see the results of the class's efforts over the past year at a dedication service and open house at 3 p.m. Sept. 26 at the newly renovated and landscaped Walnut Grove church.

The class of mostly retirees originally planned to raise funds “just to shore up the church so that it didn't fall down,” McDaniel said.

She learned that if her class had \$5,000, the church could qualify for a \$10,000 grant from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. The class got the needed \$5,000 in one day thanks to a grant from the United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas.

“I came home and told my husband and he said, ‘My goodness, if you can get \$5,000 that quickly, think what we could do if we tried to raise \$20,000,’” McDaniel said. “And that's what we did.”

Ultimately, the class won a \$40,000 state Historic Preservation grant to match the \$20,000 the group collected through fundraisers, individual donations and the original foundation gift.

“What began as a cleanup,



The Ben Miller Sunday School class at Highland Valley UMC in Little Rock has raised money and volunteered their labor to restore Walnut Grove UMC, the oldest original Methodist church building in Pulaski County.

Photo courtesy of Highland Valley United Methodist Church in Little Rock

fix-up, paint-up project expanded into a full-blown reconstruction because we had \$60,000 to work with,” McDaniel said.

The class members didn't just donate money to hire professional construction workers, they also contributed their own labor.

McDaniel said her classmate Barney Taylor, a retired building contractor, has been “the ramrod behind the project.” She estimated that Taylor has spent at least 30 hours a week at the site since construction began in August 2008.

On any given day, Taylor says he sees six to eight Highland Valley members also working on the project.

Taylor says he has enjoyed revitalizing a building that's nearly 125 years old.

“Let me put it this way, my wife says every year that goes by she feels a little bit more secure because I like old things,” he joked.

So far, the professional and volunteer laborers have leveled and stabilized the building, reinforced the rafters, replaced rotten siding, replaced the rusted metal roof, reglazed the windows with antique glass, repainted the interior and exterior, and restored the floor and original 19 pews. Workers also cleared the 1.43 acres the church sits on, landscaped around its perimeter and added stone benches and a stone path near its entrance.

Throughout the endeavor, the state preservation program required that workers stay true to the historic structure, even replacing the siding

with the same kind of cypress wood used originally. Church members scavenged antique stores and Web sites to find kerosene lanterns just like those that illuminated the 19th century sanctuary.

But the crew was allowed to install some modern touches such as heating and air conditioning and a septic system for a bathroom that Taylor expects will be completed by the open house. Taylor said the kerosene lanterns also have been converted to electricity.

Highland Valley members envision eventually adding a covered pavilion, picnic tables, parking facilities and a footbridge over the creek. But for now the building is already getting more use. Three weddings are scheduled there in the coming months.

“The Highland Valley Ben Miller Class is convinced that Walnut Grove Methodist Church can become a place where people can gather both inside and outside the church for prayer and meditation, worship, fellowship and celebration,” McDaniel said. “We know that God is at work in this endeavor.”

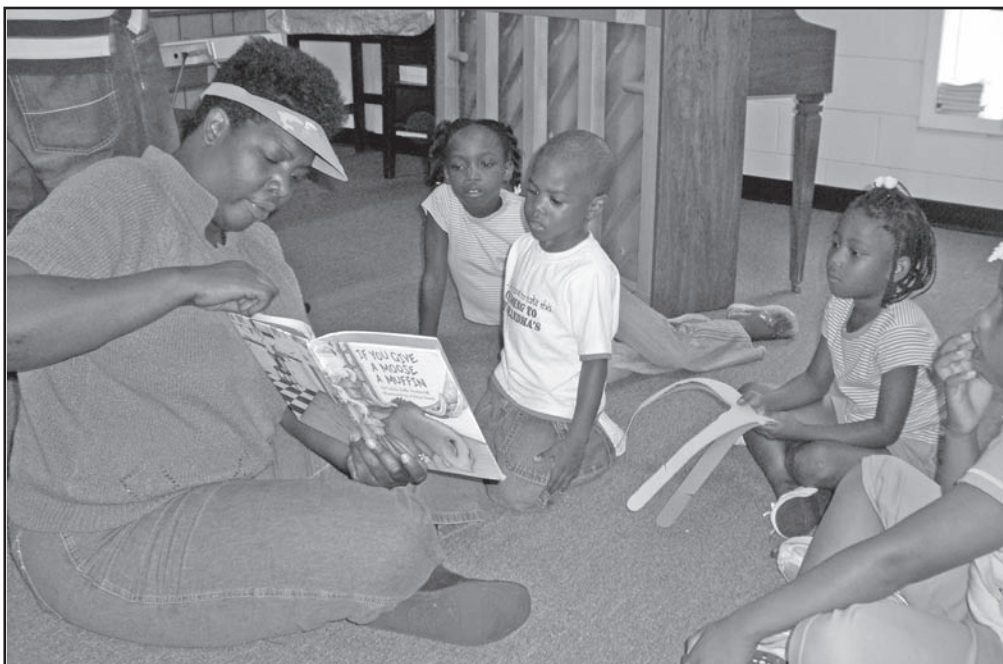
*A dedication service and open house for Walnut Grove UMC will be at 3 p.m. Sept. 26. The church is on Walnut Grove Road between Kanis and Burlingame roads. For directions, call Highland Valley UMC at (501) 224-6047. To learn more about the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, visit [www.arkansaspreservation.org](http://www.arkansaspreservation.org).*



Children listen to the story "If You Give a Moose a Muffin" by Laura Numeroff during VBS at Kynette UMC in Forrest City.

During June 1-5, about 20 kids attended the church's evening VBS. The theme was "Moving God's Grace From Place to Place." Cecilia Kelly, the conference's minister of children and families, visited on June 8.

Photo by Cecilia Kelly



Marion UMC hosted more than 65 children at its VBS. The church used Cokesbury's curriculum, which has the theme "Camp E.D.G.E. — Experience + Discover God Everywhere."

Photo courtesy of Marion UMC

During VBS, men at Greenwood UMC competed in a "Womanless Pageant" to offset the cost of curriculum. Each contestant performed a talent and was interviewed. The winner was Zach Underwood, the church's associate pastor, second from the right.

Photo courtesy of Greenwood UMC



More than 50 children attended VBS July 19-23 at First UMC in Bella Vista. The kids exceeded their goal of raising \$120 to buy a sheep for a needy family through Heifer International.

Photo courtesy of First UMC in Bella Vista



Roger Hook, pastor of First UMC in Beebe, made a deal with the church's children. If they raised \$500 for the VBS mission project, he'd dress like a pirate for Sunday worship. The kids raised \$624.09, which they used to sponsor a child through Compassion International. And the pastor played Captain Hook for a day.

Photo courtesy of First UMC in Beebe

## VBS memories

This summer, United Methodist Vacation Bible Schools brought Kool-Aid smiles to children's faces across Arkansas.

Youngsters learned Bible stories, created crafts for their parents and sang along to special music.

Many also helped raise money for church missions. They bought animals for needy families through Heifer International, collected items for local food pantries and even sponsored children halfway across the globe.

Churches used VBS to teach about Jesus in different ways.

Most held their classes inside the cool air conditioning. But L'Eau Fraiz UMC, Keith Memorial and Victory Assembly of God joined together for an interdenominational, outdoor VBS at Ables Garden Farm, south of Malvern. Forty-one local children attended.

"We were outside in 100 degree weather," said Nancy Cooper, L'Eau Fraiz UMC's lay leader. "But we were sweating for Jesus."

Here are just some of the snapshots of what hundreds of Arkansas children did on their summer vacation.



Chuck and Joyce Massey tell Bible stories to VBS participants. Nearly 200 children and adults enjoyed VBS at Cabot UMC. This year's theme was "Crocodile Dock." The children raised close to \$1,400 for the church's food pantry. The church's fifth- and sixth-grade Mission Maniacs spent the week doing local service projects and visited Arkansas Children's Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Cabot UMC

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## Lee Myane

Lee Myane of Bella Vista just completed his second year of attending classes Monday through Thursday at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Mo.



Photo by Heather Hahn

decided to attend seminary.

The seminary student was asked to take joint appointments

at Centerton

United Methodist Church and Living Waters. In the past year, Myane helped merge the two congregations into one church that now welcomes between 100 and 150 at worship services each week.

"My life is quite full with family, work and now pastoral ministry, but my calling has become clear," he said. "I'm very excited about all my new opportunities as a pastor. My goal is for our church to flourish and maybe stay here for a while, but my family and I are willing and want to have different experiences in the future."

He's also associate pastor at Living Waters at Centerton, a United Methodist congregation; co-owner of an engineering firm; husband to Andrea; and dad to Silas, Sarah and Sawyer.

Just a few years ago he was a landscape architect who coached Little League and attended First United Methodist Church in Bentonville. Then he and his family helped start a new church, Living Waters, in the Bentonville/Bella Vista area. He felt called to ministry and

## Daniel Thueson

Back in 1997, Daniel Thueson of Alma was a martial arts instructor, emergency medical technician and Air National Guard medic. As much as he enjoyed his work, he was unsatisfied.

"After much soul searching and seeking God's guidance through prayer," Thueson said. "I felt God was telling me to feed his sheep."

Now a United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas Seminary Scholarship student at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, he is looking forward to coming back to the Arkansas Conference as a full-time pastor.

He feels the opportunity for full-time ministry will allow him to focus on helping others, meeting their needs and growing Christ's followers.

"Arkansas is so full of natural



Photo by Heather Hahn

beauty, wonderful value-driven people and my wife's family lives here," Thueson said. "As great a place as Arkansas is, people here still struggle, hurt and look for guidance from something greater than themselves. They need God and I hope God will... know God will... work through me to serve them."

Thueson feels called to be a member of the United Methodist clergy because he believes the United Methodist Church is representing God's heart and love to the world.

# Meet your next pastor

JESSICA COWART  
Special to the Arkansas United Methodist

This semester, four new pastors will be getting a seminary education with help from the United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas.

The new recipients of the foundation's seminary scholarships are: Lee Myane of Bella Vista, Mike Blanchard of Russellville, Soniyah "Sonna" Blue of Fort Smith and Daniel Thueson of Alma.

Currently six foundation scholars are attending three-year seminary programs.

Ben Crismon at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas and Natasha Murray-Norman at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Mo., received scholarships in previous years.

To receive the scholarships, all six have pledged to return to Arkansas to pastor United Methodist churches.

"With a huge percentage of Arkansas pastors retiring in the next 10 years, this initiative offers the potential of strengthening every United Methodist local church in Arkansas," said Jim Argue Jr., president of the United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas.

"Ensuring strong pastoral leadership for the future strengthens the church and its ministry to our state."

United Methodists in Arkansas can contribute to the scholarships by contacting Janet Marshall, the foundation's vice president of development, at (501) 664-8632 or [jmarshall@umfa.org](mailto:jmarshall@umfa.org).

In the mean time, here is an introduction to four individuals who could be your next pastor.

## Soniyah "Sonna" Blue

"I have experienced many things in life, but none can compare to the love of Christ," said Soniyah "Sonna" Blue of Fort Smith.

Blue was raised in an abusive home environment, but an aunt and uncle shared with her the Gospel, became models for a new and better life and prayed for her. This couple laid a foundation that resulted in her call to ministry.

"God called me to reach His people, and I made a vow to follow Him when I was 19," she said. "It has not always been easy. There have been times when I have struggled, but my desire to serve God has led me here."

Blue was visiting different churches while attending the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith when she found Grace United Methodist Church. She calls the United Methodist Church a balance between spirit and truth, between faith and works, between head knowledge and heart knowledge.

"God led me to the United Methodist Church, and I feel connected here," she said.

Today, Blue is a first-year student at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology. She lives with her husband in Dallas.

"Sonna is a tremendous asset to the United Methodist Church," said her mentor Dee Dee Autry,



Photo by Mary Jacobs of the United Methodist Reporter

associate pastor at Grace United Methodist Church in Fort Smith.

"Her insight and discernment will reveal to many the power of God in their lives. She uses her life experience to reach others and approach them with a kind and gentle hand of God's grace and love."

## Michael Blanchard

Mike Blanchard has been an active United Methodist, serving Bell's Chapel United Methodist Church in Atkins in many capacities and offices on the local and district level. When he retired from a career as an operations trainer at Nuclear One in Russellville, he felt a call to spend more time in service to his church.

District Superintendent Rodney Steele said Blanchard was one of the spiritual leaders of Bell's Chapel who helped the congregation focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ.

"He has a calm demeanor and a thoughtful approach to all he does," Steele said. "As a lay speaker, he has filled several pulpits on a moment's notice, and he is always asked to return."



Photo by Patrick Shownes

After taking some local pastor courses, Blanchard became more interested in the theology of John Wesley, and felt a call to become an ordained elder.

"I began to see a big change in how I view the world, and my place

in God's world," he explained. "I came to believe preaching, teaching and caring for people in a church setting is what I need to do. I began to realize it is not about me; it is about Jesus and His Gospel."

So Blanchard and his wife, Nancy, moved to Dallas in 2007 where he attends Perkins School of Theology. This year he was named a United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas Seminary Scholar.

"More than the monetary aspect, the scholarship shows that people in the Arkansas Conference feel strongly enough about a seminary education to put their money into it," Blanchard said. "It is a source of comfort to me that church members in the Arkansas Conference are willing to help."

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# Campus calling

## UM college ministries provide steady supply of clergy in Arkansas

HEATHER HAHN  
Editor

One early morning in March, 40 Wesley Foundation students from the University of Arkansas at Monticello joined construction workers to build a house in a single day.

By the evening, the 1,700-square-foot structure was completed — from foundation to the roof and all the windows and doors in between. And Fee Fee Jones had a new, safer home from where she could direct Wilson Chapel United Methodist Church's soup kitchen ministry, which feeds 900 people each month.

For Jones and her husband, Calvin, the new three-bedroom house in Warren was desperately needed. Their old house's floor was caving in and a gaping hole in the ceiling exposed the couple to the elements.

For the Wesley Foundation volunteers, the house's construction was life changing — particularly for student Tim Rushing Jr.

"Watching all of those people come together to do the Lord's work is what drew me to the ministry," he said. "I almost cried while I was helping them build that house. ... It was just amazing."

Rushing, just starting his second year at UAM, now has entered the formal candidacy process to become a United Methodist pastor.

Rushing's experience is hardly unusual. Many of the United Methodist clergy now serving Arkansas first discerned their calling as participants in a university Wesley Foundation or the campus ministries at Philander Smith and Hendrix colleges.

Growing up the son of a United Methodist pastor, Kavan Dodson said joining the clergy was the last thing he wanted to do. But that began to change when he got involved in UAM's Wesley Foundation as a student the late 1980s.

In fact, of the 33 Wesley Foundation students at the time, Dodson said, 28 remain heavily involved in church as clergy or lay leaders.

"What Wesley Foundations do is appeal to young professionals and get them to come back to the church," he said.

Now campus minister at UAM's Wesley Foundation, Dodson is mentoring Rushing in his candidacy process.

The strength of the Arkansas Conference's college outreach is a big part of why it leads the national church in its percentage of ordained elders under the age of 35, said Joseph Arnold, research manager at Wesley Theological Seminary's Lewis Center for Church Leadership.

College ministries, he said, are second only to church youth groups in producing clergy.

In 2008, the Lewis Center reported, 9.29 percent of the conference's 269 elders were under 35 — the highest percentage among the U.S. conferences. Nationally, the United Methodist Church's percentage of elders in that demographic was 5.21 percent.

This year, the conference no longer holds the top slot. But with 8.61 percent of its elders — 23 clergy members — under 35, Arkansas is still well above the national average.

David Scroggin says more than 100 clergy members have come out of Arkansas Tech University alone during his 31 years as Wesley Foundation campus minister before his appointment this summer to Wesley UMC in Russellville.

Among those Tech alumni is Heath Bradley, who was commissioned at Annual Conference in June and now serves as pastor of Huntsville and Presley Chapel UMC.

Bradley, 30, said he first got involved at the foundation at the suggestion of the pastor at Paris UMC, his home congregation. Bradley still remembers his first night at the foundation.

"I'd never heard young people praying in every day language before," he said. "They talked as though God was real and would really listen to what they were actually going through. That really impressed me."

Scroggin encouraged Bradley to get involved in as many foundation ministries as possible — including joining the Circuit Riders, a team of students who led music and took turns delivering the sermon at a different church each week.

"Some people's call stories are that they know from early childhood this is what they're meant to do," Bradley said. "Mine wasn't like that. This wasn't on my radar at all. I think the only 'C' I ever got in high school was in speech class."

But participating in Circuit Riders, he said,

gave him "confidence in the gift of preaching." Scroggin soon started recommending Bradley as a supply preacher for local pastors on vacation.

Jason Molitor had never been involved in the United Methodist church before entering Arkansas Tech in 1990. He had grown up attending Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Presbyterian churches.

But he and a United Methodist friend were walking around during their first week at Tech when they saw that the Wesley Foundation was

sponsoring a dance.

"We thought, 'Hey, that's a good place to go,'" Molitor recalled. "There'll probably be some girls there, some people to meet."

What began as a lark soon became a passion. Now, Molitor is the new campus minister at Arkansas Tech.

"I believe all people are called to ministry whether they go into full-timed ordained ministry or not," he said. "My idea is to help students discern what that ministry might be."



Members of the Wesley Foundation at the University of Arkansas at Monticello help build a house in one day for Fee Fee Jones, who runs a soup kitchen from her home. Wesley Foundation activities such as this March service project help future pastors discern their vocation.

Photo Courtesy of UAM-Wesley Foundation

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## Kathy Conley

Kathy Dillard Conley is a lifelong United Methodist.

Through the years, she has served God in churches in Murfreesboro, Arkadelphia, Hot Springs and now Blytheville.

After 10 years as a merchandise manager with JCPenney, Conley felt called to make herself available for whatever God would have her do.

She now is in her seventh year on the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. She also serves on the Conference Nominating Committee, the District Nominating Committee and has been Northeast District leadership chairwoman since 2004.

Conley serves on the Arkansas State University Wesley Foundation



**Kathy Conley**

board and is the United Methodist Women president at First UMC in Blytheville. She teaches Sunday School, sings in the choir and serves as a Stephen minister.

In addition, she has attended

Annual Conference since 1994, first as a teller, then as a local church lay member and most recently as the Northeast District lay member.

She has lived in Blytheville for the past 29 years with her husband, Dowell. The couple has two children.

## Edna Morgan

Edna Morgan is currently associate pastor at First UMC in Pine Bluff. Her spouse is David Morgan and they have two daughters and two grandchildren.

In 2005, Morgan began work as crime victims' chaplain. Under the 501(c)3, nonprofit Healing Place Ministries at First UMC — Pine Bluff, Morgan has established collaborations with more than 30 faith-based and secular organizations.

The nonprofit has four ministries: youth camp, crime victims advocacy, reflective listening and "Dare to Be You," a national alcohol/drug/tobacco prevention program.

Morgan received the Crime Victim Advocate of the Year award



**Edna Morgan**

from Arkansas Crime Victims' Reparations Board in 2008.

She received her bachelor's degree, Hendrix College, Conway in 1974; master's degree in educational supervision/

administration, Roosevelt University, Chicago in 1982; master of divinity degree, Memphis Theological Seminary in 2004; and chaplaincy certification in 2007.

Morgan believes God has commissioned us to bless others because we are here to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only."

## Don Riggin

Don L. Riggin, a certified association executive, currently serves as a principal in Riggin & Associates, a group that provides management, organizational design, strategic planning, and fundraising consulting to nonprofit organizations. He also serves as secretary general of Arthritis and Rheumatism International.

The son of a Methodist minister, he is a member of St. James United Methodist Church in Little Rock. He has been an active lay person in the local church, Conference, and General Church. His service includes: board of directors of Camp Tanako (Chairman), Board of Church and Society (Conference and General Church for eight years), lay delegate to Jurisdictional and General



**Don Riggin**

Conference (1976, 1980, 1984), alternate member of the Judicial Council, Committee on Episcopacy (Conference and Jurisdictional), Board of Pensions (North Georgia

Conference), United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas board of directors and the Little Rock Conference Board of Education.

He currently serves on the boards of LifeQuest of Arkansas, CARTI Foundation, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Alumni Association Board, Connected in Christ and Philander Smith College.

# Imagine Ministry team members

## Mackey Yokem



**Mackey Yokem**

Mackey Yokem is the convenor of the Imagine Ministry team.

He is a native of Little Rock and grew up in St. Luke United Methodist Church. He received his license to preach in 1968.

After graduating from Hendrix College, Yokem received a master of theology degree from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

Yokem and the former Cindy Olmstead from Rison married in 1971. They have four children and two grandchildren.

Under episcopal appointment since 1976, Yokem has served

extension appointments as the executive director of Camp Aldersgate, director of church relations at Hendrix College, pastor at Primrose UMC in Little Rock; and senior pastor

of the United Methodist congregations in Gurdon, Lonoke and Warren and First UMC Russellville.

He is currently appointed as

district superintendent of the Northwest District.

He serves as a member of: Board of Trustees of Philander Smith College, Conference Council on Finance and Administration, University of Arkansas Wesley Foundation board of directors, Heart of the Ozarks Emmaus Community board of directors; Board of Trustees at Mount Sequoyah Conference and Retreat Center.

Previously, Mackey served as a trustee at Hendrix College and on the Conference Board of Trustees and Conference Board Ordained Ministry.

## Charles Donaldson



**Charles Donaldson**

Charles W. Donaldson is the vice chancellor of educational and student services, dean of University College and associate professor of higher education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

He oversees educational and academic support services, including admissions and financial aid, academic advising, health services, testing services, counseling and career planning as well as disability support services.

UALR's Student Government Association recognized as a student administrator when the association established the Charles W. Donaldson Administrator of the Year Award,

William O. "Bud" Reeves was born in Camden. He grew up in Camden and Sheridan, graduating from Sheridan High School. He earned his bachelor's degree from Hendrix College, a master of divinity from Duke Divinity School, and a doctor of ministry degree from Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology.

Reeves entered the United Methodist ministry in 1980 and was ordained elder in 1985. He has pastored Arkansas churches in Opollo, Houston, Watson, Montrose,

which is now presented annually to a top administrator as recognized by students.

Donaldson is a servant of the United Methodist Church and its institutions, including its

colleges. He has served as vice chairman of the board of trustees at his alma mater, Philander Smith College, and as a chairman of numerous boards in the Arkansas Conference, including the Board of

Higher Education and Campus Ministries. He was a member of the National Task Force to Strengthen the Black Church for the 21st Century, and he has served on the boards of numerous United Methodist institutions, including Camp Aldersgate and the Methodist Children's Home.

He has been recognized as a distinguished alumnus of Philander Smith College and received the Little Rock Community Man of Distinction Award for Volunteer Service. Donaldson was also the recipient of the Mary and Ira Brumley Award for Religious Education given by Hendrix College.

## Bud Reeves



**Bud Reeves**

Lake Village, and Bryant. Since June 2006, he has been the senior pastor of First UMC in Hot Springs.

Reeves writes a monthly column, "The Shepherd's Staff," in the *Arkansas*

*United Methodist* newspaper.

His articles and sermons have appeared in *The Interpreter*

magazine, *Rev.* magazine, on the United Methodist News Service Web site, and on Len Sweet's Preaching Plus Web site.

In 2002, at the Little Rock Annual Conference, he was awarded the Harry Denman Award for Evangelism by the United Methodist Foundation for Evangelism. He currently chairs the board of directors of Connected in Christ and is a trustee of Hendrix College.

Reeves has been married since 1980 to the former Karen Watson, and they have two son.



### Jim Argue Jr.



**Jim Argue Jr.**

Jim Argue Jr. was raised in a United Methodist parsonage, grew up in Little Rock and earned a degree in history and political science from Hendrix College.

In 1981, Argue became president of the United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas.

The foundation develops and administers permanent, charitable endowment funds to support United Methodist ministries in Arkansas.

Argue was elected to the Arkansas Legislature seven times. He is a former president pro tempore of the state Senate and chaired the Senate Education Committee from 2003 to 2008. He is recognized as one of the key architects in the state's response to the 2002 Lake View court decision, a ruling that led to major reforms in the state's public education system.

Argue is past chairman of the Education Committee of the National Association of State Legislatures. He served two terms as a director of the Southwest Educational

Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, and served on the Board of the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, Ga.

Argue has offered his time and energy to his community and church. He is past chairman of the administrative board of Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church. He serves on the board of St. Vincent Medical Center. He is a fellow of

Leadership Greater Little Rock and has received the organization's Distinguished Leadership Award, which in 2005, was renamed the Senator Jim Argue Distinguished Leadership Award.

He is past president of the board of Good Shepherd Ecumenical Retirement Center. He received the National Conference of Community and Justice's Father Joseph Biltz award in 2000.

Argue received an honorary doctorate degree from Philander Smith College in 1999 and received the Ethel K. Millar Award for Religious and Social Awareness from Hendrix College in 2004. He was named a National Humanitarian by Just Communities of Central Arkansas in 2007.

Argue is married to Elise Carey Argue. They have two daughters.

### Susan Ledbetter



**Susan Ledbetter**

Susan Meider Ledbetter was born in Littleton, Colo., and raised in Colorado Springs. She grew up at First United Methodist Church of Colorado Springs.

Ledbetter graduated from the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs with a degree in organizational communication in 1998. After graduation, she was a public relations specialist with Goodwill Industries of Colorado Springs.

After discerning her call to ordained ministry, Ledbetter sought a master of divinity degree at Drew Theological School in Madison, N.J., where she met her husband Justin Ledbetter. After their marriage in 2001 and relocation to Fort Smith,

Ledbetter transferred to Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Okla., to complete her degree. She also served as the youth director at Goddard UMC.

Before graduating, Ledbetter served as interim pastor at Hollywood UMC and student pastor at First UMC in Malvern. Upon graduation, Ledbetter was appointed to serve as the associate pastor at First UMC in Benton. In July 2005, Ledbetter was appointed to serve as

pastor at Wiggins Memorial UMC while her husband, Justin, was appointed as pastor at Farmington United Methodist Church.

She now is the associate pastor at First UMC in Bentonville.

Ledbetter has served on the Board of Church and Society for the Arkansas Conference as the Peace with Justice Coordinator since 2004, the Heart of the Ozarks Emmaus and Chrysalis Boards since 2007, and as a part of both the Northwest District Finance Committee and the Arkansas Conference Board of Ordained Ministry since last year.

The Ledbetters welcomed their first child, Sadie Joy, in February 2008.

#### • RENDLE Continued from Page 1A

current programming.

Since 2007, Rendle has served as a senior consultant with the Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence of the Texas Methodist Foundation in Austin, as well as an independent consultant. Prior to that, he worked for 12 years as an author, seminar leader and senior consultant with the Alban Institute, a respected interfaith nonprofit group that focuses on congregational development.

He also has pastored urban United Methodist churches in Philadelphia and Reading, Penn. Rendle has a master of theology degree from Boston University School of Theology and a Ph.D. from Temple University School of Education. His doctoral studies focused on



**Gil Rendle**

organizational psychology and other fields related to group development.

He said his experiences have shown that how a group is organized can make "all the difference in the

world."

"Are we organized for survival? Are we organized to satisfy the strongest voices? Are we organized for the mission that we claim? Each one has a different organization to it," he said. "The other part of that is that the organizations we have inherited from earlier generations were

designed to meet the needs of that time."

He sees the Imagine Ministry process as an opportunity to rethink how the church fulfills its mission.

"The national church has come out with encouragement to 'Rethink Church,'" he said.

"There's actually a need to rethink the denomination and rethink conferences. What is the purpose of the conference? That's really a question that's up for grabs at the moment."

To subscribe to *Imagine Ministry e-mail updates*, visit [www.arumc.org/Imagine\\_signup](http://www.arumc.org/Imagine_signup).

To send in your thoughts and suggestions, e-mail [imagineministry@arumc.org](mailto:imagineministry@arumc.org).

## OBITUARIES

**J. Hillman Byram**, 82, of Conway passed away July 25.

Born in Izard County on June 2, 1927, he was a son to the late Jordan A. and Nola (Gilland) Byram.

Byram had been a United Methodist minister for more than 61 years, serving 53 churches in the North Arkansas Conference and was past minister of Wesley United Methodist Church in Conway. He earned his bachelor of science at Arkansas College (which is now Lyon College) and his master of divinity from Southern Methodist University. He was a U.S. Navy veteran and a member of the Navy M.A.R.S. (Military Affiliate Radio System) for more than 45 years. He also was a member of the Faulkner County Amateur Radio Club.

His parents and a brother, Duane Byram preceded him in death.

Survivors include his wife of 61 years, Marie (Wiles) Byram; son Tom and his wife Bonnie Byram of College Station, Texas, and son Don and his wife Cecile Byram of Watkinsville, Ga.; five grandchildren, Hannah, Joseph, Mary, George and Charlotte, and numerous friends.

Memorials may be made to Wesley United Methodist Church in Conway or Forrest Chapel United Methodist Church in Izard County.

Services were held on July 28, at Wesley United Methodist Church in Conway with David Hoffman officiating. The interment service was at Violet Hill Cemetery in Violet Hill.

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• **BACKPACK** Continued from Page 1A

Like First UMC in Conway, many other United Methodist churches across the state held special events in August to help students get a good start on another year's education. Some hosted school-supply giveaways; others held back-to-school parties.

Many also promoted their other ministries in hopes that visitors would resolve to add church to their calendar. After all, for many families, the new year doesn't really begin with "Auld Lang Syne" in January but with the first ring of the school bell in August.

The "Blessing of the Backpacks" at First UMC in Conway marks the unofficial start of the church year after members have returned from vacation, says associate pastor Dede Roberts.

Charles Murry, First UMC's senior pastor, says the event is second only to Christmas in helping to reconnect people to church life.

The church even decorates for the occasion. Beside the altar stands a whimsical arrangement of backpacks, dictionaries, colored pencils and Crayola markers. A banner proclaiming the "Blessing of the Backpacks" adorns the side of the chancel.

The tradition started four years ago when church staff held a special blessing to welcome tots to the church's preschool.

"Their little faces were so excited," Roberts said. "We decided we had to do this program again."

The last three years, pastors have invited all school-aged youngsters to participate.

Shay Raycher says her 9-year-



Above, children pray during the "Blessing of the Backpacks" at the contemporary service on Aug. 16 at First UMC in Conway.

Photo by Heather Hahn

At left, two teens see how far they can stretch on the inflatable bungee run at the "Back to School Bash" on Aug. 22 at First UMC in Manila. The church's carnival games, free food and karaoke drew some 90 people.

Photo by Kaye Gann of Manila First UMC

old daughter, Sarah, keeps all her tags hanging on her backpack.

Now her 4-year-old son, Hayden, is equally eager to get his backpack blessed.

"I think it's a wonderful ministry for the community," Raycher said. "You want to send your children into school with the protection that the church and God can provide."

#### Keeping kids well supplied

St. Andrew UMC in southwest Little Rock stands amid a financially strapped neighborhood where most children qualify for the federal free- and reduced-lunch program. For nearby families, buying a new backpack can be a serious burden.

With that in mind, the congregation began planning its second annual school-supply giveaway and block party last February.

Members organized movie nights and other fund-raisers. Many also made personal donations for the event, said Kathy Lyons, the church's evangelism chairwoman. St. Andrew also received a \$3,000 grant from the Central District Board of Missions.

Altogether, the church was able to provide local elementary-school students with 257 backpacks and book bags. The bags contained paper, glue, pencils, pens, crayons and in some cases, scissors. Congregation members also distributed an organizer to each parent or guardian.

For the congregation, the

gathering is one of its biggest missions of the year. At a church where the weekly attendance is usually 60, 50 members showed up to volunteer.

"If this thing didn't do anything else," Lyons said, "having all of us together working for a common cause for our community makes this worth doing."

Volunteers weren't limited to church members. On the morning of the Aug. 8 event, a mother brought her two teenage sons to help set up. The boys, Michael and Robert Maxwell, brought out the tables and chairs and did the bulk of the morning's heavy lifting.

"We wanted to volunteer together because we wanted to get work experience," said Michael, 17, the older of the two. "I like doing this for the kids."

Families were able to move smoothly around the church's perimeter from registration in the entry way to the backpack distribution at a side doorway to the concession stand along the back.

In the church parking lot were carnival games and a table where people could write to servicemen and women overseas. His Word in Song, a local Christian rock band, also volunteered to perform in the park next to the church.

"They've got this down to a science," said Carol Ann Blow, St. Andrew's senior pastor.

Blow and her predominantly white congregation hoped the event

would help the church reach its goal to become more multicultural and more closely resemble its racially mixed neighborhood.

Christy Ayers was grateful for the church's outreach. Both her daughter, Kidaakasha, 5, and son, Willie, 6, were excited about their new backpacks.

"This is really helpful for us when we don't have much to buy school supplies," Ayers said. "And it's also a great time."

Like St. Andrew, Wiggins Memorial UMC in south Fayetteville also serves a low-income neighborhood. The church had a back-to-school party where members distributed school supplies and gently used clothes and shoes as well. In addition, the church gave away new undergarments and socks.

"We have kids in the neighborhood who would be glad just to have new clothes," said Cherrie Frazee, the church children's director. "They don't have to be brand new, but new to them. We've had a lot of people in the community and other churches donate to this."

More than 30 children and their families came out for the Wiggins festivities on Aug. 15. They delighted in their new school gear, joined in the games, munched on the free snacks and prayed for their schools and teachers.

#### So long, summer

Even with kids back in the classroom, Kaye Gann of First UMC

in Manila hoped her church's fourth Back-to-School Bash would give local youth a last taste of summer.

The church's youth passed out fliers about the event to their friends during the first weeks of school. The northeastern Arkansas congregation also planned to lure local teens with a disc jockey's tunes.

"In Manila, like other small towns, kids drive from one end of town to the other," said Gann, the church's youth director. "When they hear the music, they walk up and check out what's going on."

Ultimately, about 90 youth and adults showed up on Aug. 22 to try their hand at carnival games like bowling, darts and water guns; bounce around in an inflatable moonwalk and bungee run; and sing along to a karaoke contest.

They also listened to a short homily by Kurt Boggan, the Northeast District superintendent, who encouraged the teens to stay connected to church during the school year.

"I hope the public will view the church that as a place that welcomes and puts kids first," Ganne said. "Maybe our speaker will reach a kid who needs to hear about Jesus."

Melissa Polk, the interim adult minister at First UMC in Conway, says, as a parent, she appreciates whenever kids can connect church life with their non-church life.

"I think it sends a message to the kids that the entire church family is behind them."

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## COMING UP

**Mallettown UMC**, 274 Town Circle, Springfield, will celebrate its homecoming at morning worship at 11 a.m. Sept. 6. A potluck lunch and congregational singing will follow. The church is on the Arkansas Register of Historical Properties and the National Register of Historic Places. To learn more, call Carolyn Dammann at (501) 893-2474.

**The Arkansas Chapter of Methodists for Social Action** will present the Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock, at 10 a.m. Sept. 12 at First UMC in Little Rock. His topic will be "Welcoming Strangers: The Human Rights of Immigrants." Tickets cost \$10. First UMC in Little Rock United Methodist Women will host a brunch. For reservations, contact lizagodwin@sbcglobal.net or (501) 771-1982.

**Trinity UMC**, 1101 N. Mississippi St., Little Rock, will hold its second Pet Blessing service at 11 a.m. Sept. 12 in the courtyard. The pastors will bless anything that won't bite them including dogs, cats, iguanas and other beloved critters. To learn more, call the church at (501) 666-2813.

**Arkansas Conference Volunteers in Mission** will present a team leader-training workshop from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 18 at St. James UMC in Little Rock.

The session will cover how to select a mission, how to make travel arrangements and the spiritual aspects of the mission experience.

Jeremy Basset, the director of Volunteers in Mission for the Oklahoma Conference, will be the workshop leader. Registration costs \$20 and covers team leader materials and lunch. Register at [www.arumc.org/VIM](http://www.arumc.org/VIM).

Fred Allen, National Director for Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century (SBC21), will provide leadership for the **Fall 2009 Crossing Jordan Institute**.

The event will be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sept. 19 in the Harry R. Kendall Center of Philander Smith College, 2 Trudie Kibbe Reed Drive in Little Rock.

Allen, formally the executive director of African American Initiatives and International Outreach at the United Methodist Publishing House, will give the

keynote address and the charge to the group. Workshops for the fall event include: "Face to Face or Facebook" (enriching youth and young adults leadership); "Each One Reach One" (developing an evangelism plan for your congregation); "Who Is My Neighbor?" (community development in a congregational model).

Each congregation that brings five people to the event will receive \$100 for programs related to church and community development. All people must be registered on-line and be present at the time of check presentations.

Registrations required by Sept. 15 for the \$100 award.

To register, visit [www.arumc.org](http://www.arumc.org) and the click on "Registration." Admission is free before Sept 15. On-site registration is \$20 per person.

To learn more, contact Maxine Allen at (501) 661-1153 or at [mallen@arumc.org](mailto:mallen@arumc.org).

**Faith UMC**, 9820 W. Markham St., Little Rock, will host a women's conference from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Sept. 19. The title is "Vessels of the Lord." Prayer in preparation for the event will be at 6:30-9 p.m. Sept. 18. To learn more, contact Nancy Scott at (501) 337-0065 or [cncscott@suddenlink.net](mailto:cncscott@suddenlink.net).

**The Arkansas Conference Day of Evangelism Seminar** will be at 2-4 p.m. Sept. 23 at First UMC in Stuttgart, 307 E. Fourth St. John Ed Mathison will lead the course. A free-will offering will be collected. To register, e-mail David W. Bush at [thepastor@stuttgartfumc.org](mailto:thepastor@stuttgartfumc.org).

The Arkansas Conference will offer **"Rethink Church" training** on welcoming newcomers and connecting better with those outside United Methodist churches. The workshop will be from 9 a.m. to noon Sept. 26 at Asbury UMC, 1700 Napa Valley Drive in Little Rock.

In the welcoming portion of the training, participants will put themselves in the place of a newcomer and introduce the idea of building a welcoming lifestyle in the church.

The connection portion will concentrate on how to help people connect with others and the church in ways that involved their interests, their spiritual journey to date and their desire to connect with something — and Someone —

beyond themselves.

To register, visit [www.arumc.org](http://www.arumc.org) and the click on "Registration." To learn more, contact Martha Taylor at (501) 324-8005 or [mtaylor@arumc.org](mailto:mtaylor@arumc.org).

**Camp Aldersgate**, 200 Aldersgate Road, Little Rock, will hold its annual Fish Fry at 4 to 7 p.m. Sept. 26. Meals cost \$15 for adults, \$10 for children 4-11, \$10 for senior adults 65 and older, and free for children under 4. To learn more, call (501) 225-1444.

**Goshen UMC** will sponsor its fifth Goshen Gallop at 9 a.m. Sept. 26. The proceeds will go towards the completion of the Goshen Area Senior Center hosted by the church.

Participants can choose to walk or run 5 kilometers, one mile or just sleep in for \$20. Free massages will be available.

To learn more, visit [www.goshenumc.com](http://www.goshenumc.com) or e-mail [goshenumc@gmail.com](mailto:goshenumc@gmail.com). Google Backwoods Barn to map the race location, east of Fayetteville.

Volunteers may contact Dennis Stropes at (479) 790-1640.

**BlackCommunityDevelopers, Inc.**, will have its fifth Recovery Jam in honor of National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month. The event will be at 4-8 p.m. Sept. 28 at the Little Rock River Market Pavilion, 400 President Clinton Drive. Integrity will be the featured artist. To learn more, call Sandra Mitchell at (501) 663-7221.

**Mount Sequoyah Conference and Retreat Center in Fayetteville** will have the Clergywomen's Gathering on Oct. 5-7. The theme is "Living in Balance: Recapturing Our Creativity." The gathering will include small group workshops on "Living the Story", "Soul Strings", "Self-Exploration through Mask Making", "SoulCollage\*", "The Art of Eating Mindfully" and "A Still Small Voice." Continuing education units will be available.

Cost for single occupancy is \$325 and \$285 for double occupancy and includes program fee, two nights and seven meals. To learn more, contact Kim Ross at [spiritualdirector@mountsequoyah.org](mailto:spiritualdirector@mountsequoyah.org) or (800) 760-8126.

To register online or download a registration form at [www.mountsequoyah.org](http://www.mountsequoyah.org).



Youth and others hit the pavement during the Walk for Children and Families at the Big Dam Bridge on Aug. 7. The annual event on the pedestrian bridge between North Little Rock and Little Rock benefits Methodist Family Health.

Photo by Patrick Shownes

## VOLUNTEERS IN MISSION

This Volunteer in Mission listing includes mission opportunities offered by local churches and districts. Often there is room for additional volunteers to join the team. For more information on any of these projects, contact the individuals listed or Don Weeks, Arkansas Area Volunteers in Mission coordinator, 18 Montagne Court, Little Rock, AR 72223; (501) 868-9193 or 681-2909; [dweeks@arumc.org](mailto:dweeks@arumc.org).

**Oct. 13-29:** Tanzanian Medical Mission trip sponsored by One Book Foundation and Charles Wiggins. The team will be working at the Coptic Hospital in Musoma and teaching courses to improve the health of the Tanzanians and to enrich their faith. A doctor is especially needed. Contact David Poulter at (479) 903-1434 or [poultersdg@yahoo.com](mailto:poultersdg@yahoo.com) or Martha McCandless (479) 442-9975 or [mpalbright@cox.net](mailto:mpalbright@cox.net).

tools and labor. Any church can apply for help through their District Superintendent. Teams can sign up by contacting Don Weeks at [dweeks@arumc.org](mailto:dweeks@arumc.org).

**Wesley Foundation, UALR:** Help needed with general maintenance, cleanup, painting, etc. Contact Maxine Allen at [mallen@arumc.org](mailto:mallen@arumc.org), her office at (501) 663-1153 or her cell phone at (501) 539-0280.

**Mount Eagle Christian Center**, 935 Beal Road in Clinton, is requesting chain saw and cleanup crews. E-mail Lu Harding at [lu@mounteagle.org](mailto:lu@mounteagle.org) or call her at (501) 753-4580.

**Grandriver Station of Louisiana Disaster Response** needs volunteer teams to rebuild homes damaged by the last two hurricanes. Contact Michelle L. Hadden at (225) 659-7450.

**Ongoing: "This Olde Church"** Volunteers in Mission project. Help restore and repair churches in the Arkansas Conference. Teams will be painting, weather-proofing, doing general repairs, landscaping and other jobs. Teams DO NOT do roofing, plumbing or electrical. The church that asks for teams will provide housing, help prepare meals and provide showers. The teams will supply their food, the materials,

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# Church honors United Methodist architect who gave it room to grow

HEATHER HAHN  
Editor

Two things Edgar "Eddie" Allen Branton loved: building construction and the United Methodist Church.

So when Volunteers in Mission sought people to help build a church sanctuary, the retired general contractor and architect immediately offered his services.

From mid-2004 until the end of 2005, he was on site nearly every day directing the construction of the new sanctuary he had designed for First United Methodist Church in Sweet Home. Branton, a member of Highland Valley UMC in Little Rock, celebrated with the congregation when the new worship space was dedicated on Jan. 1, 2006. But a little more than a year later he died while out fishing on Lake Maumelle.

To honor the late architect's memory, members of First United Methodist Church in Sweet Home have decided to establish scholarship in Branton's name for architectural students.

Barbara Douglas, the church's pastor, presented a giant check for \$10,000 to Branton's four adult children, Allen, Andy, Chris and



Volunteers from Theresa Hoover and St. James UMC and the Sweet Home community help build a new sanctuary for Sweet Home UMC in Pulaski County. On the ladder is Barbara Douglas, the church's pastor.

Photo courtesy of Sweet Home UMC

Susan and their families at the end of the church's 135th anniversary service on June 28.

"He had given us so much," Douglas said. "We wanted to give back to him, and this will be a good legacy for him."

The congregation raised half of the scholarship funds, and the Brantons donated the other half. The United Methodist Foundation of

Arkansas is the scholarship endowment's trustee and is in the process of determining how the money will be distributed.

Douglas said that what the late Branton did was desperately needed. When she arrived at the Sweet Home congregation in 1999, the tiny congregation had just one room in which to worship and attend Sunday School. Only eight people regularly

attended the church, Douglas said.

"People want to attend an up-to-date church that has space for fellowship," Douglas said. "We needed space for Sunday School and our outreach programs."

With the new sanctuary, the church was able to convert the old building into a fellowship hall and Sunday School classrooms.

Today, the church attracts between 50 and 60 worshippers each week. That's largely because of the ministries the church now has space to provide, Douglas said. These ministries include an after-school tutoring program, a summer camp, a food pantry and a van ministry that regularly brings children in the neighborhood to the church.

Roberta Douglas, the senior pastor's daughter, said when her mother first came to the Sweet Home congregation from west Little Rock, many in the rural Pulaski County community saw her as an outsider.

But that changed when the pastor joined in the building project.

"A group of guys used to sit around drinking outside the church," Roberta Douglas recalled. "My mom

told them 'no,' they couldn't do that while she was pastor. Now those very same guys are helping to organize the food pantry and helping elderly ladies carry their food."

Andy Branton, the late architect's second son who lives in Little Rock, said the project was equally beneficial for his father.

"He and that project were made for each other," the younger Branton said. "It was really a very good thing for him in his retirement to have something where he could serve."

As he was building of the sanctuary, Eddie Branton was also building relationships with church members, volunteers and the larger Sweet Home community.

Andy Branton recalled that his father once left his tools on site overnight and they were stolen. But a member of the community tracked down the thief and made sure the architect got his tools back.

Branton said his family was very touched when Barbara Douglas suggested the scholarship.

"Eddie was a lovable old character," Andy Branton said. "And she obviously appreciated what he did."

Once upon a time, a young mother named Mary and her 10-year-old daughter, Felicia, faced a frightening battle. The little girl fought with her emotions and her behavior. She couldn't concentrate at school. She lashed out with fits of rage. Life was spinning out of control, and the battle was being lost. Then the two began a new chapter, and bravely they faced their struggle – together.

When we found Methodist Family Health, we found hope in their loving care," says Mary. They correctly diagnosed Felicia's condition and took the time to listen to our story." Felicia is now a student at their Day Treatment School, improving every day, and on the road to getting her high school diploma. Each day is a battle, but thanks to the support of Methodist Family Health, we're prepared to win the fight."

Methodist Family Health provides treatment and support to women, children and families in Arkansas who suffer from emotional, behavioral and addiction issues.

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# REPORTER

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2009 DESIGN PICS PHOTO

Economic circumstances today may offer churches a “teachable moment” regarding the practice of tithing, say United Methodist clergy.

## Churches urged to teach the tithe

BY MARY JACOBS  
Staff Writer

**F**our words that many United Methodists will likely hear in church soon: stewardship, pledging, gifts, giving.

Two words you might not hear: tithe, tithing.

Churches are launching their fall annual stewardship campaigns at a time when unemployment hovers around 10 percent and financial markets remain

shaky. Many pastors may even hesitate to preach about the biblical teaching on tithing: giving 10 percent of one's income to God.

“There's a likelihood that many pastors will shy away from the concept of tithing,” said Dan Dick, director of connectional ministries for the Wisconsin Conference of the United Methodist Church and author of *Beyond Money* (Discipleship Resources, 2006.) In a poor economic climate, he said, many pastors “will get more apologetic and cautious about putting ‘pressure’ on people to give.”

The denomination's *Book of Discipline* prescribes that each annual conference, as part of its responsibilities in the area of stewardship, is to “educate the local church that tithing is the mini-

mum goal of giving in the United Methodist Church.”

And the 2004 *Book of Resolutions* affirms the 2000 General Conference's adoption of “a program for teaching and preaching for spiritual growth in giving, with an emphasis of setting tithing as a goal for every person in The United Methodist Church.”

But the reality is that giving by United Methodists averages less than 2 percent of annual incomes. And a survey of all Americans conducted by the Barna Group in 2007, showed that only about 5 percent of adults tithed. “Whether they believe in the principle of tithing or not, few Americans give away

## Q&A:

### How to help when you see hurting people

Retired United Methodist Bishop Joe Pennel has over 45 years of experience in serving the church. He's putting that pastoral experience to good use in his new book, *The Gift of Presence: A Guide to Helping Those Who Suffer* (Abingdon Press, August).

He spoke with managing editor Robin Russell about common questions that arise about helping people who are suffering.

**Your book is about offering our presence, not necessarily fixing someone's pain. Why do so many of us need help with the idea of “being present”?**

When I was serving as a pastor for 45 years or so, the questions that I had more than any others were, “Why do people suffer?” and “How do I help people who suffer?” Lay people would say to me, “I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do.” I heard that over and over and over again. The book really grew as a response to the concerns that I heard from lay people.



Bishop Joe Pennel

■ See ‘Q&A,’ page 2A

■ See ‘Tithing,’ page 8A



## FAITH WATCH

**Freedom panel adds India to 'watch list'**

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom placed India on its "watch list" on Aug. 13, citing "inadequate" response from the Indian government to violence against religious minorities. The commission, an independent, bi-partisan panel that advises the White House, listed India as a "country of particular concern" in 2002, when groups related to the Hindu nationalist party Bharatiya Janata were on the rise. India had since been removed from that list, but attacks on Christians in 2008 led to new concerns.

**Senate confirms Diaz as diplomat to Vatican**

The U.S. Senate in August confirmed Cuban-born theologian Miguel Diaz as the country's ninth ambassador to the Vatican. Dr. Diaz will be the first Hispanic to serve as American envoy since formal diplomatic ties with the Vatican began in 1984, according to Religion News Service. Dr. Diaz, 45, has taught theology at the College of Saint Benedict and St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., since 2004. He is a board member of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

**Pakistani Christians protest mob attacks**

Church schools in Pakistan's Punjab region closed for three days in August to protest the killing of eight Christians during an Aug. 1 attack by Islamic marchers. The victims, including four women and two children, were shot and burned to death after rumors were spread that Christians had desecrated a copy of the Quran. The World Council of Churches appealed to Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari to ensure the security of Christians, noting that the attack was the third in two months.

—Compiled by Bill Fentum

## ■ Q&amp;A Continued from page 1A

I put this little book together as a tool that people can use. I had in mind people like Stephen Ministers, ALIVE hospice people, lay people, pastors who need a refresher. But also just to give lay people some tools they can use: what to say, what not to say. I also deal with the question of God and human freedom, a small way of helping people understand how much suffering arises out of the misuse of our freedom. That's kind of the theoretical part of the book.

**How do you define "presence"?**

I would define presence as being both physically and emotionally present to people who are suffering, looking for a spiritual connection to people who are suffering in one way or another. An e-mail doesn't quite do as much as a knock on the door.

**'Life gives us a lot of opportunities to be present to people that are hurting in one way or another.'**

**And people can tell when we really want to be there, versus just checking off an obligation.**

That's correct. Sincerity is very important. Stephen Ministers and pastors can fall into repetition, where it comes across to people as not being deeply sincere, not deeply compassionate—that one is simply taking care of a task.

**Many of us don't know what to say when someone is suffering. You recommend the use of silence first. How is that helpful?**

There are times when we just need to sit with people and be silent

with them. To let the person who's suffering take the initiative and open the conversation if they want to. We don't always have to be talking.

**When it is time to speak, what are some common phrases to avoid?**

People say: "Keep your chin up." "This too shall pass." "Don't worry." "You're in good hands at this hospital." "You sure do look good today." But sometimes, just the false words of encouragement, using clichés, that really does not help people in a deep way.

**Using Scripture can be a tricky thing. How do we know when it's appropriate to quote a verse?**

I can only speak out of my experience. I think it's important to say to the person who is suffering, "Would you like for me to read Scripture with you?" You always get permission. If the person says, "Yes, that would really be helpful," then this book has a resource that you can use for that purpose.

It's more intuitive. People who are deeply religious—maybe they go to church with you, and you know that they are people who love the Scriptures—I have found that those people welcome Scripture being read. We should not impose that on people, however.

**You warn against being a "busybody." How can we show sincere concern without crossing that line?**

I think what I mean by that is trying to gather a lot of information that does not pertain to the situation. If a person's dying of cancer, you don't say, "Well, is your daughter still going through a divorce?" You

stay focused on the person. By "busybody," I mean just trying to get in every part of a person's life, thereby missing the opportunity to be connected to the person.

**You also talk about tragic situations, like a suicide, where we might be probing too much.**

Yes, it can happen. With suicide, I think it's important for the family to tell you what they want to tell you. We don't need to be overly curious about that.

**Sometimes we may not agree theologically with a person's response to his or her own suffering. For instance, someone might say, "Well, God must be trying to teach me something here." How do you**

**respond to that?**

I don't try to correct their theology. Rather I try to respond to the person who is articulating that theology. I would respond by saying, "Well, God really cares about us if we are healthy or suffering." But it doesn't help a person to try to correct their theology if they're suffering because their husband just left them. Now there might come a time later when you have a relationship with the person. But those are not teaching moments.

**How do we know when we've been a helpful presence?**

Sometimes you know, and sometimes you know later. When I was elected to the episcopacy and left Brentwood United Methodist Church, they gave me one of these notebooks full of letters from people. There was not one letter in that notebook about the new buildings that were built, the new programs that were put in place, the staff that was added, the budget that was increased, the missionaries that were sent. Every single letter had to do with, "I remember when Mother died." "I remember when my husband left me." It was telling me that the things that really meant something to them had to do with my

pastoral relationship to them during their time of crisis and suffering.

**Do you think some people have a particular pastoral gift of presence, or is it something anyone can learn?**

I think if you love people, genuinely love people, whether you're clergy or lay, you can find ways to be present in appropriate ways. If we're too turned in upon ourselves and just want to be the hero in situations, then that's not really helpful to people.

**What would you say to someone who might think, "Well, I've really messed up in this situation. I'm not going to do this again"?**

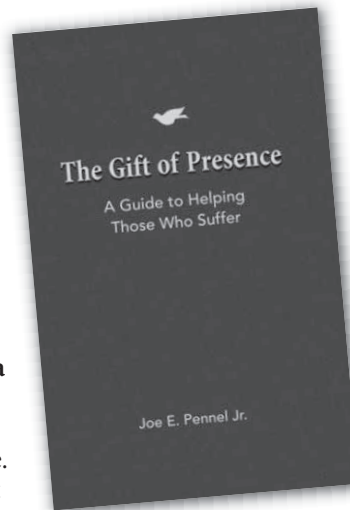
I'd say to them, "Well, let's review what happened. Let's look at the conversation. You may not have messed up as much as you think you have." Again, it's presence that matters. Sometimes we do feel like we've messed up with the words we say. But if you've ever had a death in your family, you remember every person who came to you. And you remember the people whom you thought would come, and did not.

**With all our digital communication today, we can't get away with just sending an e-mail, can we?**

I think e-mails can be used effectively. A hand-written note is better, and presence is even better. There's something about the incarnate word. In Jesus we see the Word incarnate. When it's an embodied word, an embodied presence—that communicates in ways that a paper presence does not. It's so easy for me, for example, to send an e-mail, and think I've done it; I've just taken care of it.

Sometimes it's not being formally present with people—as in their home or at their bedside. Sometimes it's when you bump into people in the grocery store, when you know there's been pain in their life. To understand the importance of being present and connecting to those folks. Life gives us a lot of opportunities to be present to people that are hurting in one way or another. And as John says, it's the Word made flesh that dwells among us. And that Word is full of grace and full of truth.

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## UM CONNECTIONS

**Reality star begins studies at seminary**

Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, the reality TV star from *The Apprentice* and *The Surreal Life*, began



**Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth**

studies Aug. 17 for a doctor of ministry degree at United Methodist-related United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. "I

made a very personal decision to study the word of God," Ms. Manigault-Stallworth said in a written statement. "I want to grow as a person and finally discover what God's purpose for my life is."

**Book tells stories of call to ministry**

*Beyond the Burning Bush: Hearing and Answering God's Call*, a collection of 20 personal stories about the call to ordained ministry, was written for young people exploring God's call. Published by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, it is available at [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com).

**Global group honors three communicators**

Three Methodists were among those recently recognized as honorary life members of the World Association of Christian Communicators. The Rev. William Fore, a United Methodist pastor, the association's president from 1982 to 1990, served as executive director of the communication commission of the U.S. National Council of Churches. The Rev. Carlos Valle, a Methodist minister from Argentina, was the association's top executive from 1986 through 2001, and a staff member of the ecumenical theological school, University Institute ISEDET, in Buenos Aires. Shirley Whipple Struchen retired from United Methodist Communications in 2001 and is now executive director of the Religion Communicators Council.

—Compiled by Mary Jacobs

# Faith leaders advocate health care reform

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

President Barack Obama and several faith leaders launched a campaign for U.S. health care reform with an Aug. 19 audio Web cast. The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) was one of the interfaith event's sponsors, along with dozens of other faith groups.

"I know we've got thousands of people listening from many different denominations and faiths," Mr. Obama said during the Web cast. "But the one thing that you all share is a moral conviction; you know that this debate over health care goes to the heart of who we are as a people."

The Web cast launched the "40 Days to Health Reform" campaign, which, according to a GBCS news release, seeks "to make sure that the faith community has a strong voice in the outcome of the health-reform debate." Plans include a TV ad, prayer vigils, rallies and meetings with members of

Congress before they vote on a reform bill this fall.

United Methodist speakers on the Web cast included the Rev. Cory Sparks, pastor of Faith Community UMC in Youngsville, La., who criticized insurance companies "that deny people coverage for pre-existing conditions, jack up rates when people become sick, or force folks to pay more than they can afford for the care they need."

It's crucial, Mr. Sparks said, "to make sure our fellow worshippers, neighbors and co-workers hear what it means for our families."

The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* calls health care "a basic human right," and states that it is a "governmental responsibility to provide all citizens with health care" (Social Principles, Paragraph 162.V).

In a separate initiative, the "John 10:10 Challenge," issued in July by the GBCS, urges church members to advocate for health care reform based on Jesus' declaration in John's Gospel: "I

came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." A Web site at [www.1010challenge.org](http://www.1010challenge.org) includes a petition to Congress and op-ed columns by Jim Winkler, the board's top executive and an outspoken supporter of comprehensive reform.

The denomination's stance on health care reform, however, has met with some controversy.

Mark Smith, an optometrist and member of First UMC in Pine Mountain, Ga., responded in a letter to one of Mr. Winkler's columns. The reform bill supported by the White House, Mr. Smith said, would give employers an incentive "to drop health coverage for employees, since providing such coverage may cost more than dumping the employees into the public system."

The 2008 General Conference, the denomination's highest legislative body, adopted a resolution that supports "a totally non-profit health-insurance system, a single-payer system administered by the federal government."

Lana Hannen, a member of Harleton UMC in Harleton, Texas, opposes the reform effort and says the resolution went too far.

"The church should not take a position either way on an issue that is so sensitive to its members," Ms. Hannen said. "We are not a political body, and this is not a religious issue. . . . It is really a test of faith, when the church you love takes a stand against you."

Sam Marullo, a student at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., teaches a Sunday school class attended by several homeless people at Capitol Hill UMC. Seeing their plight, he said, leaves him unsure how to feel about health care reform.

"I think some people are scared, and maybe legitimately so," Mr. Marullo said. "If somehow the health care system turns into a place where the quality of care is negatively affected, I'd be scared of that."

But, he added, "As Christians, we've got to think about how in God's kingdom there is enough for everybody."

## UM agencies partner for discounts on meds

BY MARY JACOBS  
Staff Writer

If you have health insurance, you and your insurer pay a discounted price on the drugs you buy. If you don't have insurance, likely you'll pay the full retail price.

"It's a little-known quirk of our healthcare system," said Jim Robbins, CEO of PS Card. "It's a little like a customer walking into an auto dealership with a fistful of cash, and being told, 'Since you're paying with cash, you'll have to pay sticker.'"

"What that means is that the poorest people often end up paying the highest prices for prescription drugs," said the Rev. Mearle Griffith, chief executive of the United Methodist Association of Health and Welfare Ministries.

But through a partnership between the association and PS Card, there's now a way for United Methodists to get the same discounts, through PS Card's discount prescription card.

The PS Card allows users to access discounted pricing for prescription drugs at their local pharmacies. Discounts are up to 50 percent off the cash price for virtually all generic and brand-name prescription drugs at over 56,000 participating pharmacies nationwide.

The card involves a cooperative

arrangement between Santa Barbara-based PS Card and the association, which serves nearly 400 United Methodist-related health and human service agencies across the U.S. These agencies serve more than 32 million people annually.

Millions of the cards are now available through the association's member agencies and through United Methodist churches across the U.S.

Mr. Griffith says that PS Card was chosen over other discount prescription programs after a comparison of available options, initially undertaken by the denomination's General Board of Global Ministries.

"We chose PS Card because there's no cost to the end user, and it didn't cost us anything to develop the program," he said. "Also, we liked the benefits and the number of pharmacies involved through this card."

PS Card holders pay no membership or other fees. All individuals are eligible regardless of employment status, income level, age or citizenship.

How does PS Card make a profit? The company is able to offer discounts on FDA-approved drugs through its bulk-purchasing agreements with pharmaceutical companies. When a cardholder purchases a prescription, the pharmacy pays a small referral fee to PS Card.

"It's a private solution to a public problem, involving the church," said



COURTESY PHOTO

**PS Card helps uninsured consumers stay on their needed medications by giving them access to discounted pricing for all prescription drugs, both brand name and generic.**

Mr. Robbins. "The cards are easy to get and can be used by anyone. We only make money when people save money."

Consumers may also obtain items such as diabetic supplies at a discount with the card. PS Card officials estimate the cards save consumers an estimated \$10 million a year.

The partnership with the United Methodist Association will help PS Cards reach more Americans needing help paying the high cost of prescription drugs, according to Mr. Robbins.

"The United Methodist Church

reaches into virtually every community across the United States," he said.

The free PS Cards are available through the United Methodist Association at [www.umassociation.org](http://www.umassociation.org) or from PS Card online at [www.pscard.com/refs/uma](http://www.pscard.com/refs/uma). Personalized plastic cards are also available.

Persons without Internet access can obtain the cards by calling 1-877-716-4457. Churches may also place bulk orders for cards and display racks at no cost.

[mjacobs@umr.org](mailto:mjacobs@umr.org)



# Faith and joy keep revival going in r

BY JAN SNIDER  
United Methodist News Service

**M**OSCOW—The gray, murky snow is plowed high in waves against the busy city streets.

Women in black, spike-heeled boots and fur-covered coats stride forward as if on a Parisian runway, while below them old women crouch among the shuffling swarms, begging for rubles to buy their bread.

Down the street, police officers openly hustle bribes from drivers who are too busy to argue bogus tickets. Elsewhere, it is every well-groomed man for himself, as the latest cell phones slip into high-fashion pockets.

And Christians who once faced the gulag for proclaiming their faith struggle anew in a society that now pays homage to modern capitalism.

“People do not care. People do not go to church,” says Eurasia Bishop Hans Växby.

Headquartered in the same building as the Theological Seminary of the Russia United Methodist Church in Moscow, this Finnish-born bishop has a keen outlook on Russian society. Although he oversees the largest episcopal area in the United Methodist Church, with 11 countries under his supervision, Russia presents a particularly challenging situation.

Not only does a large portion of society shun religion, those who do care are generally pro-Russian Orthodox and staunchly anti-Protestant.

“Unfortunately,” he says, “there is a lot of prejudice toward Protestant groups; so people do not easily find their way to our churches. But, if they do, there is the same freshness and you can see the joy in the eyes of the people and you can see how people find God.”

## Fleeting infatuation

When Communism fell in the early 1990s, Russians in the first heady days of political freedom embraced newfound religious freedom with vigor. All religious groups grew as a pent-up demand for spirituality burst open.

But a backlash emerged. Protestant churches were seen by some as foreign influences exploiting a nation in transition. Even Methodism, which has a 120-year history in Eurasia, is viewed as a foreign religion with “cultish” practices. This is especially true in communities where there is sentimentality toward Soviet society.

Voronezh, a city of 800,000 in southwestern Russia that is an overnight train ride from Moscow, lies in an area that is part of a pro-Communist region known as the Red Belt. It was once a robust factory town under the Soviet system. When government-owned businesses closed, resentment grew against outside influence, including the three United Methodist congregations.



UMNS PHOTO COURTESY OF THE REV. IGOR VOLOVODOV

The Rev. Igor Volovodov, pastor of Peter and Paul United Methodist Church in Voronezh, Russia, baptizes a parishioner.



UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE PHOTOS BY JAN SNIDER

ABOVE: Alexander Kolesnikov (left) and Yuri Konovalov (right) stand with another church member outside Revival United Methodist Church in Latnaya, Russia. BELOW: Alexander Kozyrev owns a Christian bookstore in Voronezh.

The hostility is felt at Rev. Irina Mitina’s small congregation in the center of the city.

Ms. Mitina laughs often and is quick to smile in response to frowns of her neighbors. The neighborhood where she pastors Resurrection United Methodist Church is populated with unemployed Soviet factory workers who found communism comfortable and often drink to their disappointment in democracy.

Her church is housed in a faded factory building that shares a courtyard with blocks of dreary apartments. A former English professor at a Russian University, Ms. Mitina is comfortable speaking about the challenges of growing a church in an inhospitable neighborhood.

“They say they don’t want to come to our church. They say that we are sects and cults and things like this; just prejudice. But we do what we can.”

She laughs as she observes the new windows in her building, “And we are very happy that they don’t break the windows.”

But some churches have suffered greatly.

## Harassment, hostility

The Rev. Yuri Davydkin of Mercy United Methodist Church in Gatchina remembers the fire that destroyed his cherished worship space. It was in



1999, before his congregation was part of the Russia United Methodist Church.

The church was set on fire. “Everything was destroyed. It was a strong blow,” says Mr. Davydkin, a man modest in size, but not demeanor. “There were people who wanted to get rid of us, to burn us out of this church.”

Mr. Davydkin regularly has to take matters to city authorities when harassed; the antagonism, he says, comes from the leadership of the local Russian Orthodox Church.

“When two or three ministers come to the nursing home we usually can be with the people and have a Bible study and pray for them,” he

says. “But today when we came we found out that a representative of the Orthodox Church has been there and he has forbidden to let us in.”

Like so many United Methodist pastors, Mr. Davydkin vows to continue; he raises his frail voice and waves a well-worn book of Russian law.

“We will visit them, and it does not matter what difficulties we will have. We know that we live in the country where the Orthodox Church is a semi-state organization. But we also know that according to the law of our country we have the full right to continue our activity on the territory of our city and the district.



# modern Russia

“We will continue to serve the Lord in the place where the Lord has put us.”

As a former president of the Russia United Methodist seminary, the Rev. Tobias Dietze observed society’s shift in allegiance toward Russian Orthodoxy. “Maybe they do not know much about Christianity, but to be Orthodox is a kind of new identity which, of course, conflicts with the activities that other churches here undertake in Russia,” he says.

Mr. Davydkin is not discouraged: “I know about a pastor who had a very small church. His name is Jesus Christ. In his church there were only 12 members, but these 12 people overturned the whole world. They turned it upside down.”

Still, there are ominous signs in some parts of the country that there is little progress.

Last year, a United Methodist house church in Smolensk was temporarily closed for teaching children’s Sunday school during regular worship services. The complaint was reportedly lodged by a local Russian Orthodox bishop who was said to have called the church a “pseudo-religious organization.”

The Russian Ministry of Justice recently elected a “sectologist” to head the council of experts charged with guiding Russian courts on religious matters, an appointment some church officials find disconcerting. This official considers Protestants to be among those cults that should be reined in.

## Fertile ground

Having a physical presence is one way that United Methodist churches have found tolerance.

During the days of Communism, the golden onion-domed Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries were often used as warehouses, orphanages and even farms. Today, the government sponsors the refurbishment of the elaborately bejeweled structures and is helping to build impressive new churches throughout the federation.

By contrast, Protestant churches are sometimes as simple as a living room in a small Khrushchev-era apartment, a repurposed industrial building or a minimally furnished institutional space.

Russian Protestants understand that having a tangible existence means to many observers that the church is viable and that the congregation intends to grow.

In the Central Black Soil district of the Russian United Methodist Church, everything grows well, according to Rev. Igor Volovodov, pastor of Peter

and Paul United Methodist Church.

Mr. Volovodov speaks like a proud farmer nurturing his fields. “We have big plans,” he says, “We want to be a church that plants new churches. We want to be a church where there is a lot of youth. We want for our church to become a mother church of other churches.”

Although there are only 50 official members, the congregation enjoys a new red brick building on landscaped grounds in a neighborhood of recently constructed upscale homes. An expansion is nearly complete.

Mr. Volovodov allies with other Protestant congregations to help grow. “We want to do it with other evangelical churches; with Baptists, Pentecostals and charismatic churches. Here in our city we have a good relationship with these churches.”

Across the city, Alexander Kozyrev watches the busy traffic zoom by as he stands outside a converted first floor apartment underneath a large banner that advertises Christian books.

It has taken two years and a great deal of paperwork but his Protestant bookstore is now open. “People need such a store,” says Mr. Kozyrev. “There is no other store like this in Voronezh or in the areas around.”

As a Russian United Methodist, Mr. Kozyrev has put his hopes in this store and feels that educating government officials will help him overcome major difficulties. “They do not understand how important such a store is for the city.”

## Brick by brick

By contrast, on the rural outskirts of the metropolis is a town called Latnaya, where a pre-World War II home serves as the sanctuary for Revival United Methodist Church.

Surrounded by a weathered picket fence, the building’s green metal siding competes with its rusted undercoat. Inside, scraps of yellowed linoleum are still glued in spots to the wooden floor; mouse holes sprinkle the baseboard.

The worship space is a side room off the main hall furnished with three high-back benches covered with old rugs. The small altar table is draped in an elegant pink tablecloth. Displayed with care are embroidered textiles, the Russian edition of *The Upper Room* devotional, wooden crosses and a Bible.

In the backyard stands an ancient, but working outhouse, and beyond that a small patch of land that is farmed by church members. The congregation serves the prison, the orphanages and a handful of Protestants in this town of 10,000.



**ABOVE:** Established in 1994, New Commandment United Methodist Church is the oldest United Methodist congregation in Voronezh. **RIGHT:** The Church of Our Savior on the Spilled Blood in St. Petersburg is built on the site where Emperor Alexander II was assassinated in 1881.

Next door is the shell of a brick church; the small congregation has been adding to it piece by piece for over three years.

Bishop Växby predicts it will take time to build trust, to build bridges between United Methodist and Russian Orthodox Christians and to sow seeds of faith in new communities.

But the bishop marvels at the journey.

“To see how they fight and struggle with this calling and how strong the urge to live for God is, this is moving and very hopeful,” he says.

Ms. Snider is a producer with United Methodist Communications.





# How Twitter has helped me be a better disciple

BY LEONARD SWEET  
Special Contributor

I have been on Twitter for less than a year, but it has already changed my life.

Less than two years old, with fewer than 50 employees—and as far as anyone can tell, no business plan—Twitter has grown so fast that the site is rickety and unreliable. You get the same feeling our ancestors must have had when they turned the crank of the Model-T.

But I can't imagine life without Twitter.

While a case can be made for Twitter on the basis of its role in the communications revolution (which would lead me to defend "tweets" during worship) or in political revolutions taking place around the world (Iran, for example), I want to make a more personal case.



Leonard Sweet

Twitter makes me a better Jesus disciple, partly because Twitter is my laboratory for future ministry. Here's why.

**Followership.** Twitter only knows two categories: who are you following and who are your followers. Twitter's categorical imperative is one of followership, not leadership.

Jesus' category is "leader;" my fundamental category is "follower." Even when Jesus calls me up to the front of the line, I still lead "from behind."

For the last 50 years, the church has made a fetish of a word that is hard to find even once in the New Testament ("leader") and has ignored a word that is found hundreds of times ("mathetes" or "follower," "disciple").

Twitter is a daily reminder that

everything doesn't rise and fall on leadership but on followership—who am I following, and who is following me.

The name "Christian" ("little Christ") was given to believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26) because people saw in them the Christ they followed. Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

In Twitter's ethic of followership, I am constantly reframing reality in ways that are more Jesus—more grace-full, more forgiving, more loving, more humorous—and helping my "followers" to better follow Christ. I am constantly on the prowl for things that could encourage, enrich, inspire.

## Focusing on others

I want my tweeps either to smile after reading one of my tweets, or to shake their head and sing, "What a Tweep We Have in Jesus." In my ongoing battle with self-transcendence over self-absorption, Twitter has helped me become more others-focused.

For the One who taught us to be "in" the world but not "of" the world (or "out of it" either), the question is not "Would Jesus Tweet?" but "What Would Jesus Tweet?" The Twitter question of "What are you doing?" has been replaced in my mind with "What is God doing?" and "Where do I see Jesus?" and "What am I paying attention to?"

With a new list of followers every day, and an unlimited number of po-

tential followers, I am also reminded daily that the most important people in my life I haven't met yet.

**Sound bites that bite.** If you can't say it in everyday words, you probably don't understand it yourself. And if you can't say it in less than 140 characters, you can't say it in a way that can connect with a Google world.

The first task of a missionary is to learn the language. Most of history's greatest books and thinkers have distilled their thoughts into a 140-character tweet. In fact, the single killer sentence is what has changed the world.

No one was better at tweets than Jesus. Jesus was a master at sound bites that bite with terseness and immediacy. In fact, he was always twittering the gospel in pithy, memorable phrases, and even expressed his gospel in The Great Tweet: "Love one another as I have loved you."

I suspect his followers would be well advised to RT (ReTweet) everything he said.

**Surface.** To say that someone is bubbling in or around the surface of a subject is not to say something nice. This is the greatest critique of Twitter: its numbing, crushing banality. Do I really need to know when you finished brushing your teeth this morning? Or what toothpaste you used?

But life is not just about the depths. Life is also about the surfaces. I spend large parts of my life with academics who spend their careers exploring the depths; many seldom come up.

People with highly sensitive seismographs for souls, like writers and

artists, often rail against the shallowness of living and refuse to compromise and play in the spray. That's my theory for the high incidence of suicidal behavior among artists and poets.

We need a theology of the surface in tandem with our theology of the depths. As Alice in Wonderland reminds us: "All this digging deep I dislike because if you dig deep all you dig is a pit into which you may fall yourself, or a well at the bottom of which there is nothing but treacle."

In looking for something to tweet about, I find myself paying attention to life in heightened ways. With Twitter, every day is an awakening to things that never would have registered before.

Life is a bunch of little things. These little things add up, and Twitter reminds me to be grateful for the little things and to celebrate the little and the simple.

In my list of "50 Reasons Why I Love Twitter," Reason No. 33 is "A place where serious people can think serious thoughts about trivial things." A good beer is a subtle symmetry between froth and substance. A good life is a dance of depth and surface.

One of the highest compliments you can pay me? "Sweet, you do shallow well."

**Global Commons.** This is what initially convinced me to enter the twitterverse. Social media guru Aaron Linne challenged me to think of Twitter as a medieval village green. If we were living a millennium ago, our lives would revolve around a village commons. In the course of a day, we would physically pass each other many times and exchange greetings: "How was your lunch?" "Who you working for now?" "What is in your hands?"

Wireless technology enables those multiplicity of personal exchanges to take place with people from around the world. Twitter is the new global commons.

Like soothsayers reading entrails, I conduct tweek readings. Twitter both connects me to others and to what's hot, what's current, what's the reigning gossip and styles of this new global village.

## Pastoral sense

I like to think of myself as the "pastor" of this Twitter parish. In the course of a day's passings ("postings") on the village commons, I try to find ways to encourage my "parishioners" (Barnabas blasts, I call them), and be a positive, healing energy in their lives.

The question all social media pose is one easily answered: Are the residents of your global commons reflective of our global community or are they only mirrors of yourself? How many people of different races, classes, continents and religions are part of your social universe?

**Social Solitude.** I'm a hermit at heart. Twitter is made for hermits. It enables me to shut myself off without shutting anything or anybody out. It enables me to simultaneously give myself away and never stop hiding. You might call the twitterscape one of social solitude.

My life is like a barbell: lots of weight on the social end and lots of weight on solitude end—with not much in between other than the handle (read: long lines at airports) that connects the socialness with the solitude. Twitter now lets me do my solitude in society; it lets me be anonymous in groups.

For all of these reasons, Twitter has changed my life and made me into a better follower of Jesus.

Dr. Sweet is the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University, and a Distinguished Visiting Professor at George Fox University. <http://twitter.com/lensweet>

'Life is a bunch of little things. These little things add up, and Twitter reminds me to be grateful for the little things.'

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# Revisiting the fundamentals of Methodism

BY DONALD W. HAYNES  
UMR Columnist

**Editor's note:** This is the second of a four-part series. Part one is archived at [www.umportal.org](http://www.umportal.org).

The United Methodist Church stands in great need of identifying and defining our “brand” in the marketplace of religious theologies. We can assert our “fundamentals” without becoming “fundamentalists.” That is, we can know who we are, claim that, teach that and find the meaning of God’s saving grace and our own personal lives within those basics, those “fundamentals.”



Donald Haynes

Many respondents to my first column on “Methodist Fundamentals” say they are using it in newsletters and Sunday school classes. Several, however, have written to say that my comments about

the “way of salvation” are in conflict with the United Methodist Church’s Article of Religion XX: “The offering of Christ, once made, is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual, and there is none other satisfaction for sin but that alone . . .”

The Article goes on to reveal its true intent—to protest that the sacrifice in the Catholic mass is “a blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit.” Seen in its historical context, words like “propitiation” are secondary to its intent. The article’s intent is to insist that Jesus’ death on the cross, “once made,” completed the demonstration of God’s incarnate love. Jesus’ death accomplished a permanent and complete result of amazing grace—that both our original sin and our actual sins are forgiven.

Both the words “expiate” and “propitiate” are words which rose out of the Catholic-Protestant debates of the 16th century and the subsequent “middle way” Christology of the Church of England. Today, only fundamentalists insist that these are the most illuminating words to explain the work of Christ in the forgiveness of sins.

“Expiate” means to “suffer the penalty for.” Our most common way of expressing this is to say, “Jesus died for our sins.” The Latin word *propitius* re-

ally means “favorable” or “that which favors.” We use the adjective form more, like “It was a propitious moment.”

Randy Maddox, professor of theology and Methodist studies at Duke Divinity School, wrote to say that his biggest concern is the tendency of some to “suggest that the penalty model is the only legitimate model.” He explains that all “theories or models of the atonement” are theological models, based on the premise or bias of the theologian, to explain a truth bigger than the model.

I sometimes say to students that in suggesting that we really “know” the full meaning of the atonement and the other “ways of God to humankind,” we are like an old hen scratching in the corner of a 10-acre field! Just because we can find a few nutritious worms and bugs, we think we have explored and comprehended the whole field!

So what are our “fundamentals”? The Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1784, did not have a constitution until 1808. At that time, according to historian Frederick Norwood, “the General Conference was granted all powers except those prohibited by the Restrictive Rules.”

**‘God not only forgives sins freely for the sinner who repents, but God goes in pursuit of the sinner!’**

These six rules itemized things that cannot be changed by subsequent General Conferences. The first of these is, “The general conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion, nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.” The longstanding debate is over what those “present existing and established standards of doctrine” actually are.

I want to clarify United Methodist doctrine sufficiently for us to engage in intelligent conversations with our more liberal or more conservative or more Calvinistic or more Catholic friends! Since theologian Albert Outler coined the term “quadrilateral,” it has become a favored word to define our doctrine. Actually, it was never a



UMMS PHOTO REPRODUCED FROM THE METHODIST COLLECTION OF DREW UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

**John Wesley, shown in this 1771 oil on canvas by an unknown artist, insisted that sin is a dis-ease that estranges us from God and from our God-created self, says Donald Haynes.**

word Wesley used and it lacks specificity of content. It is but a vehicle for checking one’s doctrine by Scripture, church tradition, personal experience and theological reasoning.

What about Wesley? In *John Wesley’s Theology For Today*, Colin Williams quotes from one of Wesley’s letters: “Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the Atonement. It is properly the distinguishing point between Deism and Christianity.” To understand Wesley, Mr. Williams points us to the Scripture’s best known verse: “For God so loved the world that God gave His only Son . . .”

One can certainly find quotes to “prove” that of the several theories of the atonement, Wesley accepted the “substitutionary” theory that Jesus died “in our stead” or “for us.” Mr. Williams, however, reminds us that we cannot explain or comprehend the full mystery of the meaning of Jesus’ death. He calls fundamentalism “clearly heretical at this point” because adherents insist on a mystery of faith that the Church has never defined.

Dr. Maddox observes that while Wesley occasionally referred to the substitutionary theory of the atonement, he and Charles preferred “to conceive of Christ as the physician of our souls who is seeking to heal our wounds and make us partake of his holiness.”

If you read the whole of Wesley, you find two recurring “fundamentals.”

First, the root of our salvation is in the character of God, which is love. We acknowledge what Wesley calls the “contamination” of human sin, yet God’s love, not our sin, is the eternal principle from which we develop our theology. Therefore, salvation is more therapeutic than juridical or forensic. Salvation is more like a clinic than a court! There is “healing in His wings.”

God’s intent on sending Jesus was to “reconcile the world unto himself.” To the Corinthians, Paul writes of our being new creatures in Christ: “All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18). To the Romans he wrote, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In I John 3:1, we read, “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God.”

In other words, Wesley insists that sin is a dis-ease that estranges us from God and from our God-created self (Genesis 1:27). Even in Paul’s lowest spiritual despair, as he describes it in Romans 7, Paul still says, “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self” (7:22).

Church father Athanasius (who determined the books that would be in our New Testament) said, “God became like us so we could become like God.” This is what Paul called the “spirit of adoption,” replacing the spirit of slavery to sin. Dr. Maddox insists that Wesley considers salvation primarily as “liberation.” Leslie Weatherhead, a Methodist in pre-war London, prefers that we always hyphenate the word, “at-onement.”

We cannot divide the will of the persons of the Trinity. God was in Christ. Jesus refers clearly to “the works of him who sent me” (John 9:4). Jesus did not persuade God to forgive us nor die to change God’s desire for our being saved. Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer was “nevertheless not my will but thine be done.”

There is no better treatment of Wesley’s theology than Dr. Maddox’s *Responsible Grace*. In it, he asks: “What makes us aware that God loves us? The objective evidence of this love is Christ’s atoning death.” God himself is bearing the brunt and paying the price of forgiveness.

Then the scholar explains the personal evidence: “The purpose of Christ’s coming . . . is to reclaim human life, free us from slavery (addiction to behaviors, attitudes, dys-

functional relationships), and restore our participation with God.”

This is the accent of Aldersgate—the “strangely warmed heart.”

A second Methodist fundamental is that God seeks us before we seek God! Wesley calls this “prevenient grace.” He accents God’s love as what Francis Thompson called “the hound of heaven.” It is God’s grace that “precomes” our conversion; it is what we affirm in baptizing infants.

Also, it is universal, not just imputed to the elect! This divine initiative of redeeming love awakens every soul and calls every person into a conviction of our sins, our need for repentance and God’s will for our salvation. This is the root of our doctrine of evangelism; this is the motivation for radical outreach.

Jesus shocks the Pharisees and other Jewish teachers of his day by teaching that God not only forgives sins freely for the sinner who repents, but God goes in pursuit of the sinner! Ira Sankey, a Methodist whom evangelist Dwight L. Moody recruited as his song leader in the 19th century, composed a narrative hymn based on the “lost sheep” parable of Luke 15:

Although the road be rough and steep,  
I go to the desert to find my sheep,  
But none of the ransomed ever knew  
how deep were the waters crossed

Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through  
Ere he found the sheep that was lost.

In all three parables in that chapter, the message is the same: Something was lost and there was great rejoicing when it was found—a coin, a sheep, a boy. Jesus is painting us a portrait of the character of God.

In the last parable, unfortunately labeled “The Prodigal Son,” the father never stops loving, waiting, longing and looking for his son to return home. So it is with God.

Fanny Crosby, another Methodist songwriter, uses this same insight in the hymn, “Rescue the Perishing.” She writes, “tell the poor wanderer a Savior has died.” She continues, “touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness, chords that are broken will vibrate once more.” Our mission is clear.

“Fundamentally,” for all of Wesley’s spiritual progeny, salvation is rooted in God’s love!

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■ TITHING Continued from page 1A

that much money,” the report concluded.

So where’s the disconnect?

“We’re not teaching our pastors how to talk about money,” said the Rev. Melvin Amerson, who co-wrote *Celebrating the Offering* (Discipleship Resources, 2007) with his brother, James Amerson.

“Pastors don’t feel comfortable sharing their faith as it relates to giving, so members fail to receive instruction and insight into biblical giving,” he said. “That’s why we have so few tithers.”

Stewardship experts say that hesitancy stems from a misunderstanding of the principle itself. “I think this is a little bit of a ‘shame on us,’” said Mr. Dick. “The church took a good spiritual principle—tithing—and turned it into a financial tool.”

Jennifer Tyler, a member of First UMC of Richardson and CEO of the stewardship consulting firm Tyler Associates, says the disconnect is nothing new.

“I think it’s rooted in the fear of suggesting that people step up to return that 10 percent, and that stems back to a lack of understanding as to the ownership of our resources to begin with,” she said.

“It’s difficult for people to let go of what they think of as their own?”

While the economy may affect how much people are able to give, it’s no reason to abandon the idea of tithing, says Missouri Bishop Robert Schnase.

“I see this as a vital teaching moment,” he said. “These economic circumstances afford us the opportunity to ask some questions we’ve been avoiding for a long time about our values, about contentment and what makes for a flourishing life.”

“When we’ve got people who are 40 who feel like failures because they are not millionaires, and 60 percent of the population spending 110 percent of its income each year, those are not just financial issues. Those are spiritual issues,” Bishop Schnase said.

Brian Hammons, lay leader of the Missouri Conference, says that avoiding the topic could shortchange church members on the blessings of tithing. Several years ago, he and his wife felt God’s leading to “step up” toward the practice of tithing.

“We thought, ‘How in the world can we ever do that?’ he recalled. “But we committed to it. We just focused, made that a priority, and other things came next. Things just worked out. Unexpected sources of finances came to us.”

“Every week, we write that check and we realize that God has once again provided. It really is a spiritual blessing.”

The challenge for pastors this fall will be to preach boldly, without seeming insensitive to the economic reality that many people currently face, or resorting to desperate pleas for money.

“The recession invokes fear,” said Mr. Amerson. “As believers, we walk by faith. We have to trust that God will supply all of our needs during good times and uncertain times. We have to stand by that faith during this economic crisis.”

Bishop Schnase says United Methodists need to redefine what tithing really means. “The switch in our minds has to be, this isn’t about the church’s need for money, this is about developing a spiritual capacity for giving,” he said. “That focus is true any time of life and in every economic circumstance. In fact, it’s almost more true now.”

To truly understand the principle of tithing, Mr. Dick said, church members should go back to the earliest biblical teaching, which appears in Deuteronomy 14.

“Originally, the tithe was not an offering to support the religious institution,” he said. “It was a spirit act to celebrate all that God provides and to care for neighbors.” Tithes were “consumed” by the people who brought them in a kind of harvest celebration. Every third year, the tithes were gathered for distribution to widows and orphans.

So how should pastors teach about the tithe during stewardship campaigns this fall, while many people in

the pews feel burdened by economic strains? Mr. Amerson proposes the idea of “holistic” stewardship programs that include more than just giving.

“We need to teach people how to be good stewards of their money,” he said. “We need to teach them about saving, about avoiding excessive debt, and about contentment.”

Ginghamsburg Church, a United Methodist megachurch in Ohio, uses such a holistic approach with great success. The church’s stewardship program emphasizes the concept of contentment as a way to overcome American consumerism.

“We live in a culture where the advertising industry has devised powerful, sophisticated methods to induce consumers to buy,” pastor Mike Slaughter writes on the church’s Web site. “The more TV you watch, the more you spend. The more you shop, the more you spend. But 1 Timothy 6:6 says, ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain.’”

Mr. Slaughter says that pastors and lay leaders should already be practicing tithe themselves before they can preach it. He admits he didn’t tithe until a seminary professor issued a sharp challenge to his class one day.

“Are any of you cheating God?” the professor asked. “If you are not giving God the full tithe, you are cheating God. I ask that you have the integrity not to go into vocational ministry if you cannot obey God in such a simple matter.”

The Slaughter family has tithed faithfully ever since.

Bishop Schnase encourages pastors to shift their focus from obligatory giving to “extravagant generosity,” one of five tools described in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon Press, 2007). Conventional stewardship appeals may modify behavior, he says, but teaching generosity is more likely to change hearts: “It creates a kind of distance from the money monster.”

Even if many are not in a position to give, stewardship campaigns present another opportunity in hard times: They strengthen long-term financial commitment that will pay off when the economy improves. Giving at the local church level tends to decline during recessions, but increases in the years following, according to data from the denomination’s General Council on Finance and Administration.

During the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, for instance, giving dropped 2.43 percent from 1978 to 1979, and again by another 3.11 percent in 1980. But then giving increased an average of about 1.9 percent every year through 1989.

“This is a real opportunity to rethink the spiritual depths of tithing,” Bishop Schnase said. “It’s a real growing opportunity for disciples and for churches.”

Ms. Tyler agrees. “Generosity is not a matter of how much money we have; it’s a matter of the heart.”

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