

SPECIAL ISSUE

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A DIFFERENT kind of Christmas

Congregations look beyond the shopping mall for gift ideas

BY AMY FORBUS
Editor

Two thousand years ago, the miraculous birth of Jesus changed the world. It still can today. As holiday spending grows, so does a movement urging Christians and other consumers

to more carefully consider the meaning of Christmas as it relates to their spending. Arkansas churches are finding their own expressions of that movement.

[See DIFFERENT, page 6A]

Special offering boxes sit atop a water well prop at First UMC Conway. The display symbolizes the Congo Well Project, which will be the primary recipient of the church's Advent Conspiracy gifts. Advent Conspiracy churches challenge their members to buy one less Christmas gift and instead use that money to help provide clean water for a community in need.

AUM PHOTO BY AMY FORBUS



AN OCCASIONAL WORD from the Bishop

BY CHARLES CRUTCHFIELD

Dear Friends:

I read in the paper recently that giving to charities is going to be flat or down this year. I read that many churches are experiencing the same reality. The purse strings have gotten tighter, even as we begin to climb out of the recession.

Of course, each and every article also expresses the concern of "merchants" who are fearful that retail sales will not meet expectations. At the same time, families are quoted as saying "things are bad/tight/depressed/etc." And here we are coming on the Christmas shopping season with all its "hopes and fears."

This edition of our Arkansas Conference newspaper explores some of the alternatives for Christmas giving. I hope you will seriously consider some of the suggestions made. Every year I get all or part of some animal from the Heifer International Catalogue. I look forward to seeing if it is a whole chicken or a half of a goat! (I remember one year in New Mexico some of us got together and gave the DS a water buffalo—we thought it fit!)

I also pray that as you give, you will be able to seek and find a simpler Christmas. That is a gift you can give yourself—a Christmas that focuses on the birth of Christ and

not on the amount of wrapping paper under the tree. Give gifts that speak to and of the heart and not to the prestige of something from the Neiman Marcus catalog.

I can think of few "things" in my life that I treasure more than the communion chalice I received one Christmas. It is not gold or silver. It has no elegant engraving, nor is it encrusted with gems.

It is a simple, hand-made, wooden chalice that was turned on a lathe. The cost of the chalice was minimal, requiring mostly some time and the ingenuity to find a lathe on a high-tech university campus. The block of pine from which it was made could well have been a piece of

scrap. But it is precious. It was made and given to me by my son.

Obviously, as a gift from my son it has profound personal value. I love the chalice because it is of wood, reminding me that our Lord was a carpenter. Every time I hold it, I think of the sacrifice and love of God for us all. I love it because something of my son is in the design and the finish. It is a simple gift. I love it because it was a labor of love that spoke and still speaks to the heart.

Faithfully,

Charles W. Crutchfield

Charles Crutchfield





EDITOR'S CORNER

BY AMY FORBUS

How to get my goat this Christmas

Dear friends and family:

Please get my goat for Christmas.

Or my chicks. Or ducks. Or honeybees.

Or clean water in Haiti, Africa or other parts of the world where access to such basic needs is a challenge.

Some of you have given me these gifts in years past. In addition to Christmas livestock, I've even received two birthday goats. Thank you! I really, really do love them.

I admit that if you give me a gift card from my local home improvement superstore, I will use it. But I would spend that money anyway—we just bought a house, and we're making changes so it looks and feels the way we want.

Notice I wrote "the way we want." We are far past "need." Many of us don't need anything. But there are people in our own communities and all over the world who do need some things.

Not very far from where you're sitting, a family struggles with the most basic needs of food and clothing. And in other parts of the world, items like Bibles and clean drinking water are scarce.

Have you ever seen a child get tired of opening gifts on Christmas morning? I have. We are way past meeting needs here. There is such a thing as too much.

With this move back to Arkansas, John and I made an intentional downsize. Our new house is 400 square-feet smaller than our old one. We realized we didn't need all of the space we had, so we took advantage of the opportunity to release some of it—and the material possessions that filled it.

And we still have too much stuff.

■ ■ ■

Last year, some friends of ours tried a new approach to Christmas: Jesus got three gifts, so they set a three-gift limit per person for the celebration of Jesus' birth.

This family has a toddler and two grade-schoolers—who are about

the age I was when I flipped through the pages of the Sears Wish Book and circled half the items in it—but the kids didn't ask, "Where's the rest of it?"

Instead, one of their kids watched a video at adventconspiracy.com and cried as she began to realize the need that exists among God's children. And together, right then, she and her mom made a gift to Living Water International.

How would you feel if someone made such a gift in your honor this Christmas? Would you ask, "Where's the rest of it?"

Or would you be thankful that someone you don't know can avoid contracting cholera because they have clean water to drink, and that your friend or family member heeded the lesson of the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25:35-40?

"...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'"

"And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (NRSV)

You can get livestock for Jesus at heifer.org. Provide clean water for him by visiting arumc.org/congo. Meet his most urgent need by choosing an item from the gift catalog at umcor.org. Help cover the cost of a roof over his head at habitat.org.

Whatever you choose from any of these places, it will be the right size and the right color. It won't gather dust on a shelf. And until all God's children are fed, clothed and sheltered, Jesus will need another one next year.

Passing on the gift

A reflection on seeing Heifer livestock make a difference

BY J. REX ENOCH
Special Contributor

Heifer International's program of alternative gift giving—giving an animal or some other needed resource in honor of a loved one—has helped build a very successful fundraising program.

But it's about more than raising money; gifts to Heifer become life-changing resources shared with thousands of families each year around the world.

For years, Heifer has built a successful development program in many parts of the world around the theme and practice of "Passing on the Gift." The concept holds the Heifer project communities together, as they are required to share their gifts with their neighbors. Ultimately, what they share is the increased ability to meet basic survival needs.

In more than 13 years of working through Heifer's educational programs, I found that the message of Passing on the Gift was a pretty easy "sell"—it just makes sense. And sharing stories of the impact on people's lives in many projects where we have worked makes the connections more personal.

In my work with Heifer, people in all the countries I visited expressed profound appreciation for our having "passed on the gift" to them. We saw many Passing on the Gift ceremonies, and witnessed the joy shared by both those giving and those receiving animals. As those passing on the gift share their

animals' offspring with neighbors, they also share an important part of themselves and create a special communal bond.

Families not only receive animals, but also agricultural training, supplies and equipment and vegetable seeds. Then, when project partners fulfill their requirement to share a gift with others in their community, they join together in helping to alleviate conditions that set the stage for divisiveness and war—poverty, ignorance, desperation and suspicion. When people gain meaningful skills and resources, they gain the tools to create a better future.

Heifer's guidelines require passing on an "equivalent" gift. However, for some, that's only the minimum. In the Philippines we saw families passing on "two for one"—twice the basic program requirement—and in the process breaking down tribal tensions that have divided that country for years.

In the Navajo Nation in Arizona, through Heifer's gift of healthy Churro sheep, we saw Native Americans revive a struggling weaving industry, strengthening the economy and their cultural identity.

In Tanzania, we met Annah Pallagyo (who first received a cow from Heifer in 1993) and her Agape Women's Group, which continue to pass on the gift by buying desks for

the local school and helping build a dispensary for the community. These ladies welcomed us into their homes and hearts, shared their stories, fed us and sent us on our journey with full stomachs, many hugs and good wishes.

In China, Honduras, Thailand, Myanmar, Poland and Albania, we met families who thanked us because they now could provide their children a better education, better nutrition and hopes for a more peaceful future.

The gift of an animal is just one tangible part of the development program. What this gift sets in motion will hopefully continue long after Heifer is out of the picture.

Most of what happens comes from the people's own initiative, once they have the resources to make it happen. By building community, they learn how to heal the wounds of conflict and war, to become better stewards of the environment and build healthier families.

In Tanzania, I learned a traditional greeting, Karibu ("welcome" in Swahili). We heard it throughout our travels. To me, karibu says more than "welcome." It says, "Come and work with us, and we will make a better life for ourselves, our neighbors and our land, and in the process we will help make a better world for all people."

Before his retirement, Dr. Enoch served as manager of adult education programs for Heifer International. He attends First UMC Little Rock.



Rex Enoch



Annah Pallagyo (left) and another Agape Women's Group member with one of the latest offspring of the original gift Pallagyo received from Heifer in 1993.



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Martha S. Taylor • Director of Communications
Amy Forbus • Editor
Patrick W. Shownes • Communications Coordinator
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Issue Date	Submission Deadline
Jan. 7	Dec. 15
Feb. 4	Jan. 20
March 4	Feb. 17

For one Arkansan, reality of malaria hits home

BY RENAE HIGHTOWER
Special Contributor

Malaria.

Most readers are familiar with the term. Many of you know that it is a disease carried by mosquitoes. A few of you may know that it is a parasite that attacks and destroys the red blood cells of an infected person.

But did you know that malaria causes approximately one-half billion illnesses every year (the combined population of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico) and kills more than a million people—most of those children? In fact, every 45 seconds a child in Africa dies of malaria.

In September 2009, following a mission trip to Peru, I came down with what I thought was the flu—fever, body aches, headache, shaking chills. Generally, I'm a healthy person. I take pride in my health, and I downplay my illnesses. I had followed the instructions given to me by my doctor and had taken the appropriate preventive medications for malaria.

So I ignored how sick I really was, and as my husband was out of town, there was no one to gently convince me to see a doctor.

My symptoms steadily progressed over the next ten days. Finally, on day 11, I found myself in the emergency department with a diagnosis of malaria.

I was moved to the intensive care unit where my temperature climbed to 106 degrees and my blood pressure dropped to

dangerously low levels. I required two units of transfused blood. I developed pneumonia. I spent five days in the hospital and was off work for a total of six weeks. I was infected with the most deadly form of malaria, and I would have died without treatment.

Four months later, I began experiencing symptoms again and was diagnosed with a different strain of malaria. Fortunately, this diagnosis came early in the disease process, and with prompt treatment, I was well within two weeks.

I'm telling my story to help put a personal face on malaria and to help others understand the suffering it causes. My hope is that more people will show God's love through providing life-saving mosquito nets to families in Africa.

I'm so incredibly blessed to live in a country where good healthcare is available. Millions are not so fortunate. For those without healthcare, there is a plan in place to help prevent the spread of malaria. The United Methodist Church has partnered with Nothing but Nets to work for prevention.

Nothing But Nets is a global, grassroots campaign to raise awareness and funding to combat malaria. Every \$10 contribution to Nothing But Nets covers the cost of purchasing a long-lasting insecticide-treated bed net, distributing it and educating communities on its use.

Malaria is relatively easy to prevent and treat, making it a problem that can realistically be

solved. It is an opportunity for us as Christians to eliminate a killer disease that has affected humanity since before Jesus walked the earth.

Bed nets work by creating a protective barrier against deadly malaria-carrying mosquitoes that bite at night. A family of four can sleep under an insecticide-treated bed net, safe from malaria, for four to five years. The insecticide woven into each net makes entire communities safer—repelling and killing mosquitoes so they can't go on to bite others who may not be protected by a net.

Nets are a simple, life-saving solution, but we need help to provide them to those in need. You can make a difference—you can give \$10 and know that you have literally saved lives!

If you haven't yet given to Nothing but Nets, please give now. If you have already given, give again. Ten dollars doesn't mean much to most Arkansas United Methodists, but it means the world to a family in Africa.

The Bible tells us that we experience joy when we reach out to the poor. This is an opportunity for you to experience God's touch as you save lives in Africa.

During the time you've been reading this column, half a dozen children in Africa have died from malaria. Send a net, save a life!

Hightower is a member of Central UMC in Fayetteville.



Renae Hightower (left) shares a hug with her friend Lorena Perea of Cali, Colombia. The two served as fellow mission workers on the trip during which Hightower contracted malaria.

COURTESY PHOTO

Nothing But  Nets

Buy a Net. Save a Life.
What better way to celebrate Christmas?

For each \$10 gift, a bed net is given to families living in Africa where malaria claims the lives of as many as 3,000 children each day. It's just one way United Methodists are stamping out killer diseases across the globe.

How to give:

- Make a donation on-line at www.arumc.org OR
- Complete the form below and send it with your gift to: Arkansas Conference Treasurer, P. O. Box 3611, Little Rock, AR 72203-3611.

Donor Information

Mr./Mrs./Ms (circle one) _____
Spouse's name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Email _____ Phone _____

Each bed net is \$10. \$10 x _____ (# of nets) Total contribution: _____
(please make copies of form or attach extra pages for additional contributions)

I would like to honor or remember a loved one with my gift(s). Please send an acknowledgement card(s):

in honor of OR in memory of _____ [Name(s)]

Please notify the following person(s) of my gift:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
from _____

(list exactly how it should appear on the card)

Learn more. Get involved.
Go to www.NothingButNets.net



www.arumc.org
(877) 646-1816 tollfree or (501) 324-8005

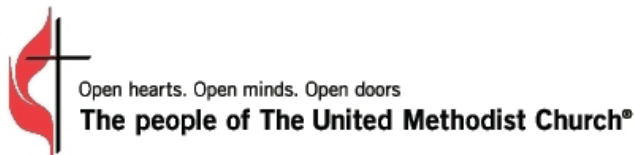
IMAGINE
NO
MALARIA



In addition to supporting Nothing But Nets, the United Methodist Church has launched **Imagine No Malaria**, a more comprehensive anti-malaria initiative. Its goal is to raise \$75 million to eliminate malaria deaths in Africa by 2015. Here's a word from the Imagine No Malaria website, imagineenomalaria.org:

"In partnership with our brothers and sisters in Africa, the gifts and resources shared through Imagine No Malaria will empower an entire continent to achieve a sustainable victory over the disease. We will accomplish this goal together with a comprehensive approach to fighting malaria that includes improving prevention, education, communication and treatment."

To learn more, visit imagineenomalaria.org. You can make a gift through the site, and 100 percent of your donation will be used to help eradicate this disease.



Caring for people this Christmas... with

Messages from two organizations fighting hunger in Arkansas

BY RAY WHITE
Special Contributor

One in four of our state's youngest residents are going hungry. That grim statistic encompasses more than 150,000 Arkansas children.

But the statistics do not do justice to a hard reality. Having large numbers of children going hungry is a crisis, and there are strong indications that the situation becomes even worse during an economic downturn. The long-term effects of hunger on such a scale make it hard for our kids to get the educations they need to become productive members of society. So their hunger hurts everyone's future.

The Arkansas Foodbank Network is fighting back. With "Kids Cafe" at Boys and Girls Clubs, and with "Backpacks for Kids," the Foodbank is working for change.

And this year, as part of a new Feeding America initiative, the Foodbank is one of six similar organizations taking part in a nationwide effort to devise new, more effective programs to feed hungry children, especially during the summer when school lunches aren't available.

Arkansas Foodbank Network is on the front lines in the fight against hunger. The Foodbank is the largest non-governmental provider of emergency food aid in the state. Last year the Foodbank's Little Rock warehouse distributed 14.2 million pounds of food through a network of 400 agencies in 33 counties in central and south Arkansas.

Most of those agencies—food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and school feeding programs—are faith-based organizations following the biblical injunction in the book of Matthew that begins, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat."

A few facts:

- Foodbank partner agencies touch the lives of 166,200 individuals every year—23,000 per week;
- It's not just about kids—the Foodbank helps the elderly through its "Senior Supplement" program;
- 94.5 cents of every dollar the

Foodbank receives goes directly into programs to feed hungry Arkansans;

- For every dollar donated, the Foodbank can provide three meals.

The Foodbank is part of a statewide effort involving all six Feeding America certified food banks in Arkansas, all of whom are members of the statewide Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, the advocacy group that coordinates hunger relief for Arkansas.

Arkansas Foodbank Network serves as a "mixing center," where canned and nonperishable items are combined with meat and dairy products and delivered to other food banks. The goal is to provide more balanced meals for hungry people, not just more calories. Last year Arkansas Foodbank sent 2.6 million pounds of food to other food banks around the state.

The heart of the Foodbank operation is a 77,000-square-foot warehouse in Little Rock which serves as the distribution hub for donated food from around the country.

But the warehouse, a former parcel service truck terminal that was converted into a supply center and cold storage facility, is old and inadequate. So this year, thanks to a \$10.3 million capital grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, the Foodbank will soon move to a new warehouse in east Little Rock.

The Foodbank's goal is to double its output in a five-year period. The new warehouse is the key to making that happen.

For this holiday season, the Arkansas Foodbank Network encourages everyone to remember the hungry children of Arkansas and find ways to ease their struggle.

Look for opportunities to bring nonperishable foods to food drives at local businesses and schools. Volunteer for food drives. Contribute to organizations like the Foodbank. Visit arkansasfoodbank.org and learn about opportunities for donating, volunteering or sponsoring a food drive.

White is public relations head of the Arkansas Foodbank Network and a member of Pulaski Heights UMC.



A toddler enjoys a meal at a Feeding America soup kitchen.

PHOTO COURTESY ARKANSAS FOODBANK

Arkansas Poverty Facts

- 18 percent of Arkansans live below the federal poverty line
- Arkansas is the fourth poorest state in the nation, with 503,000 Arkansans living in poverty
- Arkansas has the worst rate of childhood hunger in the nation—24.4 percent—and the third highest rate of food insecurity in the U.S.



Items from Arkansas Rice Depot's Simple Pleasures line of soup, chili and rice mixes are one way to provide a tangible gift for a friend or relative while also helping to fight hunger in Arkansas communities.

PHOTO COURTESY ARKANSAS RICE DEPOT

BY JANE DENNIS
Special Contributor

Arkansas Rice Depot shines as a ray of hope for Arkansas families facing hunger, poverty and hard times.

The statewide, faith-based organization is supported strongly by United Methodist congregations. Established in 1982, Rice Depot has grown steadily and last year distributed more than 8 million pounds of food to food pantries, schools, shelters and disaster victims, with an astonishing 98 percent of proceeds dedicated to feeding the hungry.

To keep the Rice Depot's programs strong and stable, a line of gourmet food and gift products has been developed and is sold under the Simple Pleasures label. The popular line includes seven gourmet rice mixes and six soup and chili mixes.

Some of the tempting offerings of the Simple Pleasures line are Arkansas Dirty Rice, Arkansas Gone Cajun Rice, Lily's Fried Rice, Presidential Parmesan Rice, Hillbilly Chili, Hoppin' John and Meatless Monday Soup.

Proceeds from the mixes are used to purchase food for the Depot's highly successful, much duplicated Food for Kids school backpack program.

Simple Pleasures also offers gift baskets, including two sizes of Arkansas-shaped baskets and a Razorback-shaped basket, filled with gourmet rice and bean mixes, other foods, snacks and novelties.

The line includes attractive gift boxes that contain all-Arkansas products and come complete with a mailing sleeve, making them perfect for easy shipping to friends and family far and wide.

A new addition to the product line this year is a Holiday Wassail Mix, a hot and aromatic beverage for sharing and enjoying.

One of the newest non-food products in the Simple Pleasures line is an eco-friendly bracelet made of recycled tires and scrap metal. It has the Rice Depot's mission, "Hunger No More," on one side and on the other a solution to hunger: "Start With One." A unique pewter

Christmas ornament that bears the mission statement is also available.

"All the Arkansas Rice Depot products sold under our Simple Pleasures brand are gifts with a mission," said Laura Rhea, Rice Depot President and CEO. "Each item makes a tasty meal for you, or a thoughtful gift for others.

"But the 'Simple Pleasure' comes from knowing all the profits from these products go back into our communities, feeding hungry families, delivering food to homebound seniors, providing food to quickly mobilize in times of disaster, or sending food home in backpacks for students who have no where else to turn."

Simple Pleasures gourmet gift items may be purchased online at ricedepot.org or at the Rice Depot Gift Shop, 3801 W. 65th St., Little Rock; phone 501-565-8855.

Simple Pleasures supports the Rice Depot's four core programs:

- Food for Families, the statewide food bank serving more than 300 church and community food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters;
 - Food For Kids, which provides free food and backpacks to students in more than 600 public schools in Arkansas;
 - Food For Seniors, delivering 50 pounds of food and household supplies each month to homebound seniors;
 - The Arkansas Disaster Relief Center, providing food and disaster supplies to any hunger relief agency or community assisting disaster victims.
- Arkansas Rice Depot provides immediate assistance, then helps as long as the need continues.

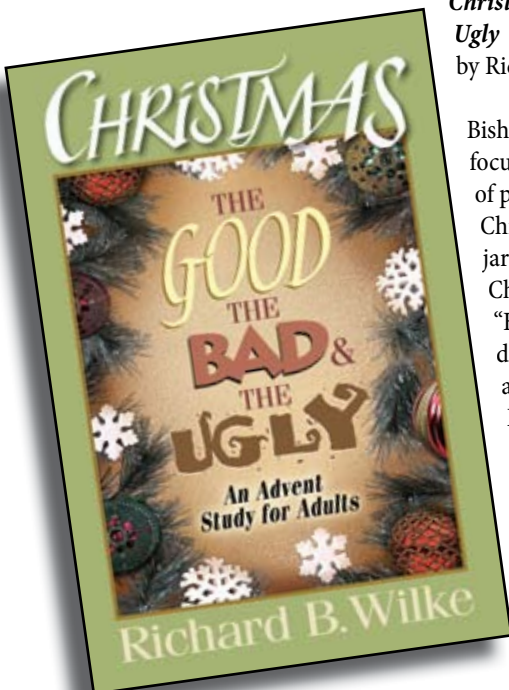
In 2009, the Rice Depot fed more than 15 percent of the entire population of Arkansas. That feat is made possible in part by those who purchase Simple Pleasures products, helping Rice Depot continue its Christian ministry of feeding the hungry and finding sensible solutions to hunger in Arkansas.

Dennis is a former editor of the Arkansas United Methodist and serves on the board of the Arkansas Rice Depot.

sustenance for body and soul

Preparing the way of the Lord: Advent studies

Special studies for Advent can make a positive difference in how we view and experience the holiday season. The following studies—and more—are available through Cokesbury, the retail arm of the United Methodist Publishing House (cokesbury.com).



Christmas: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

by Richard B. Wilke

This study by former Arkansas Area Bishop Wilke spends each week focusing on a different person or group of people involved in the story of Christ's birth. The first chapter's title is jarring—"Let's Keep Herod in Christmas"—and for good reason. "Herod was a really bad man and he depicts a world saturated with evil and in desperate need of a Savior," Bishop Wilke writes.

Other chapters focus on the wise men, Joseph and the shepherds, and what each of them can teach us today. Each lesson includes a key scripture, brief reflection, questions to discuss, a suggested Christmas carol, and a prayer.

Makin' Room at the Inn: Christmas Hospitality Through an African American Experience

by Henry L. Masters Sr.

Makin' Room in the Inn is a four-lesson Advent study that celebrates Christmas traditions and practice through the perspective of an African American family. Biblically-based topics include:

- Cultivating and living out hospitality in a diverse world;
- Trusting God as compared to trusting in wealth;
- Learning the importance of forgiveness and reconnection;
- Understanding that the most precious gift is presence.

Christmas from the Back Side

by J. Ellsworth Kalas

J. Ellsworth Kalas has written several "from the Back Side" Bible studies, and this one takes a look at Christmas from alternative angles. Kalas crafts new insights into the scriptures of the Christmas story by choosing unique starting points and re-telling the familiar stories from less familiar points of view. Chapter titles include "The Scandal of Christmas" and "Celebrating Christmas in a Hotel."

Christmas Gifts that Won't Break

by James W. Moore

With materials for adults, youth and children, *Christmas Gifts that Won't*

Break can serve as a broad study to unite a congregation around a common

Give a Bible to a seeker

United Methodist Communications Office of Public Information

For less than the cost of a matinee movie ticket or a couple of gallons of gas, you can place the New Testament in the hands of a spiritual seeker who has responded to the United Methodist Church's advertisements.

This is United Methodist Communications' message to the church, as the agency begins offering the Rethink Church Edition Common English Bible (New Testament) at no cost to seekers who request it when they visit the Rethink Church campaign website.

United Methodist members and friends are encouraged to make gifts of \$5—the cost to print and ship one Bible to a seeker. Gifts are accepted online or by texting the word Bible to 27722 to make a \$5 gift via cell phone billing*.

Churches may also order their own copies at \$5 each to give away to church visitors or at Rethink Church events in their communities. To place an order online, visit umcom.org/rethinkchurchbible.

The Rethink Church Edition Common English Bible (New Testament) is a special edition that features a seeker-sensitive introduction to the Bible and to the United Methodist Church.

"The Rethink Church Edition is a powerful tool for evangelism," said the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive of United Methodist Communications. "It introduces the Bible and denomination to seekers with sensitivity to their worldview, in welcoming language."

Accessibility is key to the entire Common English Bible (New Testament), as it is a new translation (not a revision or update) that seeks to make the Bible more readable and understandable without compromising



scholarship.

The translation is sponsored by the Common English Bible Committee, an alliance of denominational publishers that includes the United Methodist Publishing House. The full Bible translation will be available in fall 2011.

Gifts made by mail can be made payable to The Foundation for United Methodist Communications: 810 12th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37203.

To learn more about the Common English Bible, visit commonenglish.com. To learn more about the Rethink Church advertising and welcoming campaign, visit umcom.org/rethinkchurch.

*\$5 will be added to your mobile phone bill/deducted from your prepaid account. Message and data rates may apply. See the full terms for more information.

theme and focus. It explores how the gifts of the Advent season are timeless, speaking to generations past, present and future.

What are these gifts that won't break? They are the gifts that have been graciously given by God. (A hint: Look to the symbolism of the four outer candles of the Advent wreath: hope, love, joy and peace.)

The Uncluttered Heart: Making Room for God During Advent and Christmas

by Beth A. Richardson

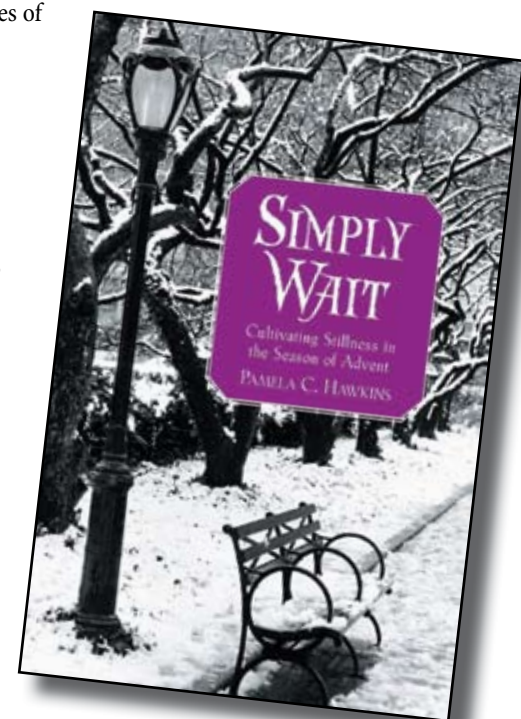
This Advent devotional guide from Upper Room Books features daily readings. Designed so that each day has its own theme for the reader to carry and meditate upon, it can create opportunity for deep reflection and connection to God amid the events of day-to-day life.

Simply Wait: Cultivating Stillness in the Season of Advent

by Pam Hawkins

This study for individuals or small groups features a focus on doing both less and more during the weeks leading up to Christmas: less scurrying and more reflecting; less worrying and more connecting.

Simply Wait is a guide for making Advent a more spiritual time. In each of the four weeks of Advent, readers focus on a single word and a simple prayer practice that does not require extensive preparation or previous experience.



A different kind of Christmas (continued from page 1A)

Advent Conspiracy

In 2006, five pastors began the project that has become Advent Conspiracy. Three of those pastors—Rick McKinley of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Ore., Greg Holder of Windsor Crossing in St. Louis and Chris Seay of Ecclesia in Houston—collaborated to refine it and make free resources available at adventconspiracy.org.

The basic idea behind Advent Conspiracy: If each person buys one less gift than they did last Christmas, and instead gives that money to an organization committed to providing clean water in parts of the world that need it most, Christmas will once again become an event that changes the world for the better.

Participating Arkansas churches include First United Methodist Church of Conway and Lakewood United Methodist Church of North Little Rock. In both churches, newly appointed associate pastors brought up the idea.

At First UMC Conway, the Rev. Regina Holtman Gideon first mentioned Advent Conspiracy during an August staff meeting—just two months after she arrived. Beyond the approval of senior pastor the Rev. Charles Murry, who encouraged her to bring up the idea, she wasn't sure what to expect. But the idea received enthusiastic response from others.

Melissa Polk, First UMC Conway's director of adult spiritual formation and Michelle Moore,



director of youth ministries, had wanted to do Advent Conspiracy in 2009, but it hadn't worked out.

"They had decided they would need to 'table it' another year because I was new," Gideon said. "So it turned out that the Holy Spirit was working in a number of different hearts independently about doing Advent differently this year."

First UMC Conway began priming the pump early, beginning their Advent Conspiracy sermon series at the end of October.

Not only is the church giving toward the Arkansas Conference's Congo Well Project in keeping with Advent Conspiracy's clean water goal, but they also will track other gifts congregants give in the same spirit. They're encouraging each household to report how it directs its offering so everyone can see the breadth of their collective impact.

At Lakewood UMC, the Rev. Andrea Allen pitched the idea to

fellow staff members. Lakewood won't begin its Advent Conspiracy sermon series until the first Sunday of Advent, which coincides with the launch of a new worship service led by Allen. But the church has already begun communicating that a conspiracy is afoot.

"We're taking a counter-cultural approach to communication, as if it's a real conspiracy," says Joe Roitz, Lakewood's director of communications. "Rather than tell people 27 times to come, we want them to be curious and dig for themselves."

Cryptic banners in the church's yard and movable-letter sandwich board signs are part of the plan. They've seen those low-tech tactics work well before.

"We just had a Halloween fall festival," Roitz said. "When I got there, there was already a crowd. It was our neighborhood as opposed to our congregation... the community was there."

"These people didn't see our event on Facebook, they saw the sandwich board and yard signs. We're in such a high-traffic area that it seems like a street-level strategy is the way to go."

Roitz hopes the signage on Lakewood's property, which is near McCain Mall, will underscore the Advent Conspiracy message of "Give more. Spend less."

"It will create some cognitive dissonance and attention in that context," he said.

Alternative gifts

For those looking for gifts that can be wrapped and given to others, yet carry a purpose larger than the gift itself, the concept of an alternative Christmas market holds appeal. Several United Methodist churches in the Conference hold alternative Christmas markets featuring vendors who donate part or all of their proceeds to ministry.

One such church is St. Paul UMC of Little Rock, which holds this year's Alternative Christmas Market Nov. 20 and 21. The market began in 1999, when then-pastor the Rev. Brian Fulwider approached the Sojourners Sunday school class about organizing the event. Eleven years later, the class still heads up the effort.

The market features a silent auction. Artists contribute their works, and proceeds go to St. Paul's Samaritan Fund, which provides assistance to those who contact the church asking for emergency

assistance, such as help with utility bills.

People who have crafts to sell may do so at the market, provided they give 40 percent of what they earn at their table to the Samaritan Fund. Usually church members who make items participate in this way, says Tish DePriest, coordinator of this year's market.

One St. Paul member, Carolyn Short, organizes a bake sale as part of each year's alternative Christmas market. The proceeds from the sale support United Methodist missionary the Rev. Shana Harrison, who serves in Chile.

"It's Carolyn's passion to see that Shana get as much money as we can provide her," DePriest said.

"If you have a passion, we want you to share that, and we'll help provide an avenue for making money for that group if we can," she said.

Some years, Harrison sends handcrafted items to sell at the market. She provides a residence for older mentally-challenged people, and the residents make greeting cards and other items that get the attention of market shoppers.

Other vendors benefit other causes, DePriest said, and St. Paul tries to balance groups that meet local needs with those that address needs worldwide. For example, the market sells Arkansas Rice Depot's Simple Pleasures goods, and Heifer International has a table, too.

Each year the Sojourners class asks the congregation for suggestions and tries to add something new, says DePriest.

"As the composition of our class changes, other groups come to our

awareness," she said. "We'd invite anybody who wanted to come if their proceeds go to help other people."

Adding, not replacing

For these churches and others, doing Christmas a little differently doesn't mean dropping long-held traditions.

Lakewood UMC, for example, is still holding its annual White Christmas food drive benefiting the Gardner Food Pantry, as well as providing the Salvation Army with stuffed Christmas stockings to distribute to those in need.

They added features related to Advent Conspiracy as an option, too.

"We'll be 'selling' bottles of water for people to give as gifts," said communications director Roitz. "The proceeds will be used to help build a well and save lives."

"There won't be a fixed price—a child paying one dollar might represent a greater sacrifice than an adult paying \$100. And by using them as gifts, we build upon the Advent Conspiracy principles and expand the light to people not in our church," he said.

Roitz also pointed out that Christmas is not a happy time for everyone. Changing the focus may help, he says.

"There is a comfort associated with bringing it all back to the story of Christ's hope and promise and love, but doing so flies in the face of the way we do Christmas now," he said.

"It's a conversation about how to change ourselves."



Advent Conspiracy signs and banners outside Lakewood UMC in North Little Rock aim to capture the curiosity of passersby.

PHOTO BY JOE ROITZ

**Join The Conspiracy.
Meet Here.
Begins Nov. 28 9 or 11 am**



A shopper at St. Paul UMC's 2009 Alternative Christmas Market stops by a display table. Shoppers at alternative Christmas events can make their selections knowing that the proceeds from their purchase will benefit others in need.

PHOTO BY RICHARD DRILLING

SHIFTING FOCUS: Ideas for a more meaningful Advent and Christmas

“Each year during Advent, we bundle up the boys and head outside to look at one of the most beautiful things God created for us—the night sky. We focus on what the Gospel of Matthew tells us: the Wise Men observed a new star rising for the very first time in the East, marking the birth of the Messiah and leading them to Bethlehem. We also print off a free star map from SkyandTelescope.com.

“Sort through your clothes and kids’ toys to see what you don’t wear or play with anymore. Gather these things up and donate them to a charity or homeless shelter. Each year we have our three boys sort through their clothes and their toys. They are to find the same number of toys to donate as they have placed on their Christmas list.

“Bake a couple of batches of your family’s favorite cookie recipe. Keep a batch to share as a family and give a batch away. Try to give them to someone who would least expect it. Some suggestions: your mail carrier (leave them in the mailbox for them), a homebound church member, a school teacher or a Sunday school teacher.”

—Melissa Polk, First UMC Conway

“I heard a woman say that instead of mailing her grandma those house slippers this year, she’s going to give the relational gift of time—she’s going to take her elementary age daughter to her great-grandmother’s house for some Christmas candy-making, something she thinks her grandmother would far prefer over a material gift.”

—The Rev. Regina Holtman Gideon, First UMC Conway

Go bigger—but in a new direction

Think Advent Conspiracy sounds revolutionary? At Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, the Rev. Mike Slaughter issues a steep challenge to the congregation each year: the Christmas Miracle Offering. Whatever amount participants spend on Christmas gifts, they agree to give an equal amount toward the Sudan Project (ginghamsburg.org/sudan).



Help UMCOR and more at givetomission.org

Givetomission.org is the home of The Advance, a convenient program that gives you the opportunity to give to the ministry of your choice. If you or someone you love has a passion for a particular kind of ministry—or even wishes to support an individual missionary—your area of interest is represented there. Gifts to the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) also can be made through The Advance’s website.

Witnessing a dream come true

BY DAVID FLEMING
Special Contributor

A new dream house will be standing in Pine Bluff this Christmas.

Although it may not be as fancy as “Barbie’s Dream House” or as fashionable as the architectural masterpieces on this year’s “Tour of Homes,” it is nevertheless a dream come true. And here is how the dream began.

Several years ago, Kathy Campbell agreed to chair the cookbook sales project at First United Methodist Church of Pine Bluff, with the idea that proceeds would benefit local mission endeavors. Kathy developed a



David Fleming

passion for the work of Jefferson County Habitat for Humanity, and envisioned raising enough money to build its tenth Habitat house in 2010.

Under Kathy’s leadership, the congregation was well on its way to meeting that goal. Then, last January, Kathy died suddenly. However, the dream lives on. Thanks to a lot of help from her family and friends, not to mention gifts given in memory of Kathy and others, the dream is becoming a reality.

The house is also a dream come true for Erika Green and her sons Trey and Devantre, who will make the house their home.

Like all Habitat partner families, the Greens were selected based on their level of need, their willingness to become partners in the program and their ability to repay the loan. Working alongside hundreds of volunteers who donate supplies and labor, the Green family is investing “sweat equity” in their home.

Habitat for Humanity is not so much a “handout,” as it is a “hand up,” offering the Greens and other families in need an opportunity for affordable housing. Erika will continue to make monthly payments to the local Habitat affiliate until her mortgage is paid in full.

In anticipation of that day, the Green family worshipped last month at First UMC in a celebration of Habitat for Humanity in conjunction with the “Sharing Together in Christ’s Name” Conference initiative. On Oct. 10 (“10-10-10”), the congregation celebrated the progress on house number 10 and also burned the

mortgage for the first Habitat house in Jefferson County to be paid in full.

During the celebration, architect A.W. Nelson, a former member of First UMC who was instrumental in helping the Rev. Fred Arnold organize Jefferson County Habitat for Humanity, remarked, “Have you ever noticed that the photos in design magazines never have people in them? I learned long ago that it is not the uniqueness of the design and the fine appointments that are the critical ingredient in homes.

“A house does not become a home until a family moves in and starts to use it. It is when we cook in it, mess it up, clean it, paint it, sleep in it, fix it, live in it, that it truly becomes unique in its character and design,” he said. “We move in, we shape the space and the space shapes us, impacting our families.”

Indeed, what we are building is not houses or even homes, but community. We do so in the name of one who is the carpenter of a new

creation.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.

As an itinerant teacher, Jesus reminded his followers that “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Even when his lifeless body was lifted from the cross, it had to be laid in a borrowed tomb. How ironic, then, that on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus promised us that he was going to prepare a place for us so that where he is, we may be also.

In the meantime, is there a more fitting way that we can honor our commitment to Christ and his dream of a world where all oppression would cease, than by making room for others in his name?

Dreams really can come true.

Fleming serves as senior pastor of First UMC Pine Bluff.



ABOVE: “Kathy’s House No. 10,” currently under construction, is a dream realized in memory of Kathy Campbell, who spearheaded fundraising efforts for the project. BELOW: House No. 10 homeowner Erika Green at the Habitat work site with Clyde Campbell, Kathy’s widower, on the day the walls of the house were raised.

PHOTOS BY DAVID FLEMING



Fair trade gains momentum

Movement supports workers in developing world

BY SERENAH MCKAY
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

A group of schoolteachers visiting the Mount Sequoyah Gift Center in Fayetteville played exotic percussion instruments and exclaimed over a Nativity scene crafted from Coca-Cola cans.

Except for a few products by local artisans, the store's merchandise is handmade in developing nations such as India, Vietnam, Peru, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria. A store clerk points out displays of jewelry made from recycled magazines and cans, as well as an array of coffees and teas, baskets, scarves and pottery.

The gift shop is at the Mount Sequoyah Conference and Retreat Center, a ministry of the United Methodist Church. All the imports are from fair-trade organizations such as Ten Thousand Villages, A Greater Gift and SERRV, gift shop attendant Janie Schumann explained. SERRV is an acronym for Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation and Vocation.

Fair trade is a business model that strives to provide economic opportunities for artisans and farmers in developing countries by creating a marketplace for their products in wealthier nations. Arkansas businesses that deal in fair-trade products say growing numbers of shoppers are learning they can buy unique products at a reasonable price while helping change lives around the world.

Stephanie Gillihan of Fayetteville, a teacher who visited the gift shop recently while attending a conference at the center, said she appreciates the handiwork of artists from other cultures.

"I think it's neat that their work gets sent all over the world, so people can learn about that culture," she said. "And if along the way it helps them feed their families, that's great."

Schumann said the store used to carry mainly books and religious items, with only a small selection of fair-trade gifts. But because of their popularity, over the last 18 months the shop has shifted its inventory to mostly fair-trade goods.

The Mount Sequoyah Gift Center is one of more than 300 "alliance" stores nationwide that carry products from Ten Thousand Villages, a Pennsylvania-based

Mennonite nonprofit that also has 72 retail stores in the United States.

The company opened a Little Rock store in May 2005, and recently moved to 301 President Clinton Ave., Suite A.

Store manager Mary Ann Harrington said she is "absolutely" seeing more customers interested in buying fair-trade goods. She attributes this largely to increased media exposure.

Classes of schoolchildren frequently drop by, and store employees and volunteers take time to talk with them about how fair-trade practices benefit people in impoverished nations.

Ten Thousand Villages is a founding member of the Fair Trade Federation, which represents North American fair-trade businesses and organizations. The federation and its counterparts on other continents make up the World Fair Trade Organization, a network of more than 350 importers, retailers and producer cooperatives in more than 70 countries.

Both groups evaluate member organizations for their commitment to fair-trade principles. Besides paying artisans or farmers a fair price for their products, these include supporting safe working conditions, ensuring the rights of children, developing transparent and accountable relationships and cultivating environmental stewardship, according to the Fair Trade Federation's website.

In the U.S., products are certified as meeting fair-trade standards by TransFair USA, a nonprofit that audits the supply chain of specific products from point of origin to point of sale.

In Arkansas, mainstream grocery stores now sell fair-trade-certified products like coffee, tea, cocoa, fruit, sugar, flowers and wine.

Even major corporations have joined the fair-trade movement in recent years. For instance, many Sam's Club stores sell fair-trade coffee, tea, fruit, sugar and wine. Starbucks began buying fair-trade coffee in 2000 and increases its percentage each year, according to its website.

Not everyone agrees fair trade is best for people and the environment. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative research and educational institution in Washington, released a report in

June that states that pushing U.S.-style labor and environmental regulations on foreign governments can do more harm than good.

As an example, the report states that child labor is needed in many countries to help families survive, and forcing children out of factory jobs could push them into prostitution.

A voice-mail message left for Terry Miller, director of the foundation's Center for International Trade and Economics, which publishes the annual Index of Economic Freedom, was not returned by press time.

Economist Raja Kali, an associate professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, said fair trade and free trade needn't be mutually exclusive. He also thinks growing corporate involvement in fair trade is a smart business move, not only because of consumer sentiment but also for political and economic reasons.

"If you're a small buyer, no one's going to bother too much about how you're sourcing your product and how the indigenous people are treated," said Kali, who holds the ConocoPhillips Chair of International Economics and Business in the Sam M. Walton College of Business. "But once you become a big buyer, you're going to run into political issues, labor practices and concern about the environment."

He said growing numbers of people seem willing to pay a bit more for products they know were made in a sustainable way and without exploiting workers.

In the long run, Kali said, going fair trade "is astute, because this is what the customers want."

Besides Ten Thousand Villages, the only other Arkansas business on the federation's member list is Asha (AH-sha) Imports in Harrison. Owned by 28-year-old Dylan Fila, a 2004 graduate of John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Asha Imports sells at wholesale prices to buyers throughout the U.S., and also does a retail business online at ashaimports.com.

Fila and his wife, Molly, who is also a JBU graduate, started the company in fall 2005.

Fila explained in an e-mail from his home in India how the couple were saddened by the plight of the poor after spending six



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN KRAIN/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

ABOVE: Jennifer Bentley (left) shows merchandise to Kelli Callender of Heber Springs at Ten Thousand Villages fair-trade gift shop in Little Rock's River Market District. BELOW: Dylan Fila looks at fabric in a shop in Calcutta, India, for his Harrison-based fair-trade company Asha Imports. Fila is a 2004 graduate of John Brown University in Siloam Springs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DYLAN FILA



months in Calcutta. When they discovered two companies that worked with poor women and families, an idea was born.

"One business operates out of a slum and the other works in the largest red-light district in Calcutta," he wrote. "We saw a need for a U.S. importer for these companies, and we knew it was something we could do."

He still works with these companies, Connexions Vocational Training and Freetset Bags.

Fila wrote that he is involved with all the suppliers of Asha (the Bengali word for hope), and is always inspired when he visits with the artisans.

"Many of the women have literally been rescued from human trafficking," he wrote. "As I listen to their stories, the freedom that they have experienced through this work is evident as it is written all over their faces."

Not only has their quality of life improved through fair wages and safe working environments, he wrote, but most of the partner organizations offer some benefits

like advanced educational programs, savings programs, child care and health insurance.

Best of all, he wrote, "is the fact that freedom from poverty and oppression will be passed on to the next generation, as many of the women have risen above the cycle of poverty that has enslaved several generations."

Fila's mother, Marsha Fila, runs the business stateside. Her son ships the items such as sari scarves and jute bags to her, and she ships the orders from their warehouse in Harrison.

She stressed that fair-trade businesses are not charities. She said people often ask what portion of the sales receipts go back to the artisans, but that's not the way it works. The women who make the products are paid a fair wage and don't need donations.

"The way you can help these women is to buy the product," she said.

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Thriving African fellowship

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Jesus offers unique evangelism model | 7B

Section B

November 19, 2010

Panama meeting

Bishops support church reforms

BY ROBIN RUSSELL
Managing Editor

PANAMA CITY, Panama—United Methodist bishops have signed on to help focus the denomination's resources in the next 10 years on growing vital congregations.

The Council of Bishops, meeting Nov. 2-6 in Panama, unanimously adopted key recommendations of the Call to Action Steering Team's report that include consolidating general church agencies and holding bishops accountable for church growth.

"It's time to stand up and get this thing done," said Western North Carolina Bishop Larry Goodpaster, council president.

Bishops also approved an interim operational team of bishops and members of the Connectional Table to guide their decision-making in the months leading up to the 2012 General Conference. The Call to Action report next goes to the Connectional Table, which will meet Nov. 15 in Franklin, Tenn.

The 16-member Call to Action Steering Team of clergy and laity was created in May 2009 to turn around the declining denomination. Its report was designed to guide the bishops' leadership process as they engage the church around areas of change.

Some of the report's recommendations would require General Conference legislation in 2012, but bishops will take initiative to spark "robust



UMR PHOTO BY ART RUSSELL/ARRMEDIA.COM

A mother and son sell handmade jewelry and molas, or colorful textiles, on the streets of the Casco Antiguo (old quarters) section of Panama City. United Methodist bishops met in Panama City for their fall Council of Bishops meeting.

conversation" about these areas, said Illinois Area Bishop Gregory V. Palmer, steering team co-chair.

"People don't have to be legislated into collaboration," he said.

Episcopal roadmap

The steering team's report is more of a roadmap than "a detailed blueprint for re-engineering the United Methodist Church system," said Neil Alexander, co-chair of the steering team and president of the United Methodist Publishing House. Bishops will lead not by taking more authority, but by assuming more responsibility "for very specific outcomes at the street level," he added.

In adopting the Call to Action report, bishops agreed to "redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

The report's key recommendations include:

- Starting in January 2011, make congregational vitality the church's "true first priority" for at least a decade.
- Dramatically reform clergy leadership development, deployment, evaluation and accountability. This

would include dismissing ineffective clergy and sanctioning under-performing bishops.

- Collect statistical information in consistent and uniform ways for the denomination to measure attendance, growth and engagement.

- Reform the Council of Bishops, with the active bishops assuming responsibility for promoting congregational vitality and for establishing a new culture of accountability throughout the church.

- Consolidate general church agencies and align their work and resources with the priorities of the church and the decade-long commit-

■ See 'Panama' page 8B

Q&A:

Pushing for gender equality in faith groups

Women are on the rise in the world of religious leadership, says Maureen Fiedler, host of National Public Radio's *Interfaith Voices*, a show that educates the public on different faith traditions.

Her new book, *Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling: Women Religious Leaders in Their Own Words* (Seabury Books), is a collection of interviews she edited with female church leaders, theologians, scholars, activists, working mothers and religion journalists. Each focuses on discrimination faced by women in religion and documents the emerging leadership of women.

Dr. Fiedler spoke recently with staff writer Mallory McCall.

You've hosted *Interfaith Voices* for over eight years. That makes for a lot of interesting interviews. Why focus on women religious leadership in your first book?

I've always been a feminist in my own denomination—I happen to be a Roman Catholic—and I've always been interested in women's issues. I was involved in the struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, I was one of the women who fasted for 37 days in Springfield, Ill., for the ERA. So any topic having to do with women and the emerging leadership of women, which I find an exciting trend, seemed to be a logical first book for the show.

■ See 'Gender' page 2B



Maureen Fiedler



UMNS PHOTO BY HEATHER HAHN

Raleigh (N.C.) Area Bishop Alfred W. Gwinn Jr. requests a vote on the Call to Action recommendations.

FAITH WATCH

WCC condemns attack on Baghdad cathedral

The World Council of Churches (WCC) condemned the Oct. 31 terrorist attack on a Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, Iraq. The death toll rose to 58 people after gunmen took hostages during evening Mass and Iraqi security forces raided the church to end the siege. The council is "deeply troubled by the continuous suffering of Christians in Iraq," the Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC's top executive, said in a statement.

Obama, church leaders meet at White House

Leaders of the National Council of Churches (NCC) met Nov. 1 with President Obama to share concerns including poverty, the Middle East conflict and U.S.-Cuba relations. "We were also asking 'What can we do for you?'" [The presidency] is a spiritually demanding job and we are spiritual leaders," the Rev. Michael Kinna- mon, NCC top executive, told Religion News Service.

More give to charities than to local churches

Americans give more these days to religious charities, but giving to churches has decreased, according to a new report from empty tomb, inc. Protestant churches saw a drop of \$20.02 in per-member annual gifts in 2007-2008, while giving to faith-based charities like the Salvation Army increased \$41.59. "People overall give to vision" instead of church finances, empty tomb co-founder Sylvia Ronsvalle told Religion News Service.

Arsonist sentenced in post-election burning

One of three men charged with burning a black church in Springfield, Mass., hours after President Obama's 2008 election was sentenced Nov. 1 to nine years in prison. Benjamin Haskell, 23, who pled guilty in June to a civil rights violation and destroying religious property, must also pay a share of \$1.7 million restitution to the Macedonia Church of God in Christ. Thomas Gleason, 25, has also pled to the same charges; Michael Jacques, 25, awaits trial.

■ GENDER Continued from page 1B**When did the issue of gender inequality first become a personal matter for you?**

That happened at the time of my high school graduation in 1960. At that point, the contemporary women's movement had not been born yet. I was eligible to be the valedictorian, and the principal, who was a priest, called me into his office and said I couldn't give the valedictory speech because I was a girl. I was so dumbfounded. It never occurred to me someone would do something like that. I didn't say anything right away.

I went home and talked to my mother, whose major advice was "Do not get into a fight with the priest," but I went back the very next day and said, "This is wrong. This is unjust. I have earned this, gender has nothing to do with it and it's going to look perfectly terrible on the front page of our local newspaper." I gave the speech. That was my very first feminine encounter. I knew then change was possible.

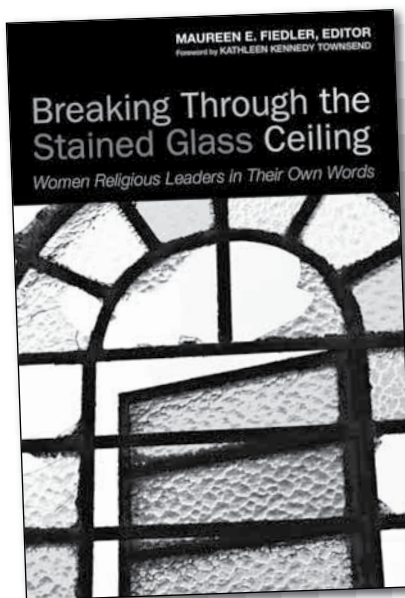
Things have changed. We live a society now where it's common to see women as secular leaders.

That's right. There was a news story recently that for the first time, women topped men in the number of doctorate degrees earned last year. What I also find fascinating is the number of women in right-wing politics that are winning primaries and running for the Senate. I find it very interesting that nobody questions their gender, even in that very conservative wing of the Tea Party or Republican Party. Nobody is saying they should be home being housewives.

They're out there on the stump, and [gender] is just not an issue, which I think signals that the women's movement has won its major battle, because in leadership capacities, gender is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Isn't it ironic that religious institutions—organizations that should ideally stand for justice, peace and equality—don't all promote full gender equality?

In reality, religious institutions ought to be prophetic voices. They really ought to be ahead of the other institutions in society in promoting women's equality. If anything, they have been way behind the curve on



this—although as I say in the thesis of the book, this is now beginning to change.

I think there is an entrenched male leadership and a theology that goes with it. It's much like the entrenched theology that defended slavery for a long time. "Slaves, be subject to your masters," or "Wives, be subject to your

husbands." It had not just the sanction of some civil authority but also the sanction of God. I think it has taken a while for people to reinterpret that theology and Scriptures and to understand that the secondary role of women is not something to be desired in religion.

Here I think the growth of feminist theology has been so important because people have been looking at what the Scripture says with new eyes, with women's eyes, and people have a-ha moments in a lot of denominations.

Which interview for the book was most memorable?

The two most memorable to me are the women from Africa. One is Leymah Gbowee. I found her incredibly courageous in organizing an interfaith coalition of Christian and Muslim women in Liberia that was highly instrumental in overthrowing the dictator Charles Taylor and laying the groundwork for the election of the first woman president of Liberia,

How can lay people support the rise of women in religious leadership positions?

If you are in a denomination that hires a pastor, be as open to female candidates as male. But I think when you have women bishops, as you do in the Methodist Church, it's important to be very publicly supportive of them because there is still some rumbling going on in most denominations, particularly at the level of bishop. I think

'Religious denominations that don't implement gender equality are going to have to rethink what they're doing.'

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The other woman is Immaculée Ilibagiza, and the story of her forgiving the people in the Rwandan genocide who murdered her family. She has taken a leadership capacity by writing a book about it and putting it out there as an example, and I found it incredibly moving.

Another unusual one was the Mourchidates of Morocco, Muslim women who are breaking new ground in women's leadership in Islam. They fill a role that we might think of right now as more like a deaconess. They do a lot of social work, they work with women in prison, they work with women on hospital situations and so forth, but it's a new leadership position and it was fascinating to hear what they are doing.

Do you think the rise of women leadership will lead to more interfaith dialogue?

Yes, I do. It's not that I believe there is some innate difference between men and women, but I think women are socialized more often to engage in dialogue and listening and conversation—that is to say an equal exchange with someone else, as opposed to a dominant exchange.

So why hasn't the glass ceiling been completely shattered yet?

There are still roadblocks. Obviously, there are lots of roadblocks in Islam, although there are real breakthroughs that most Americans don't know about. Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America, is a woman, and there are Muslim feminists who are also pushing the envelope. In Catholicism, there is a very rigid hierarchal structure that has been blocking women's progress for a long time, and eventually that will change, but who knows how many generations it will take. And of course we've had Southern Baptist women that have had setbacks.

it is important for lay people to be very supportive of such women; to be outspoken and say she's doing a fine job if she is, and to answer objections when they're heard. It's important to not be silent, and it's important, for example, if a woman bishop is giving a talk in your area, to go listen to her.

What would you like to see happen next?

In the religious traditions that are still bucking the leadership of women, the steps are probably going to be small steps. In Catholicism, I suppose it would be good if we could at least start to have women deacons, which for Catholics is the first rung on the priesthood ladder.

I'd like to see some breakthroughs in the Mormon Church too; that's another area where there is a lot of stonewalling on this. You would think that because it was founded in America that it would welcome women in those capacities, but from its foundation it has been a male-dominated institution. I remember when Sonia Johnson, one of the fasters for the ERA, was excommunicated from the Mormon Church for advocating the Equal Rights Amendment. That blew me away. That's been a very hard-lined religious institution when it comes to women, and I think some breakthroughs there would be enormously helpful.

Religious traditions that fail to recognize and implement gender equality are going to find very rough going in the 21st century. The culture is set, we've passed the tipping point now where women are accepted in these leadership roles and when a denomination refuses to do that, it tends to look like it is rushing headlong into the 17th century, which is not an attractive place to be, particularly for young women. Religious denominations that don't implement gender equality are going to have to rethink what they're doing.

mmccall@umr.org

THE UNITED METHODIST REPORTER

www.umportal.org

news@umr.org

Robin Russell, Managing Editor

Bill Fentum, Associate Editor

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UM CONNECTIONS

Action Fund awards \$296,000 in grants

The United Methodist Church's General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) has announced grants totaling \$296,000 to support nine projects that advocate for human rights and dignity and the inclusion of racial/ethnic groups, immigrants and refugees. The one-year grants range from \$10,000 to \$40,000, and the projects vary in program designs from immigration legal services and educational seminars to workshops on immigrant rights and ESL classes. The grants, awarded through the GCORR Action Fund's Action & Advocacy funding priority, will assist seven church-based and two community-based organizations from nine states and improve the lives of an estimated 12,000 people. The organizations and projects awarded are: Austin (Texas) Immigrant Rights Coalition, Southeastern Michigan Justice for Our Neighbors Clinic in Livonia, Mich., Central Florida Justice for Our Neighbors in Orlando, Fla., Immigration, Asylum and Refugee Legal Clinics of Northern Illinois Conference based in Elgin, Ill., New York Conference's Justice for Our Neighbors Project in Brooklyn, N.Y., Rosewood UMC's Justice for Our Neighbors in Los Angeles, Calif., Staunton District UMC's Casa De Amistad in Waynesboro, Va., Student Action with Farm Workers, Into the Fields Program in Durham, N.C. and Valley Interfaith Project, Action for Immigration Reform: Defending Children and Families in Phoenix, Ariz. To learn more about the GCORR Action Fund, visit www.gcorr.org.

N.C. historian honored for book on Junaluska

The Rev. Bill Lowry, Lake Junaluska Assembly historian, recently received the Ethel W. Twiford Religious History Book Award from the North Carolina Society of Historians for his book, *The Antechamber of Heaven: A History of Lake Junaluska Assembly*. The Lake Junaluska Assembly is a ministry of the Southeastern Jurisdiction. Copies are available at www.shop.lakejunaluska.com.

—Compiled by Mallory McCall

UMCOR plans food project for Sudan

BY LINDA BLOOM
United Methodist News Service

NEW YORK—The food shortage in South Sudan is so severe that more than half of the residents in two counties say they regularly skip meals.

Armed with information from an August survey, the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) is planning an ambitious food-security project to assist the people there “so they have a broader food basket,” says Thomas Dwyer, who leads UMCOR's nongovernmental unit.

The launch date of the three-year project is January—the same month when voters decide whether South Sudan should become independent from the current government of Sudan. Political unrest related to the Jan. 9 referendum could cause delays, he acknowledged.

Focused on Mugwo Payam in Yei County and Kenyi Payam in Lainya County, the project is designed to improve the production of cassava crops and help establish fish farms.

UMCOR directors approved \$262,740 toward the project during their October board meeting. The agency is in negotiations with the European Union delegation to the Republic of the Sudan for additional funding through its Food Security, Rural Development and Economics Section, Mr. Dwyer said.

The agency's research found that while the majority of residents in both geographic locations produce cassava, few have the proper tools to maximize their yields. Meat consumption is low and alternative food sources are few, but there is an interest in fish farms, which would provide protein.

The goal, Mr. Dwyer said, is to promote something “that's viable, given the local needs, but brings in some innovations.” One of the biggest components of the project will be agricultural training, allowing residents to establish techniques that are sustainable year after year.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HOLSTON CONFERENCE

More than half of South Sudan residents surveyed said they often skip meals.

The United Methodist Church now has 17 official congregations in South Sudan. UMCOR began working in Sudan in early 2005, assisting displaced people living in camps in South Darfur with programs that grew to include education, agriculture and water, sanitation and hygiene. Programs in South Sudan have focused on reintegration of the population after years of war through water and sanitation programs and school reconstruction.

With its partners—including Ginghamburg Church, a United Methodist congregation in Tipp City, Ohio—UMCOR has provided emergency supplies to nearly 80,000, school uniforms and supplies to 16,000 students and improved water and sanitation to about 90,000.

Ginghamburg—which has raised nearly \$5 million for its Sudan mission work—and the Holston Confer-

ence, which has a covenant with United Methodists in East Africa—are the two U.S. United Methodist bodies most active in Sudan.

Holston, which has some 900 churches in Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia, initially committed \$627,000 for clean water, medical care, pastoral training, education, supplies and leadership development in Yei and has raised other funds since then, including more than \$150,000 in a 2010 annual conference offering.

The 2005 Sudan peace agreement—which ended more than 20 years of civil war between the government in the predominantly Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south—gave South Sudan the right to hold January's referendum on independence.

On Oct. 13, Church World Service, a partner of the United Methodist

Church, hosted a luncheon in New York for a visiting delegation of Sudanese church leaders seeking the support of other Christians for a peaceful referendum vote. Attempts to interfere with the balloting could result in chaos and renewed fighting between the north and south, the delegation said.

Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church of Sudan noted that both Christians and Muslims in South Sudan have suffered under the central government and want the freedom to choose whether to remain part of the state of Sudan or become independent.

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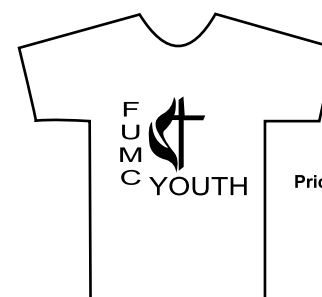
Donations to support “Sudan Emergency, UMCOR Advance 184385” can be made at www.umcor.org.



Sudanese women and children wait to get water from a borehole in Yei, Sudan.

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UMR PHOTOS BY MALLORY MCCALL

African immigrants and refugees gather weekly for worship and community at the Heart of Africa Fellowship at Lovers Lane UMC in Dallas.



LEFT: Chris Willie welcomes Benjamin Simmons, a visitor from San Antonio, Texas, to the Heart of Africa Fellowship at Lovers Lane UMC in Dallas, Texas. RIGHT: The worship team leads the congregation in song and dance during the church service. BELOW: Heart of Africa is more than a specialized Sunday worship hour; it's a community of African immigrants and refugees learning together in a home away from home.



The Heart of Africa Fellowship began when a Liberian couple attended Lovers Lane UMC after

Heart of Africa service lets

BY MALLORY MCCALL
Staff Writer

DALLAS—The Rev. Christian Kakez-A-Kapend plays an electronic keyboard as African refugees and immigrant families dance and clap their way down the center aisle.

The Heart of Africa worship service, held in Shipp Chapel at Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas, draws people who have fled conflict, corruption and poverty and find a place in the United Methodist Church while maintaining their African identity.

“The blessing that is overflowing is to have Africa come to Lovers Lane,” says the Rev. Stan Copeland, senior pastor. He tells members of the fellowship: “God has opened the doors of Lovers Lane and you have come through them, and now you help hold the doors open wide and bring others through our doors.”

Vibrant worship

Every Sunday morning, people of all ages from African nations such as Zambia, Liberia, Uganda, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Congo meet for a vibrant worship service. Some come in traditional African attire; others wear blue jeans and sweaters. Together, they sing African and American worship songs, accompanied by clapping and dancing, and also spend time in prayer.

“Visiting the Heart of Africa service just made my heart sing,” said the Rev. Mary Balagia, an associate pastor at Lovers Lane who recently attended the service for the first time. “The way they integrate body and soul into their worship is what I imagine David looked like dancing before the Lord.”

There’s freedom to stomp your feet, clap or raise

your hands—to worship however you like, she says.

“I think people would be surprised to realize the freedom they’d find in that kind of worship,” said Ms. Balagia. “It would enhance their personal worship experience, no doubt.”

The Heart of Africa is a passionate, authentic community, says Mr. Kakez-A-Kapend. The Fellowship is designed to be a time and place, where Africans can be comfortable with each other, with themselves and with God.

The congregants share joys and concerns at the beginning of the service. Some thank God for another day in America, some pray for safe travels for family traveling back to Africa, some pray for peace in Liberia as political elections grow violent.

The specially focused fellowship for Africans offers participants several benefits, say church staff.

For starters, becoming involved in a church community can be difficult for immigrants because of their work schedules. Because many recent immigrants work several jobs so they can send money home to Africa, they cannot frequently attend church services, classes and meetings, said Mr. Kakez-A-Kapend, associate pastor of the Heart of Africa Fellowship.

Africans living in America also don’t want to lose their sense of national identity and heritage, he added. “We are like the children of Israel in exile. We are here for a purpose but we also have a purpose in our home on the African continent.

“Mother Africa is calling out to her children in exile to come back and rebuild the walls of Jericho.”

One of Mr. Kakez-A-Kapend’s goals is to empower the lay members of the fellowship so that they feel a sense of belonging. He invites them to volunteer with the youth, lead men’s and women’s small groups, help lead worship, play instruments, make



escaping the civil war in their homeland.

refugees maintain identity

announcements, read Scripture and pray during the Sunday service because it gets them connected and committed to church.

He also believes empowering them in the church will help them locally and globally.

“It’s an opportunity for the U.S. church and even the government to help Africa, but as Africans, it is our responsibility to help Africa,” he said. “By empowering those who have a responsibility, that is the solution to many troubles.”

Mr. Kakez-A-Kapend quotes Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal, saying that Heart of Africa is the “le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir”—the great meeting point of giving and receiving our bests.

“I believe that’s what the church should be, and that’s what Heart of Africa is,” he added.

History

Lovers Lane United Methodist Church became aware of the need for an African ministry when Peter and Betty Weato, a couple from Liberia, joined the church in the early 1990s after fleeing the civil war in Liberia.

Mr. Weato had been shot by a drunken soldier and left for dead. He survived the gunshot wound, dug himself out of a dumpster full of dead bodies and returned home—only to find that his house had been burned to the ground and his wife and five children were missing.

Ms. Weato had been told her husband was killed, and Mr. Weato was told his family had all been killed. For three years neither of them knew the other was alive.

They were finally reunited in Dallas and joined Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in 1995.

When the church launched its wanna-

knowwhy.com marketing campaign—a series of public testimonies about how and why people joined the congregation—other African immigrants in the Dallas area had the opportunity to read about Mr. Weato’s story of hope and refuge. Through this campaign, a community of African refugees sharing their stories emerged in the church.

“Now we have about 20 nationalities represented on Sunday mornings,” said Dr. Copeland. “And at 11 a.m. there are six different languages spoken in worship at the same time but in different settings.”

“I wish I could say it was a grand scheme, but it really wasn’t. It was a movement of the Holy Spirit, it was the faith sharing of African people and then bringing people to a church that was open and accepting and equipped because of the pastors who could serve them.”

Multiple purposes

The Heart of Africa Fellowship has not only provided a community for Africans living in the Dallas area, Dr. Copeland says, it also has strengthened the Lovers Lane community as a whole.

“Heart of Africa brings to the greater community [of the church] a sense of purpose,” he said. “Our mission is loving all people into relationship with Jesus. They bring a deep sense of commitment to that mission.”

African members have enriched the North Dallas church, say church leaders.

“They’ve reminded us all how flat the ground is at the foot of the cross,” said Dr. Copeland. “They have given us a sense of a global church because now we see the global church at Lovers Lane every Sunday.”

mmccall@umr.org

BELOW: The hollow thump of the djembe, an African drum, is constantly heard throughout the service—during the time of worship, announcements and prayer.



LEFT: The Rev. Christian Kakez-A-Kapend, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is the associate pastor of the Heart of Africa Fellowship. RIGHT: Ottus Neal, 13, is an active member of the Heart of Africa’s youth ministry and occasionally joins the worship team in leading songs.



Women pretend to play the trumpet for the Lord as part of an upbeat African worship song.

Teaching the UM Way of Salvation

BY BISHOP SCOTT J. JONES
Special Contributor

If George or Jane came to you and asked, "I want to be a United Methodist Christian; what do I do?" how would you answer? There are a lot of possibilities that would lead them to ask this important, life-changing spiritual question.

George could be a factory worker, raised as a United Methodist, who has not been inside a church for years. Or George could be a corporate executive who has just defrauded millions of people and realizes his life is not what it should be.

He could be a heroin dealer making his living off the addiction of others. Or George could have just suffered the death of a child.

Jane could be a nurse, raised in another denomination but totally inactive for the last 20 years. Or Jane could be an immigrant who went to church in her home country but now is lonely and far from God.

She could be a widow whose grief from her husband's death is overwhelming. Or Jane could be a successful 50-year-old who wonders if her life has meaning.

There are people like George and Jane living in our communities who need salvation. They need a personal relationship with Christ as Lord and Savior. They need the means of grace found only in the church. They need what our church has to offer.

The problem is, they may not know what we offer, and they may not know the way of salvation. How would you respond?

Not an easy answer

The simple answer is: "I am living the United Methodist Way. Come on the journey with me!" The complex part of the answer is that Christian discipleship is a many-faceted way of life.

For longtime United Methodists, our understanding of the way of salvation lies deep in our very DNA. Yet we have to be able to give some account of this way of life so others will understand the journey they are being invited to take.

The journey begins with the first step: awareness that there is a God and that God is love. George and Jane may have come to believe that Christianity is more about judgment than about love and acceptance. Or they might believe there is no God and no divine purpose to life.

The United Methodist Way teaches that there is a God, and that God is love, and that God is seeking a relationship with every human being. We believe our awareness of this comes through prevenient grace.

We believe that God loves the world so much that God is continually seeking to save every human being and the whole of creation, even when we are not aware of it. The way of salvation is awareness that God first loved us, and we are responding to a gift God has given to us and to the whole world.

John 3:16 says God's love is for the whole world—that includes everyone. Deep in our Wesleyan understanding of God and the Bible is the awareness that Christ died for all, and all are invited to become children of God.

We tell George and Jane that they are valuable and beloved by God. They have been made in God's own image; and God still loves them, including all that has happened in their lives. Reminding them of God's love is a beginning point in a journey toward wholeness. We call that wholeness salvation.

'Convincing grace'

The next step is that God's grace sometimes reminds us of where

"The United Methodist way of salvation teaches three simple rules: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.'

things have gone wrong. We are not the people we should be, or we have done things we should not have done, or the world has deep problems that ought to be solved. We call this "convincing grace" because it convinces us of sin.

We believe the Bible teaches that God created a good world that has been marred by human sin. We human beings have been disobedient to God's will. Our violations of God's laws are sin. More than that, there is something deeply flawed in humanity that we call "original sin," which needs the grace of God to heal.

God's convincing grace leads to the next step—the decision to do something. Repentance is best understood as a change of mind. It involves turning around so that one faces in a new direction and decides, "I am not going to live this way any longer."

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of a son who got his inheritance early, traveled to a far country and "squan-

dered his property in dissolute living." The turning point came when the prodigal son was starving. Verse 17 says "he came to himself." The prodigal son decided that he would go home, confess his sin to his father and ask to be treated like a slave. Instead, he was welcomed as a son by a loving father.

Unless he had changed his mind, or repented, he would never have started the journey home. Every time Christians pray a prayer of confession we are naming ourselves as sinners who need God's forgiveness.

'Justifying grace'

Justifying grace is the love of God enabling the next step: the decision to accept God's offer of a special relationship. Justification is the entry into the Christian life. Everything up to this point has been preparatory. So far George and Jane have been testing out the possibilities and considering what it might be like. Justification is the step where they say yes to God's offer of a relationship and make a commitment of their lives.

It is crucial that the nature of this be clear or the rest of their spiritual journey will be misdirected. Justification is a total commitment. It involves their whole identity as persons and will affect their family life, work,

leisure activities and use of money.

Sometimes the Christian life has been so devalued that people join the church the way they join a club. Newcomers are led to believe that they can be good Christians by having their names on the membership roll, attending at Christmas and Easter, contributing pocket change to the offering and behaving as they please.

Instead, the United Methodist Way of Salvation teaches three simple rules: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

First, they should do no harm "by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced." Evil practices include racism, sexism, alcohol and drug abuse, greed, environmental pollution, dishonesty, violence, corruption and sexual immorality.

Second, they should do "good of every possible sort and, as far as possible, to all." Matters of personal holiness fall into this category—acts of



John Wesley

mercy to others, generosity, kindness and sharing our faith with unbelievers. Matters of social holiness are also included: feeding the hungry, combating poverty and ending racism.

Ordinances of God

The third rule is a restatement of the General Rule "to attend upon all the ordinances of God." John Wesley listed these as public worship of God, ministry of the word, the Supper of the Lord, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence. He understood these to

be the means of grace whereby the love and power of God is made available to every person who uses them.

Philippians 2:12-13 teaches an important paradox: that God's grace saves us, but we must cooperate with that grace and use the grace that is being offered.

These ordinances of God are best seen as the practices that nourish us spiritually, connecting us to God and the power of the Holy Spirit. They result in changed behavior, where our lives will reflect our desire to be part of what God is blessing in the world.

The way toward Christian maturity is called "sanctification" because we are allowing God's grace to shape our hearts, minds and lives to be more and more holy, more and more like Jesus, more and more like mature Christians.

George and Jane have started the Christian life seeking something. They want fulfillment or happiness or salvation or something. United Methodist Christians believe genuine human happiness comes from growing in holiness—becoming the men and women God intends us to be.

So how do George and Jane make progress? By using the means of grace and living the United Methodist Way of Salvation.

Bishop Jones leads the Kansas Area. This is an adapted excerpt from the book *The Future of the United Methodist Church: 7 Vision Pathways* (Abingdon).

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Bishop Scott Jones

Reflections on evangelism and a strange kind of math

BY MICHAEL J. GEHRING
Special Contributor

Having already been awarded a scholarship in classics to University College, he still needed to gain entrance to Oxford University. After Christmas he had traveled back to his private tutor so he could prepare for the entrance exams. He sat for the Responsions on March 20 and 21.

His tutor had written his father about how brilliant the young man was and that he could have a career as a writer or a scholar some day. In fact, the tutor said that's about all he would be good for. The young man knew how bright he was, and was somewhat smug about his intellectual abilities.

There was, however, one area in which he had never excelled—mathematics—which was odd, since his mother earned First Class Honors in Logic and a Second Class Honors Degree in Mathematics from the Royal University of Ireland (present-day Queens University, Belfast).

It is strange that this young man named Clive didn't gravitate to math. Still he had been prepping for the basic elementary exam for months, one that any college-bound, high school graduate should be able to pass.

He failed the math exam. His college secured for him a tutor, but Clive failed it again. He never passed the exam. The reason he was allowed to attend Oxford University was because Veterans of the First World War had Responsions waived for them.

Years later, his brother Warren asked him if at any point in his life he thought he could pass the exam and C.S. Lewis answered he didn't think so.

Essential tool

He was one of the most brilliant minds in Oxford of his day, and yet math tripped him up. I'm intrigued that Lewis couldn't do elementary math. In the society we live in, math seems to be an essential tool.

We count almost everything. We count the hours and minutes in the workweek. We watch the numbers of the Stock Exchange, even if we don't own any stock. The United Methodist Church keeps track of membership, baptisms, Sunday school and worship attendance, which is really helpful when we desire to chart its half-century of decline!

I know a preacher who wants to start a petition arguing we should stop counting, as it only makes ourselves dispirited, overwhelmed and blue. He doesn't have a prayer of it passing because it is so ingrained in Methodists to count. It's in our DNA.

Wesley was a counter. We even have a conference statistician, whose job is to keep up with all these numbers. "Quit counting," is what my preacher friend says. (He also feels this way about the national debt: "Forget about it. It's so deep in red it's pointless. Let's stop counting and just party on till the crash.")

Sometimes I think he's crazy, but

'The religious leaders were grumbling because Jesus was inviting people into the kingdom. . . who didn't look like them, talk like them or act like them.'

you know he's not alone.

If you think about the story Jesus told about the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:1-7), that guy is crazy like a loon. Jesus said, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" (NRSV) Some kind of Good Shepherd that is. If you leave the 99, who is left to protect them from wild animals? Can't you just imagine as he returns, the shepherd's face radiating with that one lost sheep draped over his shoulders, and when he gets back to the fold he can only count 12 because the rest have been devoured by a pack of wolves?

Poor shepherd, he never was much good with math. If he had simply stayed put, it would be $100 - 1 = 99$, and his net worth would be 99 sheep. Go wandering around in the wilderness, and the result is $100 \text{ sheep} - 88 \text{ eaten by wolves} + 1 \text{ lost sheep found} = 13$.

We won't put this guy in charge of our retirement. After Jesus told this story, it's surprising one of the Pharisees didn't yell out, "Rabbi, math is just not your thing!"

Heavenly math

Strange kind of math, if you think about it. But maybe it's a new kind of math, a heavenly kind of math. Jesus concluded the story by saying, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in

heaven over one sinner who repents than over nine-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (NRSV)

Tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees grumbled when they heard this story, saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2, NRSV) Don't you just hate it when you read the Scriptures and see yourself in its pages? I wish I could have back all the minutes, hours and days I've spent grumbling.

The religious leaders were grumbling because Jesus was inviting people into the kingdom who weren't their kind of people—people who didn't look like them, talk like them or

act like them. Worse yet, Jesus said, the Good Shepherd leaves the 99 who are found in order to seek out and find the lost one.

You need to look no further than this story to understand a simple truth: God cares for the least and the lost. What the Pharisees—and I suspect more than a few of us—have trouble visualizing is that they and we are sometimes just as lost as those tax collectors and sinners.

Unlike my friend, I won't be signing any petition to eliminate the numerical process from our system. In fact I'm a part of a covenantal group of pastors who share our statistics as we struggle to live into the Great Commission.

Years after he failed the Responsions, served in the First World War and became a Fellow of Magdalen College (Oxford), Lewis renounced his atheism as he became convinced of the reality of God. He then decided to use his considerable gifts as a lay evangelist for the faith.

Lewis referred to himself as just an ordinary layman of the Anglican Church. I would argue he was one of the most significant lay-evangelists of the second half of the 20th century. And it is odd, or perhaps fitting, that he who never excelled at numbers was an instrument for countless conversions to the faith.

The Rev. Gehring is senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Lincolnton, N.C.

REFLECTIONS

Election season reminds us: Be thankful for democracy

BY BISHOP WOODIE W. WHITE
UMR Columnist

We have just completed another national election season. Across the country, national, state and local political leaders were selected.

Democracy can be messy, but at least it is not bloody! However, I was shocked and dismayed to note a few citizens wearing side arms and carrying signs urging revolution at a few political rallies.

These are not the signs or symbols of democracy, but tyranny. In this country, we elect our leaders; we do not overthrow them.

Democracy does not guarantee results. It is a process that assures full and equal participation and access. It is a right guaranteed by the nation's Constitution. What it does guarantee is that the majority vote prevails for a candidate or a proposition.

I take neither democracy nor voting for granted. I have all-too-recent reminders of the price paid for both. I live in a state where citizens of color were once denied access and participation. Sadly, there are still those who would deny both if they could. Their understanding of democracy is as tainted as their view of U.S. citizenship.

In a democracy, once leaders are chosen, they become the leaders of government—local, state and national. Indeed, not all those elected were the candidates preferred by those casting their ballots. But once the ballots have been cast and counted, those selected are leaders regardless of how one voted. It is the way of democracy.

There are places around the world where such a free and open process of electing leaders is still just a cherished dream. In some instances, an armed struggle often takes place to achieve such participation in the political process.

The democratic process allows and welcomes free expression of ideas as well as support or opposition to candidates seeking office. At times, that opposition can become a bit heated and even harsh. What is said is sometimes untrue, inflammatory and hateful.

But in a democracy, even negative

expressions must be protected. Indeed, even hate speech must not be denied in a democracy!

For the most part, the open and free expression of ideas maximizes the possibility that an electorate will choose its leaders and policies wisely. That is not always the case, but it is the way of democracy. It is a good way!

'There are places around the world where such a free and open process of electing leaders is still just a cherished dream.'

I recently spent several weeks visiting U.S. military bases in Hawaii and the Far East, where I talked to young men and women who have volunteered to protect and defend this nation. I never asked their political party or preference. I suspect they held diverse views.

But when they are deployed to the battlefield, I am certain that opposing forces do not care about their party affiliation. They are viewed as Americans—or as the enemy.

Indeed, those who defend our nation and protect our democracy do not do so by partisan political affiliation, religious identity, racial or gender classification—but as Americans.

As we enter this Thanksgiving season, I am certain we have much for which to be thankful. On my list is the privilege of living in a nation where we govern and select our political leaders in a democratic process of open and free elections.

Sometimes my preferred candidates win and sometimes they lose. That is the way of democracy. And I am thankful that is our way.

Retired Bishop White is the denomination's Endorsing Agent for Chaplain Ministries and bishop-in-residence at Candler School of Theology.



Michael Gehring



Bishop Woodie White

■ PANAMA Continued from page 1B

ment to build vital congregations; agencies should be reconstituted with smaller, competency-based boards.

Bishops agreed that an emphasis on local churches is critical if the United Methodist Church is to be relevant for the future. "The real act of making disciples takes place in the local church," said Holston Conference Bishop James Swanson.

Missouri Bishop Robert Schnase, whose books on fruitful practices have been put into use throughout the denomination, said he was "thrilled" at the Council's focus on helping build effective local churches. "I hope we can courageously align our systems and resources for sustained obedience in a consistent direction to support the mission of the church through fruitful congregations," he said.

The report's recommendation for less bureaucracy means the church's general agencies must be willing to put their work on the line, said steering team member Erin Hawkins, top staff executive of the General Commission on Religion and Race.

"General agencies and churches working together is not enough. We've got to be willing to look at a new thing," Ms. Hawkins said. "Put your life's work on the line. Step up and lead."

Church reform efforts in the United Methodist Church are not new. Since the Call to Action report was released in October, some church members have criticized the Call to Action report as "the same old thing."

But bishops say shrinking membership and budget shortfalls have prompted a greater urgency and a desire to cooperate for change.

"People are rightfully concerned about the church's attention span," said Bishop Palmer. "But it's one of those moments where I feel as though

this council is digging in for sustained focus."

Bishop Goodpaster agreed. "There's so much collaboration, so much conversation among all the stakeholders," he said. "There's a sense that if not now, then we've missed a window of opportunity God's opened for us to engage in mission in the world."

Data mining

The Steering Team based its recommendations on two studies it commissioned from independent researchers. One was an "Operational Assessment of the Connectional Church" that found the church was undergoing a "creeping crisis of relevance" and rated general agencies below average in fulfilling the church's mission.

Another study, "The Vital Congregations Research Project," analyzed data from 32,228 United Methodist churches in North America and found just 15 percent were "high-vital" local churches marked by effective pastors, multiple small groups, diverse worship styles and spiritually engaged lay leaders.

Some bishops criticized the findings based on a U.S.-centric survey. Nordic and Baltic Area Bishop Christian Alsted disagreed with the "drivers" of congregational vitality described in the report, such as multiple small groups, which do not always result in "making disciples." He also criticized the report as not applicable to a global church.

"If we make a survey only in the U.S., how do we then dare to apply the findings of that survey to the whole church?" Bishop Alsted said. "It's beyond my comprehension."

But Germany Conference Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, a member of the steering team, said that while the report was based on a survey in the U.S.,



UMR PHOTOS BY ART RUSSELL/ARRMEDIA.COM

Downtown Panama City, Panama, boasts a skyline full of contemporary buildings.

where the church has seen the greatest decline, its recommendations apply worldwide. "We have to revitalize congregations wherever we live," she said.

Dealing with reality

Fred Miller, president of The Chatham Group consulting firm and a member of First United Methodist Church in Chatham, Mass., cautioned bishops that values-based organizations such as denominations often struggle with handling data that conflicts with their own values—and therefore don't deal well with reality.

"Organizations that work really well deal with brutal facts," he said. "Leaders don't wait for permission to

lead. At some point, it has to be done by the bishops; it can't be done by outsiders."

Mr. Miller, who has donated his services to coach the bishops as they process the Call to Action report, outlined characteristics of groups that make good decisions: They have clear goals, have no more than six to 10 people and are careful to hold one another accountable. By contrast, he said, the United Methodist Church depends on a law-making body of 1,000 delegates "making speeches" every four years at General Conference.

"The real problem is a [church] culture that fears change," Mr. Miller said. And sometimes, he added, prac-

tics have to change before a culture itself will change.

That's started to happen already in the council, said Bishop Goodpaster, citing greater flexibility in the agendas at bishops' semi-annual meetings and "more honest engagement" in bishops' covenant or accountability groups.

"We're more open to where the Spirit is leading," he said. "There's the sense that we've got to make something happen. Bishops are passionately onboard."

The complete Call to Action report is available at www.umc.org/calltoaction.

rrussell@umr.org



UMR PHOTO BY ROBIN RUSSELL

Council of Bishops president Larry Goodpaster, left, chats with the Rev. Fitzgerald Reist, secretary of the General Conference, at the bishops' gathering in Panama.



UMNS PHOTO BY HEATHER HAHN

Fred Miller, president of The Chatham Group consulting firm, tells bishops they need to lead in a church culture that doesn't like change.

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The Rev. Neal Christie; The Rev. Clayton Childers

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