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## A counter cultural Christmas



Nativity sets from all over the world are among the items carried by the Fair Trade Gift Shop at Mount Sequoyah in Fayetteville.

COURTESY PHOTO

## Arkansans have options for fair trade, alternative gifts

BY AMY FORBUS  
Editor

According to a Gallup poll released Oct. 20, a majority of Americans (54 percent) plan to spend about the same amount this Christmas as they did for last year's gifts.

What if the money spent on those gifts could give twice?

There are ways that it can. And United Methodists in Arkansas are among those providing such choices.

### Fair trade

Two United Methodist retreat centers offer fair trade goods: Mount Sequoyah in Fayetteville and Mount Eagle near Clinton.

In 2005, the bookstore at Mount Sequoyah Retreat and Conference Center was among those smaller shops where Cokesbury, the retail division of the United Methodist

Publishing House, decided to discontinue retail operations.

The center's directors, John and Sheri Altland, were familiar with the concept of fair trade, a practice that directly benefits producers of goods, giving them opportunities for better lives. They began to look at carrying fair trade items, and realized that focusing on fair trade would fill a niche in northwest Arkansas.

About 90 percent of the shop's inventory is now fair trade, says Brenda Thorne, director of guest services. The Fair Trade Gift Shop at Mount Sequoyah uses about 15 Fair Trade Certified vendors, plus local businesses and artists.

Christmas items include a wide selection of nativity sets, which they carry year-round, as well as handmade games, seasonal ornaments and décor.

The shop draws customers from the surrounding area, not just people who come for a meeting or retreat. [See COUNTER-CULTURAL, page 6A]



## AN OCCASIONAL WORD from the Bishop

BY CHARLES CRUTCHFIELD

Dear Friends:

Every 45 seconds a child dies from malaria. That is about the time it takes to open two well-wrapped Christmas presents.

The death of a child in that short time span is made more horrific by the fact that it does not have to happen. Malaria is a preventable, treatable disease.

At a recent gathering of malaria fighters hosted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Melinda Gates said, "The Methodists have made it [the eradication of malaria] their business. They will make a difference."

People like Melinda Gates have recognized the enormous capacity of our church to deliver, to be a transforming, healing agent in a world where a preventable disease claims so many innocent lives. We have the capacity to provide millions

of chemically treated bed nets, to support vaccine research and testing, to provide public health training and clinic care.

In Moscow, there is a student from central Russia who is struggling to learn how to be a pastor in the United Methodist Church. The student is bright, articulate, and committed. He smiles and laughs a lot. He could have a good job elsewhere as an engineer or teacher. He chooses to be a pastor. It is a call from God he cannot resist.

In spite of low wages, hostility from the "established church" and frequent frustration created by bureaucratic officials, he is studying with fellow students to become a seminary graduate. He is in desperate need of a scholarship. And there are others just like him.

In a few months, Bishop Vaxby will appoint him to a United Methodist Church somewhere in

central Russia. He will be in an annual conference spanning several time zones. He will be isolated by distance from other pastors. He will likely serve more than one church at a time. It will not be easy.

What ties the child in Africa and the seminary student together is our theology as United Methodist Christians. We embrace a theology of grace that is world-wide, not regional. It is all-encompassing, not narrow and parochial.

We believe that our faith calls us to provide for the child who is ill and the young pastor called by God to minister in the name of Christ, to go where we cannot go to preach the Good News of Christ. They both need our prayer, and our support. We are the ones who can, for the sake of Christ, provide.

We can provide.

Suppose each of us added up the total amount we spend on

Christmas gifts and made a tithe on that amount to "Moscow Seminary Scholarships" or "Imagine No Malaria."

Suppose we brought healing to the body and healing to the spirit—in the name of the Christ Child.

Suppose you sent a check to the conference office marked "Moscow Seminary Scholarship" or "Imagine No Malaria."

Suppose you sent two checks.

Do you suppose your heart might smile and you'd have a very Merry Christmas, indeed?

Faithfully,

*Charles M. Crutchfield*

Charles Crutchfield



# Competitive spirit boosts generosity

## 'Adopt a cause' game a big hit

BY PAT BODENHAMER  
Special Contributor

I'll begin by admitting it: Omaha UMC does not have a glowing record when it comes to paying apportionments. But this year, there's something new in the mix: a little healthy competition.

Our church treasurer, Janet Shapter, devised a game to help parishioners learn about the worthwhile causes supported by the Arkansas Conference through our apportionments. We invited members to participate in an "adopt a cause" contest.

Each competitor has chosen a cause they are interested in from among the ministries and organizations that receive our apportionment dollars. They learn the history of their adopted cause and why it still exists today, and work to convince others both inside and outside the church that it's important. They then ask for donations of any amount.



**Pat Bodenhamer**

For example, if a competitor does a favor for a neighbor and the neighbor wants to pay him, but the competitor doesn't want to accept payment, he can instead ask for a donation of any size to his adopted cause. The neighbor will naturally be curious, so now the player has an opening to engage his neighbor in conversation about his adopted cause and his church—and to invite the person to church.

We kicked off the competition with a dessert party on Sept. 12, where we laid out the rules: All the money collected will go into the same apportionment fund, but we will give recognition and prizes for the three largest generators of interest and money. The game continues for a full year.

The game is helping us to raise awareness within our own congregation of these worthwhile causes that have been historically supported by United Methodists in Arkansas. Some of the state's finest schools, colleges, camps and retreats were founded by Arkansas United Methodists. Organizations beyond

our Conference borders make a difference, too. Each institution has a rich and interesting history behind it.

Our treasurer took the lead by claiming all "administrative funds" as her cause. Others of us chose a variety of local, regional and international causes that benefit from local churches paying their apportionments in full.

Mount Sequoyah Conference and Retreat Center and Camp Aldersgate benefit from our churches' support here in Arkansas, but we're not limited by the bounds of our Conference. Imagine No Malaria and Africa University make a difference in parts of the world many of us will never see—but because we are connected through the UMC, our help can still reach those places.

While we've made a game out of it, we also remember to keep our adopted causes in mind at all times, praying for these causes to prosper and to do even more good works with the donations they receive.

Early in the competition, we held one of our church's "free yard sale" events. At these sales, the community is invited to choose items from our inventory of clothes, books and furniture, and some shoppers make donations. Because of their generosity, we were able to split \$114 among our adopted causes to help get everyone started.

That was September. Since then, the competition has really taken off! In the short time that we've been involved with the game, excitement has grown. Based on the money already gathered, we project that for the first time in several years, Omaha UMC will pay 100 percent of apportionments, in addition to supporting several local causes.

Our congregation has learned a lot about where our money goes, and why the gifts make a difference. Just a few months into this experiment, we can already see that our giving is transforming the world—for other people and for us, too.

Since September we have added five new members to the roll, and they are active participants in the game. Watch out world—Omaha UMC is living out their calling to build up the Body of Christ!

*The Rev. Bodenhamer serves as pastor of Diamond City and Omaha UMCs.*



## EDITOR'S CORNER

BY AMY FORBUS

# The true meaning of Christmas?

Every year, I watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas." And every year, my thought process goes something like this:

*Oh, I just love this show. So old-fashioned and pure. And the music is wonderful.*

*Ha! Would you listen to that? Charlie Brown thought Christmas was too commercial in 1965! I wonder what he'd say now?*

*He'd probably say, "Aaaugh!" He's kind of known for that.*

*I saw that you can now buy the sad little Charlie Brown Christmas tree to have for your very own.*

*I hope Charles Schulz had already died by the time someone decided to make a commercial product out of that particular icon of anti-commercialism.*

*I think he was still alive when I bought the DVD.*

*Aaaugh! Christmas is too commercial!*

*We're all suckers, aren't we?*

## Marketing madness

I ran an errand on Nov. 1 that took me into a large artsy-craftsy establishment. The Christmas music was on full blast.

Let's have a look at the retailers' side of things for a moment. They face a quandary: If they don't hit Christmas just as hard and just as early as other stores, will they lose business?

The Nordstrom department store chain has a policy of not decorating for Christmas until the day after Thanksgiving. It hasn't seemed to hurt them—in fact, they've used it in a marketing campaign, so it may have led some folks to shop at Nordstrom before other stores.

But this year a Seattle blogger caught them playing fast and loose with a "party season" display window theme that looked an awful lot like Christmas in October. Is Nordstrom starting to think they won't get an invitation to the party if they don't play the game?

I'm guessing that within the past decade, most of our readers have heard the phrase "war on Christmas." Most recently, it has been associated with retail establishments that use generic terms like "holidays" in place of

"Christmas." The American Family Association (AFA) has gone so far as to call for boycotts of stores that refuse to use the word "Christmas" in their marketing and advertising.

I think the AFA is hiding from a much bigger problem.

Because sensitivity to such a matter indicates that we have placed our celebration of Christmas in the wrong hands—the hands of consumer culture. If you, a Christian, take offense when someone who is trying to sell you stuff wishes you Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas, commercialism has already won.

Saying a certain phrase is not what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

## Can we beat the greed?

Last year in this space, I wrote "How to get my goat this Christmas." Purchasing a goat from Heifer International's gift catalog at [heifer.org](http://heifer.org) is just one way we can celebrate Jesus' birth instead of buying stuff that, it could be argued, nobody needs.

And last Christmas, I got my goat, and then some. Family and friends bought me a goat, rabbits, ducks and other types of livestock through [heifer.org](http://heifer.org). It was my best Christmas ever; because I knew that people who hope for a better life had some of their needs met.

I also wrote about some Arkansas churches participating in Advent Conspiracy, which puts the focus on providing sources of clean

water in parts of the world lacking that basic resource.

In that same vein, the book that appears on page 5A of this issue, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*, offers a serious challenge: For every dollar you spend on Christmas gifts for your own family and friends, give a dollar to help someone else.

At the church where the author serves as senior pastor, it's known as the Christmas Miracle Offering. And it has been a miracle, both for people in Sudan and for people in Tipp City, Ohio.

It's a bold challenge, and people stepped up to meet it. They didn't take the easy way out. They made a significant difference through sacrificial giving. And it wasn't just one year—they're still at it. Visit [ginghamsburg.org/sudan](http://ginghamsburg.org/sudan) for details.



What about us? What can we do right here in Arkansas? Are you ready to give every bit as much—or more—to those outside your circle of family and friends as you give to those inside it?

*"...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..."*

To quote Shane Claiborne, who spoke last month at Hendrix College, "What if Jesus really meant all that stuff he said?"

I'm not ready to go to the mall this Christmas. But I am ready to be part of a miracle.

*To reach me, send an e-mail to [aforbus@arumc.org](mailto:aforbus@arumc.org).*

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# Two ways to help wipe out malaria: giving and advocating

BY SARA D. BAYLES AND DANIELLE WILLIAMS  
*Special Contributors*

Every 45 seconds, a child dies from malaria. That's 2,000 children every single day, and 2,000 sets of parents who were not ready to prepare for that child's funeral. And malaria is a completely preventable and treatable disease. What are *you* going to do about it?

You have options. You can participate in Imagine No Malaria, which is a comprehensive effort of the United Methodist Church to eliminate malaria deaths in Africa by 2015. It's easy to give by visiting [imagineenomalaria.org](http://imagineenomalaria.org). You can make a gift in honor of a relative or friend—a Christmas gift that changes the world.

Or you can advocate for the U.S. Congress to maintain humanitarian aid spending. But you should do both.

Imagine No Malaria is a campaign of the United Methodist Church that fights malaria in Africa through prevention, treatment, communication and education. Our church is focused on Africa because 90 percent of deaths from this disease occur in sub-Saharan Africa. We provide prevention tools like insecticide-treated bed nets—because the *Anopheles* species that carries malaria feeds from dusk until dawn—and methods for draining stagnant water where mosquitoes breed.

In addition, the church is

revitalizing hospitals and clinics in Africa so they have appropriate testing supplies and medication for diagnosis and treatment. Through our radio stations and communications infrastructure, we have the ability to fight malaria by spreading health care messages.

Finally, we train health care workers—local volunteers who educate communities about this disease and help families set up their bed nets.

Our work has been incredibly successful in Africa, as has the work of our partners. Child death rates have been reduced from a child dying every 30 seconds to every 45. Nevertheless, our progress may be undermined.

Congress is proposing to cut humanitarian aid spending as a means to reduce the U.S. budget and our country's debt. While humanitarian aid makes up only one percent of the nation's budget, in terms of lives saved, this amount of money is absolutely critical.

If the House of Representatives' budget recommendations are approved, 3.8 million children will be at risk for malaria, because they will no longer have access to medications. This risking of young lives will save us less than one percent of the federal budget.

On Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2011, we, along with the Rev. Steve Copley and Melissa Thomas, traveled to Washington D.C. to serve as advocates for the children of Africa who face the threat of malaria every day. That week we visited with

Senator John Boozman and Representative Tim Griffin to lobby for continued support for malaria funding.

Our request was not that they increase spending for malaria or that they reduce spending in another area; we simply asked for funding to be maintained so the gains which have been made will not be lost.

We were not alone in this effort. United Methodists from across the country joined with us for Imagine No Malaria Advocacy Days to ask their own representatives to maintain humanitarian aid spending.

You can join with us now. We need the U.S. government to continue supporting anti-malaria projects, such as the President's Malaria Initiative, so that children are protected from this preventable and treatable disease.

Please, contact your representatives. Let them know that reducing our spending by less than one percent is not worth jeopardizing 3.8 million children's lives.

If you would like further information or are interested in becoming an advocate, please contact the Rev. Steve Copley at [scopley438@aol.com](mailto:scopley438@aol.com) or 501-626-9220.

*Bayles is active in the Wesley Foundation at the University of Central Arkansas, and serves as a student pastor for Cleveland and Overcup UMCs. Williams, a native of Cabot, serves as an Imagine No Malaria annual conference liaison for United Methodist Communications.*



## Why us? Why now?

The goal of the Imagine No Malaria campaign is to raise \$75 million to eliminate malaria deaths in Africa by 2015. And we are making progress!

Why is the United Methodist Church such a powerful force in this fight? Here's a word from the Imagine No Malaria website, [imagineenomalaria.org](http://imagineenomalaria.org):

"The UMC has worked in Africa for more than 160 years. We operate churches, schools, hospitals and clinics across the continent in places where no one else will go. Wherever the road runs out, you'll find us bringing hope to the hopeless and empowering the powerless."

Partners such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the United Nations Foundation recognize the church's power to transform lives, and that's why they choose to work with us in this effort.

To learn more, visit [imagineenomalaria.org](http://imagineenomalaria.org). You can make a gift through the site, and 100 percent of your donation will be used to help eradicate this deadly disease.

## Society of St. Andrew pairs giving, devotions for Advent

Each Advent, the Society of St. Andrew publishes a series of daily devotions and a giving program designed to draw participants closer to God's gift to the world: Jesus.

Perhaps best known for its ministry of gleanings—the biblical practice of gathering crops that would otherwise be left in the fields to rot or be plowed under after harvest—the Society of St. Andrew has a partnership with United Methodist Men. The organizations work together through programs like the Hunger Relief Advocate Initiative and Meals for Millions.

The Society of St. Andrew encourages those who participate in the Advent devotions program to give, in the name of the Christ Child,

a gift of food by making a small daily donation to the Society during the season. These contributions help the Society of St. Andrew to feed the nation's hungry at a cost of about two cents per serving.

The Society is an ecumenical, non-profit organization dedicated to leading others into lives of Christian community and service. It works to fulfill the mandate of the Gospel by striving to adhere to the words of I John 3:18, "Let us love not only in words, but in deed and in truth."

The Advent devotions starter kit includes a sample devotional booklet and instructions for church leaders. To learn more, visit [endhunger.org/advent.htm](http://endhunger.org/advent.htm).

## Giving, learning, serving: churches teach joy of Christmas in many ways

Christmas can seem to be all about what Santa Claus brings. But every year, churches across the state work to teach children the meaning of the holiday.

In recent years, St. Paul UMC Jonesboro has given up the traditional gift exchange as part of their kids' Christmas party. Now, each person brings something to give to others in need. In 2009, the group brought goods for the local food pantry, and took a tour of the facility.

"The children saw how their gift would be used to help others," said Tami Freeman, children's ministry coordinator for St. Paul.

This year, the kids will collect baby food for the pantry, in honor of Baby Jesus' birthday.

At Leslie UMC this year, kids who attend the church's Power Express after-school ministry will receive a visit from St. Nicholas—the fourth-century Bishop of Myra. Their special guest will tell them about the origins and faith of the man they now know as Santa Claus.

And at many churches, kids of all ages learn about giving to others through Angel Tree programs. For example, Highland Valley UMC in Little Rock has a partnership with Watson

Intermediate School to provide presents for children who might not otherwise receive any Christmas gifts. Church members shop for each individual child's needs.

Each student on the Angel Tree list—students at Watson and their siblings—receives clothing, accessories and an age-appropriate toy.

"The school counselor told me last year that when one parent came to pick up gifts, he cried and said it was the first Christmas his children had ever received gifts," said Carla Coleman, a member of Highland Valley.

# RETHINK Christmas

## Two new books call for

BY SAM HODGES  
United Methodist Reporter

Hamilton and Slaughter sounds like a law firm one wouldn't want to mess with, but those are in fact the last names of two well-known United Methodist megachurch pastors. They are good friends and close collaborators on efforts to renew the UMC.

And, as it happens, the Rev. Adam Hamilton and the Rev. Mike Slaughter each has a book on Christmas that's just out.

Hamilton's *The Journey* and Slaughter's *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* are both published by Abingdon Press, part of the United Methodist Publishing House. Both have as their market not just individual readers but also small groups within a church setting.

This would seem to be a highly competitive situation, at odds with the Christmas spirit and perhaps endangering their egos and friendship. But both pastors insist they are cheering on the other one and his book.

"Anything Adam does, I enjoy and appreciate," Slaughter said.

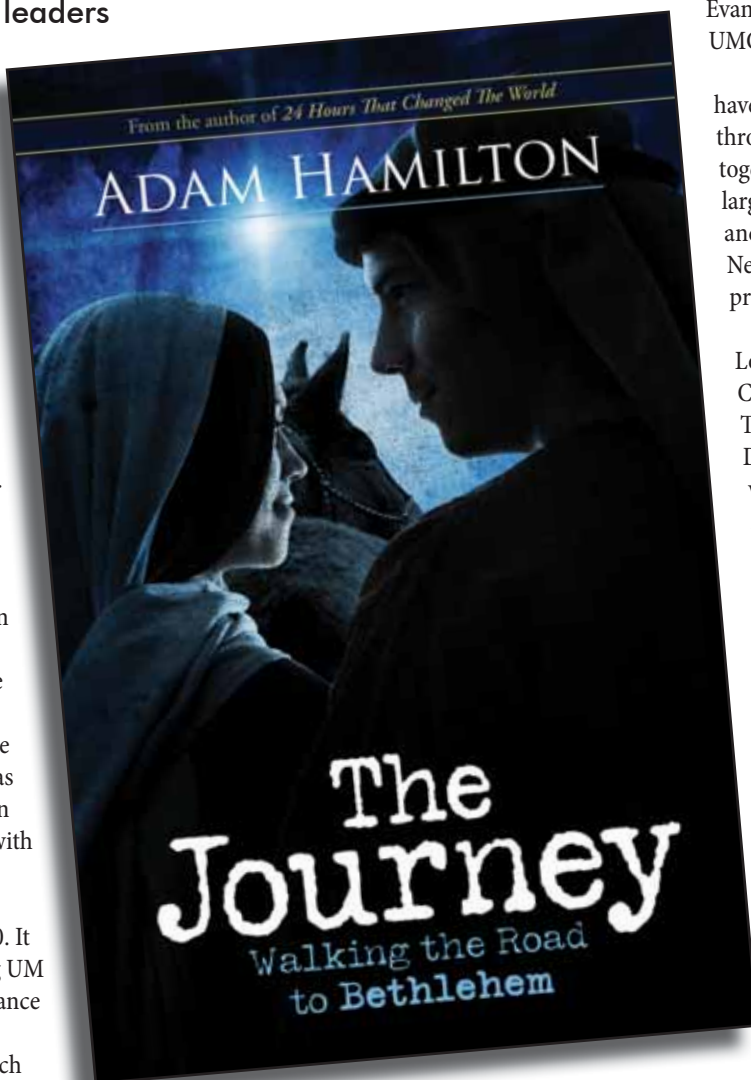
Hamilton noted that his ideas about the missional aspect of Christmas have been strongly influenced by Slaughter.

He added: "I hope that if people do *The Journey* this year, they'll do Mike's book next year. I really think they provide a two-year emphasis for Advent that could set the church on a new course."

### Authors and leaders

Hamilton, 46, is perhaps the biggest name among current UM clergy, as a prolific author of accessible books on Christian faith, a sought-after speaker at church conferences and especially as leader of Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kan.

He started it in 1990 with four people, holding the first meetings in a funeral home. Since then, the church has grown to more than 17,000 members, with current average weekly worship attendance at 9,180. It ranked first among UM churches in attendance in 2009, the most recent year for which statistics are available



from the denomination's General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA).

Hamilton's innovative approach to church leadership and organization has won him high standing within the denomination and attention beyond it.

Indeed, the blurbs for *The Journey* come from such prominent non-Methodist megachurch pastors as the Rev. John Ortberg, the Rev. Joel C. Hunter, and the Rev. Bill Hybels.

Brian McLaren, an emergent church leader and popular author, recommended an earlier book by saying, "Adam Hamilton is, in my opinion, a national treasure. He embodies the kind of generous orthodoxy so many of us have been dreaming of and praying for."

Slaughter, 60, came to Ginghamburg Church in Tipp City, Ohio, in 1979. Worship attendance averaged 90. Last year, the average was 4,552. The 2009 GCFA report had Ginghamburg ranked fourth in attendance among UM churches.

Like Hamilton, Slaughter is regarded as a denominational leader in innovation, be it in small group ministry or use of cyber communication. And like Hamilton, he's a busy author, having contributed such titles as *Upside Living in a Downside Economy*, *Momentum for Life*, *Unlearning Church* and *Change the World*.

Under Slaughter, Ginghamburg has become a widely-recognized leader in mission work, both in its part of greater Dayton and in the African nation of Sudan. Slaughter won the Foundation for Evangelism's "distinguished evangelist" award in 2003, and has twice received the foundation's Denman Evangelism Award for promoting the UMC's commitment to evangelism.

Together, Hamilton and Slaughter have worked toward UMC renewal through Leading Edge, which brings together pastors of the denomination's largest churches to share ideas, stories and strategies, and the Young Pastors' Network, a leadership development program for young clergy of the UMC.

"Both are remarkable leaders," said Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. "They are immensely gifted, work very hard and have bold visions that include yet go beyond themselves and their congregations."

### Nazareth to Bethlehem

Just as the UMC has embraced the slogan "Rethink Church," Hamilton and Slaughter are, through their new books, asking readers to rethink Christmas.

Hamilton's previous books include *24 Hours That Changed the World*, an intensive look at Jesus' crucifixion, and in *The Journey* he follows the model, drawing on close readings of the Gospel accounts, recent archaeological findings and his own most recent trip to the Holy Land to try to wake up readers to

the story of Jesus' birth.

"We all kind of know the general story of Christmas, even people who don't go to church," he said. "But I don't think we fully grasp it or fully understand the story as it unfolds, or what the details are pointing us toward."

The journey Hamilton writes of is the one taken by Joseph and Mary from her home town of Nazareth to Bethlehem, for Jesus' birth. And he stresses the small size and utter obscurity of Nazareth, especially in relation to nearby Sepphoris, a relatively prosperous city nearby whose amazing history has come to light only in recent years through archaeological excavations.

"God goes to this little town of relatively poor people [Nazareth] to find the mother of the Messiah, not to the wealthy community across the way," Hamilton said.

Hamilton notes that much about the Christmas story is open to debate, and argues that Joseph was most likely from Bethlehem. The pastor used car, van and foot to take what he thinks is their most likely route from Nazareth, a trip that would have taken them nine or 10 days.

As for the "no room at the inn" idea, Hamilton believes the best translations of key words suggest the inn was really Joseph's family home, and that a birthing room was created in the family stable because the home was crowded and Jewish customs would have considered her discharge of blood and water at birth to render her ritually unclean.

Step by step, Hamilton takes on the Christmas story, including the virgin birth ("Is it really so hard to believe that the God who created the laws of biology and who designed our DNA could bring about a virginal conception?"), the visit of the Wise Men, and whether Jesus' birth really happened on Dec. 25.

Toward the end, Hamilton deals with the purpose of God's sending Jesus to earth, and gets personal about the gift of salvation represented by Jesus.

"He has saved me from becoming my worst possible self and, to whatever degree I actually seek to care for others, to give of myself for them and to work for justice and to offer





# making the most of the holiday

compassion in a broken world," he writes.

## Matching gifts

Slaughter had long been attuned to the materialism that goes with Christmas, and had pushed his congregation to be an exception to that. But in 2004, bent on getting Ginghamburg Church seriously engaged with the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, he went farther.

"I said to the people, 'Christmas is not your birthday, it's Jesus' birthday. What would honor him?'" he recalled.

Slaughter had a goal in mind, and shared it with the congregation. He asked that they total how much they'd spent on Christmas presents for family and give an equal amount to hunger relief in Sudan. The church raised a special offering of \$300,000.

Soon, Ginghamburg had formed a partnership with the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) to establish the Sudan Project. Since then, that project—enlisting other churches, schools and businesses—has invested \$5.1 million in Sudan, focused on sustainable agriculture, clean water and education.

Ginghamburg has balanced its international effort with giving to social ministries in the Dayton area.

*Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* tells the story in more detail, and presents Slaughter's argument for why and how other churches can follow suit in matching family gift giving with charitable giving that is focused on missions.

One that has done so is Church of the Resurrection.

"Mike Slaughter's been doing this for years, and we started about four years ago," said Hamilton. "I stole the idea from him."

The Rev. Mike Slaughter (left) and the Rev. Adam Hamilton, seen here at Ginghamburg Church, are close friends and have collaborated on efforts to renew the UMC.

PHOTO COURTESY GINGHAMSBURG CHURCH



Slaughter speaks of his own debt to Hamilton, and of their close friendship.

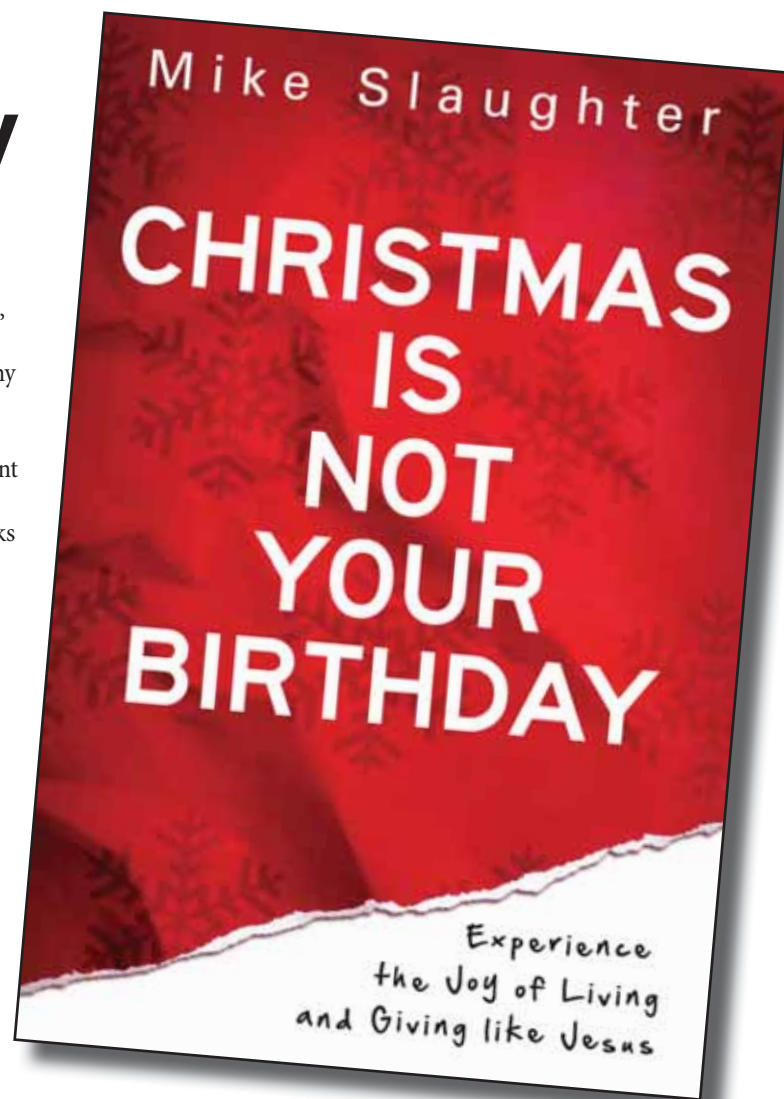
"I've said to him, 'Adam, when I die, you do my funeral.' I love that guy. He's a great leader and example in our denomination."

The pastors are clearly commercially important authors for Abingdon Press and the United Methodist Publishing House. Both Christmas books are being sold in print and e-book format, and Hamilton's is packaged with editions for children, youth and devotional reading.

But Neil Alexander, president and publisher of the United Methodist Publishing House, prefers to emphasize the spiritual effects.

"Adam and Mike share extraordinary gifts as they reach tens of thousands through their writings," he said in a written response to questions about the authors. "Both discern with clarity and humility God's calling and presence and they help us see what God is doing and wants us to do."

*This article originally appeared in the Oct. 28 issue of the national edition of the United Methodist Reporter. Reprinted with permission.*



## HENDRIX

The Hendrix College Choir presents the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual

## Candlelight Carol Service

December 1-3, 7:30 p.m.

December 4, 4 p.m.

Greene Chapel • Hendrix College • Conway

Reservations required. Call 501-450-1495 beginning Nov. 21.

### Tour Services

Thursday, December 15 at 7:30 p.m.

Highland Park United Methodist Church, Dallas, Texas

Friday, December 16 at 7:30 p.m.

St. Paul United Methodist Church, Little Rock



# 'Christmas in October' for Searcy girls' home

BY JANE DENNIS  
Special Contributor

Members of First United Methodist Church Searcy on Oct. 9 hosted a home makeover "shower" for their local Methodist Family Health Girls' Home.

Held at the church, the special shower was planned by DeAndrea Tate Gibson, Susan Adams and Tina Ziegenbalg. Refreshments were provided by the Friends in Service for Him (FISH) Sunday school class.

"The outpouring of gifts from the church was astounding," said Ashley Coldiron, executive director of the Methodist Family Health Foundation. "One of the girls opening the gifts said it was like Christmas in October. Another commented she had never seen so many presents."

The teaching parents and six residents of the group home participated by completing a gift registry and identifying favorite items at a local store. Groups and individuals from the church then purchased items and showered the home with an assortment of kitchenware, bedding and bath accessories and decorative items, as well as a flat-screen television and gaming system.

In addition, the congregation collected a "noisy offering" of loose change that totaled \$600 for the girls' home. And earlier in the week, church member John Byrd led the Sons of Thunder mission group in fully stocking the pantry at the home.

"Methodist Family Health is incredibly grateful for the generosity of the Searcy church and the love they have shown these girls," Coldiron said.

The Searcy Girls' Home is one of seven therapeutic group homes that are part of the Methodist Family Health continuum of care. The home provides a family-like setting for residents who receive help and treatment for emotional and behavioral issues. The teaching parents in the home are foster parents as well as treatment professionals.

*Dennis serves as director of communications for Methodist Family Health.*



A resident of the Methodist Family Health Girls' Group Home at Searcy opens one of the numerous shower gifts given by members of First UMC Searcy.

COURTESY PHOTO

## Make a difference for MFH ministries

Methodist Family Health has some great ideas for alternative Christmas giving:

**The MFH Bible Fund** provides age-appropriate Bibles to children, youth and adults served by Methodist Family Health programs, including Methodist Children's Home, Methodist Behavioral Hospital, Arkansas CARES and more. To donate, make checks payable to Methodist Family Health Foundation, designating Bible Fund, and send to: MFH Foundation, P.O. Box 56050, Little Rock, AR 72215. Or contact Maggie Beeler at 501-661-0720 ext. 7299 or mbeeler@methodistfamily.org.

**Balls and outdoor recreational equipment** are always on the Wish List to be enjoyed by children served by the Methodist Children's Home, Methodist Behavioral Hospital and other MFH programs. For more information, contact Maggie Beeler at 501-661-0720 ext. 7299 or mbeeler@methodistfamily.org.

**Donations of diapers and other baby-care items** are welcome gifts to be used by the infants and toddlers of mothers participating in the Arkansas CARES (Center for Addictions Research, Education and Services) program. Contact Ashley Coldiron at 501-661-0720 ext. 7300 or acoldiron@methodistfamily.org.

**Send a child to camp!** The Rev. Regnier Memorial Camp Fund gives children in Methodist Children's Home residential programs a chance to enjoy a United Methodist summer camp experience. Make checks payable to Methodist Family Health Foundation, designating Camp Fund, and send to: MFH Foundation, P.O. Box 56050, Little Rock, AR 72215. Or contact Maggie Beeler at 501-661-0720 ext. 7299 or mbeeler@methodistfamily.org.

**Honorariums and memorial gifts** to Methodist Family Health, given in memory or in honor of friends or loved ones, make meaningful Christmas gifts. Send to MFH Foundation, P.O. Box 56050, Little Rock, AR 72215; contact Ashley Coldiron at 501-661-0720 ext. 7300 or acoldiron@methodistfamily.org; or give online at methodistfamily.org.

## Counter-cultural (continued from page 1A)

"We have people who come up here and say, 'You know, I come to buy my gifts here because when I do, I feel like I'm giving twice,'" Thorne said.

At Mount Eagle Retreat Center, the selection is smaller, but the intent is the same.

"Supporting the use of fair trade products is about justice, and justice is about everybody having enough," says the Rev. Lu Harding, the center's director.

Mount Eagle serves only fairly-traded coffee purchased through the UMCOR Coffee Project. It costs more, but "the use of fair trade items is a faith issue," she says. Guests may buy fair trade coffee, chocolate and hot cocoa mix to take home as souvenirs of their stay—or as gifts for their loved ones.

"We are helping make a difference in the lives and communities of these farmers and sharing fellowship with our global neighbors," Harding said. "What a wonderful way to celebrate the birth of the Christ child."

### Alternative markets

First UMC Paragould is among the churches holding special events as benefits for mission and ministry. Its "Joy of Giving Market" on Nov. 12 featured gift items such as handmade baskets, crafts and baked goods.

Purchases supported a variety of missions locally and worldwide. The event also served breakfast and lunch; proceeds from the meals benefitted the hunger relief work of Witt House, the church's food pantry.

"In this time of year where too often we focus on ourselves, what a great opportunity to focus on what God wants us to do for others in their life's journeys," said the Rev. Angie Gage, associate pastor. "In one day we fed people for a lifetime, provided scholarships, wheelchairs and more. It's unreal to think about how far-reaching this can be."

One of several alternative Christmas markets in central Arkansas was held on Nov. 6 and 13 at First UMC Little Rock. An annual tradition for the congregation, the market invites shoppers to give gifts of love, friendship and service.

Giving to support an organization can be more meaningful than a physical gift, said Patty Barker, coordinator of the market. "For Uncle John, instead of a tie this year, let's give him a gift that honors him in a special way, either through the church, or locally or globally," she said.

The market provided easy ways to give in honor of loved ones to

organizations like Heifer International, Harmony Health Clinic, UMCOR Disaster Relief and more. It also included items for purchase: Shoppers could buy pendants to support a local women's shelter, hams to support Camp Aldersgate, gift baskets to benefit Arkansas Rice Depot and bags of Equal Exchange Coffee—the same brand used by Mount Eagle Retreat Center.

### Buy less, give more

Last year, the *Arkansas United Methodist* profiled two churches participating in Advent Conspiracy (adventconspiracy.org). The idea involves each person reducing their shopping list by one gift, and giving that amount to an organization that provides clean water in parts of the world that need it most.

With those efforts, both First UMC Conway and Lakewood UMC North Little Rock raised enough money to build a water well in the Democratic Republic of Congo through the Arkansas Conference's Congo Well Project.

Neither church is using Advent Conspiracy this year, but they continue to encourage celebrating Christmas in a less consumer-driven way.

First UMC Conway plans to build another well. The congregation's annual Merry Mission Fair will feature glass "water drops" made by artist James Hayes, available for a donation of \$25 or more to the Congo Well Project.

"They could be worn on a necklace, used as an ornament or hung somewhere in the home as a reminder of the mission to provide drinking water to those in need," said the Rev. Lynn Kilbourne, associate pastor.

At Lakewood UMC North Little Rock, last year's Advent Conspiracy project raised money by giving out water bottles in exchange for donations of any size. This year, they'll do the same with votive candles to benefit local missions serving the homeless and hungry.

"The candles can then be given as gifts under the Christmas tree, but gifts that represent the Light of Christ breaking into the darkness, rather than gifts that represent self-destructive consumerism," says Joe Roitz, director of communications.

And another counter-cultural move: To acknowledge that Christmas may not feel joyous to those who are alone or missing loved ones, Lakewood UMC holds an annual Longest Night Service of Hope and Healing. This year's service begins at 6 p.m. on Dec. 21.



Find the Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church on Facebook at [facebook.com/arkansasumc](http://facebook.com/arkansasumc)

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Reuse  
Replenish**



Be sure to recycle your copy of the *Arkansas United Methodist* when you're finished reading it (or share it with a friend).



# Christmas gifts to honor friends, family, God

BY LAURA RHEA  
Special Contributor

When I was a child, the Sears Christmas catalog was the best! I spent hours looking through the pages, wishing I could buy the gifts pictured inside.

When my grandchildren were small, they loved colorful newspaper inserts with pictures of toys. They would grab an insert, hold up their arms to sit in my lap, and say, “Look Grammy, look!”

Today, I’m most interested in giving gifts to people whose names may not appear on anyone’s gift list: the poor, the hungry, the forgotten. I want my gifts to honor my loved ones, and most of all, to honor God.

These are tough economic times. Schools report more hungry students than ever before, yet we can’t afford to buy all the food we need to feed them. Filling our vans and trucks with gas is a challenge, yet at the end of each route are hunger agencies and schools with Food For Kids programs desperately needing food. Trucking costs to bring in much needed donated food are higher than ever before.

In times like these, people on your gift list might appreciate a card telling them you’ve made a gift in their honor to feed the hungry.

Your family, your business, or your Sunday school class might be willing to forgo exchanging gifts and give life-sustaining food instead.

My Christmas wish for you is the joy that is found in giving gifts both to those you know, and to those who will never know your name.

May the God of all creation look on your gifts and pronounce them good. Merry Christmas!

Rhea serves as president and CEO of Arkansas Rice Depot.

## The Arkansas Rice Depot offers three ways to give this holiday season:

**Give a gift of food to the hungry.** Your family, business, or Sunday school class might be willing to forgo exchanging gifts and give life-sustaining food to hungry Arkansans instead.

- \$5 will give a home bound senior a generous supply of fresh fruit delivered with their food box.
- \$5 will also give an emergency meal kit providing ready to eat food for a day to victims of disasters in the state.
- \$10 will give 2 families 20 pounds each of food.
- \$30 will provide a month’s supply of food for a child facing hunger to take home from school in a backpack.



wonderful gifts, all proceeds help feed hungry children and families. Make purchases online at [ricedepot.org](http://ricedepot.org), or if you live in the central Arkansas area, visit the Rice Depot gift shop, 3801 West 65th Street in Little Rock, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. between now and Dec. 22.

**Spread Christmas cheer by making a gift in honor of a friend or loved one.** Arkansas Rice Depot will send that person a special card, telling them about the gift you made in their honor.

**Give a tasty gift from the Rice Depot’s Simple Pleasures gift shop.** Not only do the gourmet rice, soup and bean mixes

# Paper plates: windows into the struggles of those who live on the edge

For a recent project of the Arkansas Foodbank, people of all ages and backgrounds decorated paper plates with messages about the role local food pantries play in their lives.

PHOTO COURTESY  
ARKANSAS FOODBANK

BY PHYLLIS HAYNES  
Special Contributor

The Arkansas Foodbank recently handed stacks of paper plates to our member food pantries with a request that they ask recipients of food aid to write on them about their experience of being hungry.

We touched a nerve. The response was overwhelming. More than 1,500 paper plates were returned. They describe a litany of woes—disabled veterans trying to stretch their incomes, families caught in recession, older people on fixed incomes having to choose between food or medicine, people driven into poverty by illness, regular joes who have lost a job or had their hours cut—all leading to the need for help. One plate says simply, “God bless you. We were so hungry.”

Another held but a single word: “Help.”

Another divided the plate into two halves, drew a colorful scene on one half with a house, sunshine and happy people, labeled “With food, a sunny day...” and the other colored dull gray all over, labeled “...or nothing.”

But we shouldn’t be surprised. The pantries supplied by the Foodbank have been telling us for more than a year that they are seeing the lines growing as people come in for a box of food.

And a new study by Feeding America reveals that, more and more, the people we help have come to rely on us and the food pantries we

serve as the “new normal”—a place people go so they can get through the month—month after month.

According to that report, “Food Banks: Hunger’s New Staple,” emergency food from pantries is no longer being used to meet only temporary acute food needs. Many Americans now rely on food pantries as a regular source of nutrition. The crisis is becoming the norm.

How bad is it? A majority (54 percent) of the people visiting Feeding America-partner food pantries have used a food pantry for at least six months or more during the past year, and more than a third of them are “recurrent” clients, having had to visit a food pantry every month within the past year.

And for those who receive benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), we see that they, too, are struggling month-to-month. More than half (58 percent) of them have to seek food assistance again and again. People are relying on food banks and pantries as a coping strategy to supplement their grocery needs.

This new research suggests that things aren’t getting better for the millions of Americans and the 500,000 Arkansans who struggle to make ends meet. Food banks are fighting a “perfect storm” of rising

food prices, food manufacturers seeking greater efficiencies in a down economy (which mean fewer

donations to food banks), and a downturn in charitable contributions.

Looming ahead is the fear that Congress, looking for budget cuts, will slash nutrition programs in this time of crisis for many families. Many of the most critical programs help the struggling families that are most at risk. And we should remember that hungry Arkansans are not nameless statistics—they’re our neighbors, our friends and our co-workers.

So it’s time for those of us who are more financially secure to pull together and help the less fortunate. Please join us in our commitment to continue to help those who increasingly find themselves in need.

What can those of us who want to help do? Become better informed. Look for and participate in local food drives, or help start a food drive yourself in your church. Donate. Volunteer. Every one of us can make a difference. I can only hope that we haven’t lost the ability to heed that simple cry, “We were so hungry,” and brighten up that gray “nothing.”

Haynes is the CEO of the Arkansas Foodbank, the state’s largest non-governmental source of food aid and a member of Feeding America. For information on how you can help fight hunger, visit [arkansasfoodbank.org](http://arkansasfoodbank.org).



# Are you ready to make some *counter-cultural* changes this Christmas?

The ideas presented in this issue represent just a few ways Christians can make this Christmas more like the very first one—a world-changing event. Here are a few places where you can get started.

## Fair trade shopping options

This list, while not exhaustive, seeks to provide a sampling of places to begin when shopping for fair trade products.

**Clinton:** Mount Eagle Retreat Center, 935 Beal Road

**Fayetteville:** The Fair Trade Gift Shop at Mount Sequoyah, 150 NW Skyline Drive.

**Little Rock:** Ten Thousand Villages, 301 President Clinton Avenue; Shop @ Heifer, the gift shop at Heifer Village, 1 World Avenue.

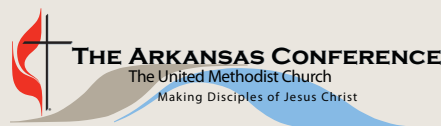
**Perryville:** Heifer Ranch gift shop, 55 Heifer Road (for directions, visit [heifer.org/ranch](http://heifer.org/ranch), as some mapping software gives inaccurate directions).

**Online:** UMCOR Coffee Project is a year-round effort in partnership with Equal Exchange. Visit [interfaith.equalexchange.com](http://interfaith.equalexchange.com) to place an order or learn more.

## Giving options

If there's a cause or ministry that holds special meaning for a person you love, there is probably a way to give to that cause in their honor. Many non-profit organizations offer ways to make gifts through their websites, and will even provide a card to send to the person you've chosen to honor.

**The Advance** is an accountable, designated-giving arm of The United Methodist Church that ensures 100 percent of each gift reaches its intended mission or ministry. You decide which program or ministry to support through The Advance. To view their online gift catalog with a wide array of options, choose "A Gift Catalog" under the "How to Give" menu at [advancinghope.org](http://advancinghope.org), or get there through this direct link: [new.gbgn-umc.org/advance/give/giftcatalog](http://new.gbgn-umc.org/advance/give/giftcatalog).



Visit [arumc.org/donate](http://arumc.org/donate) to make gifts to a number of causes supported by the Arkansas Conference, including Imagine No Malaria, the Congo Well Project and the Arkansas Conference Disaster Relief Fund.

**Heifer International**, an Arkansas-based non-profit organization, helps lift communities out of poverty here in our own state and around the world. Visit [heifer.org](http://heifer.org) to view the gift catalog and learn more.



## THIS CHRISTMAS, START A NEW FAMILY TRADITION

### CHANGE THE LIFE OF AN ARKANSAS FAMILY

Methodist Family Health is a nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive psychiatric and behavioral healthcare to children and families throughout Arkansas. By donating to Methodist Family Health, you'll improve the lives of thousands of Arkansas families in desperate need of answers and guidance. This Christmas, listen to your heart and help us care for the children and families who need your love and support.



#### CHOOSE ONE OF THESE THREE CONVENIENT OPTIONS:

- ★ Visit [www.methodistfamily.org](http://www.methodistfamily.org) for online giving
- ★ Make checks payable to Methodist Family Health Foundation and mail to P.O. Box 56050, Little Rock, AR 72215
- ★ Call (501) 661-0720 ext. 7304



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# REPORTER

THE UNITED METHODIST

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On Wesley, stewardship and Count Dracula's cape | 6B



## Holy marketing

Can churches make a pitch without losing their souls? | 7B

Section B

November 18, 2011



FILE PHOTO BY KEN BENNETT, WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

An annual campus-wide Advent service at Wake Forest University's Wait Chapel in Winston-Salem, N.C., is among the largest Moravian-style "Love Feast" worship services held in the U.S.

## UM churches savor simple Advent service

BY MARY JACOBS  
Staff Writer

Every year during Advent, since the mid-1970s, church members at First United Methodist Church in Brevard, N.C., have repeated the drill. They unpack the special mugs, the aprons and caps from storage; they order the yeast buns from a bakery in Winston-Salem, and they buy the beeswax candles and wrap them in red paper skirts.

It's all in preparation for a special Christmas Eve service called the Moravian Love Feast, and it packs the church every year—with members of the church as well as folks from the community.

"Every so often we get a minister who thinks this might be something

we should change," says church member Donald Myracle. "He gets the message right away—this is the one thing you don't change."

Brevard's Love Feast includes traditional Christmas carols, prayers, a few Moravian hymns and an offering benefiting a local charity. As worshippers quietly enjoy Christmas music, the young women of the church—many on break from college—don the lace caps and aprons and pass out the buns. Young men distribute mugs of hot cider. Then the candles—made of beeswax, symbolizing Christ's purity—are handed out. The lights are lowered, the candles are lit and the service concludes in candlelight.

"It's a very pretty service, very reverential and contemplative," said church member Sarah Lee Myracle. "I

always look forward to it as a time of reflection.

First UMC in Brevard is one of many United Methodist churches in North Carolina each Advent that celebrate the Love Feast, a popular tradition adopted from the Moravian church, which has a large number of congregations in North Carolina. The state is also home to what is likely the largest Moravian-style Love Feast in the U.S.—an ecumenical gathering at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. Attendees imbibe 90 gallons of coffee and 175 dozen yeast buns, and the college's Wait Chapel is aglow with 2,200 beeswax candles.

### A simple meal

But Love Feasts aren't just for Christmas. The broader tradition of the

"Love Feast"—worship or fellowship centered on a simple meal—has a solid Wesleyan heritage, as well as roots that harken back to the early church.

And it's a concept that many Christians would benefit from rediscovering, says Paul Stutzman, author of *Recovering the Love Feast* (Wipf & Stock, 2011).

"The church was founded on a meal, the meal that Jesus shared with us," he said. "The act of eating together is important to us as Christians."

### Early church roots

While its modern forms vary widely, the Love Feast "is basically a way of gathering that goes back to the book of Jude," according to C. Michael Hawn, director of the Sacred Music

■ See 'Feast' page 8B

## Q&A: German bishop ready to lead in era of change

Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, 56, begins a two-year term as president of the UMC's Council of Bishops during the 2012 General Conference, set for April 24-May 4 in Tampa, Fla. She has been serving as president-designate, and her episcopal colleagues confirmed her as president through a unanimous vote at their recent meeting in Lake Junaluska, N.C.

Bishop Wenner, who studied at the United Methodist Theological Seminary in Reutlingen, oversees three conferences in Germany. She was the first woman outside the United States to be elected to the UM episcopacy, and she will be the first woman outside the United States to be Council of Bishops president. Before her election as bishop in 2005, she served as a pastor and as superintendent of the Frankfurt District. She studied at the United Methodist Theological Seminary in Reutlingen, Germany.

During a break in the Lake Junaluska meeting, she answered questions from managing editor Sam Hodges.

How did you become a United Methodist?

Actually that was through my

■ See 'Wenner' page 2B



Bishop Rosemarie Wenner



## FAITH WATCH

**'Parade of horrors' suppresses religion**

Religious freedom has declined in parts of the world and the United States hasn't done enough to protect it, advocates said at an Oct. 26 forum sponsored by the conservative Family Research Council. "What a parade of horrors," said Georgetown University professor Thomas Farr, after noting such recent incidents as Coptic Christians massacred in Egypt, dissidents jailed in China, and a pastor burned to death in Nigeria.

**Episcopal Church still losing members**

The Episcopal Church continues to shrink, though some dioceses are growing. Membership in U.S. dioceses of the denomination dropped under 2 million in 2010. Overall membership has declined 16 percent since 2000. Average worship attendance in 2010 was 657,831, compared to 856,579 in 2000. "Churches that turn inward will die," said Bishop Stacy Sauls, the church's chief operating officer. "The numbers call us to strengthen our commitment to turn outward."

**Lawyer goes after Catholic University**

A lawyer has filed a complaint against Catholic University of America for not providing Muslim students with prayer rooms free of Catholic iconography. John F. Banzhaf III, a law professor at George Washington University, filed the 60-page complaint with the Washington, D.C. Office of Human Rights. He earlier filed a protest of CUA's decision to switch to same-sex dorms.

**Harper Collins to buy Thomas Nelson Inc.**

Thomas Nelson Inc., a publisher of Bibles and other religious books, is being acquired by HarperCollins. HarperCollins, part of Rupert Murdoch-controlled News Corp., already owns religious publisher Zondervan. If the Thomas Nelson sale clears regulatory review, HarperCollins would control 35-40 percent of the evangelical Christian publishing market, *The Tennessean* of Nashville reported.

■ **WENNER** Continued from page 1B

mother. She joined the church when I was a child. That was through the counseling of a Methodist preacher who helped in a time of mourning, when my grandmother was sick. Then I grew up in that church from the time I was 8 years old. And that was a very small church. They needed me in leadership when I was quite young. And that was very encouraging to me. I really grew up with people who were nourishing my faith. And I also was seeing the gifts I was able to bring to the church.

**Where was this?**

This is a very small town, about 10,000 inhabitants, in the southwest of Germany. The name is Eppingen. But nobody knows it here.

**What's your response to being elected president of the Council of Bishops?**

It's a privilege to serve in this position and to lead the council in this challenging time—a time of change

I stand behind that agenda. I really think that refocusing on helping each other to gain vitality—not through our efforts but through listening to the gospel and moving towards spiritual renewal—will help us to see God in the people to whom he sends us. Because God is already there, out with the people. I think we are on the right track.

**The Call to Action reforms might seem to some U.S.-centric. Are they applicable to your churches?**

In the goals, yes. The methods have to be different. But at least where I come from, Germany, we are on the same page in the decline of membership. The reasons might be slightly different. However, refocusing on vitalization of congregations and regaining the missional spirit—that's on top for us as well.

And I think even in other countries where congregations are growing, we need to be helping each other to focus on leadership training so that the churches are served well, finding

'The main point is: Do I, do you, live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, answering his call to ministry? And do we continue to live in prayerful relationship in this question?'

when we really refocus on the mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world. I trust that God through the Holy Spirit will lead me, as a part of the leadership team, together with the whole council, to lead the church in the direction we really think that God calls us to go—so that we are not inward focused, but outward focused.

**Do you have an agenda beyond, say, the Call to Action or what the bishops have agreed on should be the priorities of the church?**

ways to live in a connectional church, and not seeing the *[Book of]* Discipline to be the only connection. It's an important connection, of course, but it's not the only one.

**There's a widely held view in the United States that Western Europe has gone nearly completely secular. Almost no one goes to church. Is that simplistic?**

The secularization is more than here. This is, at least, my observation. However, that does not mean that people are not interested in religion. They



UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE PHOTO BY RONNY PERRY

**New officers for the UMC's Council of Bishops are, from left to right, Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, Bishop Warner H. Brown Jr., Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, Bishop Robert Hayes Jr. and Bishop Peter Weaver. The election took place Nov. 3 during the council's meeting at Lake Junaluska, N.C.**

are. Unfortunately, they have no expectations to go to the churches. That means we have to go where people are. We cannot expect that they come to us—not necessarily. And we have to go where people are, living with them, sharing their journeys, serving them, listening carefully to their questions, and even realizing that God is right there, as St. Paul realized it when he was in the Athens marketplace. It's a long journey. The growth of the church in Western Europe—that's not a quick effort. It really means relationship building.

But there are successful models, and there is a strong wish, not only in the United Methodist Church but also in other churches, to really live out the mission of the church.

**Germany has a rich tradition of theological scholarship. One figure who is revered here is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Is he a hero of yours, and someone you've studied?**

Probably he is a hero of all of us in Germany, and not only in Germany. He was really a person who not only inspires us through his theological insights—which were prophetic—but also through his personal witness and through living his faith, especially his letters from prison. He was saying God is there even in the deepest dark.

**The issue of homosexuality is divisive within the U.S. part of the United Methodist Church, and there's a view that conservatives within the United States are in common cause with the African members of the church, who are socially conservative. Is there a**

**place for European members of the church to be peacemakers or offer a different solution?**

I hope so, actually, because in Europe, and in Germany, the area where I serve, we are in a similar situation. The people in our congregations have different judgments [about] whether it's compatible with [Christian] teaching to live in a homosexual partnership. However, we say—and we live—that we trust God's grace, leading all of us in that struggle. And we trust each other that we are faithful Christians, moving forward, seeking God's will in all of that. . . . The main point is: Do I, do you, live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, answering his call to ministry? And do we continue to live in prayerful relationship in this question? So I hope that could be an offer to the church, seeing that conferences in our connection live in this way.

**You'll preach at General Conference. Have you been thinking of what you'll say?**

Thinking, yes. But that's the only thing. I haven't written anything down. I'm privileged to preach in the closing worship service. And I really hope that I can serve as a servant of God in reminding us that we are sent forth in making disciples for the transformation of the world, no matter where we have to go and how the circumstances are. And we are not the only persons doing so, but are part of a big connection, helping each other to keep on in that mission.

Because it's not our mission. It's God's call for us.

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THE UNITED METHODIST  
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## UM CONNECTIONS

**Bishop Ernest Lyght to retire in December**

United Methodist Bishop Ernest S. Lyght of the West Virginia Conference announced Oct. 27 that he will retire on Dec. 31 due to health issues he has struggled with since last February. The denomination's Council of Bishops named retired Bishop William Boyd Grove to serve as episcopal leader in the conference through next August. A new bishop will be elected in July during the Northeastern Jurisdictional meeting.

**Nascimento named to global education post**

Amos Nascimento, a native of Brazil and an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Washington, began serving Nov. 1 as special assistant to the general secretary for global education and new initiatives at the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM). He succeeded Ken Yamada, who retired Oct. 31 after 45 years in United Methodist education. Dr. Nascimento's work will include helping create institutional partnerships between those in developed and developing nations, as well as seeking resources for the Methodist Global Education Fund for Leadership Development.

**United Methodists hold 250 DREAM Sabbaths**

Of more than 500 DREAM Sabbath events held across the country this fall in support of the congressional DREAM (Development, Relief & Education for Alien Minors) Act, 250 were at United Methodist churches, according to the Interfaith Immigration Coalition. Observances included worship services, prayer meetings and conferences; many of the events featured undocumented young people as speakers. The legislation would provide some undocumented immigrant students the opportunity to earn legal status if they came to the United States as children, are long-term U.S. residents, have good moral character and complete two years of college or military service.

—Compiled by Bill Fentum

# Maintain connections, UM top court rules

BY LINDA BLOOM  
*United Methodist News Service*

SAN DIEGO—When annual conferences of the United Methodist Church decide to change their structures, they are obligated to retain some specific connectional relationships.

That message was delivered to the North Texas and South Carolina annual conferences by the Judicial Council, the denomination's top court.

In separate decisions from its Oct. 26-28 fall meeting, the council found that restructuring plans implemented by both conferences failed to comply fully with church law.

The council also ruled that the Northern Illinois Conference does not have the authority to suggest a maximum penalty for any clergy member convicted of officiating at a same-sex civil union.

**North Texas decision**

Reversing a decision of law by Bishop Earl Bledsoe, the council asked the North Texas Conference to revise and complete a strategic plan adopted in 2010.

While an annual conference can adopt rules for its own governance, the boards, commissions and committees mandated by the denomination's *Book of Discipline* "shall be

maintained, clearly identified and defined and the connectional relationships shall be clear and obvious," the council said in Decision 1198. "Any equivalent structures must be defined by name, function, connection and membership."

During an Oct. 27 oral hearing, William Herscher, a lay member, said he had raised the issue during the North Texas 2011 Annual Conference session because he believed the restructuring did not maintain the required denominational committees or encourage leadership roles for laity.

"One of the ways we transform the world . . . is [by] providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church," Mr. Herscher told the council.

John Croft, chancellor of the North Texas Conference, argued that Bishop Bledsoe's decision finding the new structure met the requirements of the *Discipline* was correct. He expressed "serious doubts" that Mr. Herscher's question "was properly before the 2011 annual conference in the first place," since the restructuring had been deliberated upon and decided the year before.



**Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe**

The Rev. John Fiedler, senior pastor of First United Methodist Church, Dallas, and chair of the strategic planning team that developed the new structure, noted that working groups now exist for mission areas such as church and society, global ministries, ethnic local church development and Christian unity and interreligious concerns.

"Mr. Herscher's concerns have been answered but on the leadership team's timetable and not his," Dr. Fiedler added.

Bishop Bledsoe, who was also present at the hearing, confirmed the committees "are up and running" and said while the process for nominating members has been slow, it will be accomplished by the 2012 annual conference session.

He praised the conference's new operational plan. "I think the structure is a lot more nimble," the bishop said.

While not conducting a complete review of the amendments made to accommodate the new North Texas structure, the Judicial Council found its creation of a Center for Missional Outreach "fails to delineate how the function, connection and membership of the operating board or committee of the center will comply with the *Discipline*."

**S.C. transition plan**

The Judicial Council also found "defects" in the South Carolina Conference's transition plan for new programmatic structures and is requiring the conference to submit a revision no later than 30 days after the council's October 2012 session.

In Decision 1204, the court cited several examples of how the confer-

ence "has failed to match all the disciplinary requirements for conference structure."

The plan's deficiencies include lack of programmatic provisions for the mandated commission on archives and history and failure to link a council on youth with a conference council on ministries or an alternative structure, the decision said.

**Civil-union penalty**

The 2011 clergy session of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference adopted a resolution regarding a "suggested maximum penalty" for any clergy member charged, tried and convicted of officiating at a same-sex civil union ceremony.

The suggested penalty was "suspension of said convicted minister from the exercise of pastoral office for a period of 24 consecutive hours."

The *Book of Discipline* states, "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches."

In Decision 1201, the Judicial Council declared the resolution "null, void and of no effect." The *Discipline* makes clear, the decision said, "that only a trial court has the power to set a penalty in a church trial which results in a conviction."

Those options include revoking the minister's ordination, suspending the minister from exercising the functions of office or imposing a lesser penalty, according to the *Discipline*.

Any effort by an annual conference to modify or limit penalties intrudes upon the authority of the *Discipline* and alters legislative action by General Conference, the court said.

## Agencies urge Congress: Don't cut funds for poor

BY LINDA BLOOM  
*United Methodist News Service*

Legislation affecting how the U.S. addresses global poverty will be under scrutiny as the U.S. Senate considers the 2012 appropriations bill.

The bill, which was expected on the Senate floor in mid-November, will affect many programs and places where United Methodists are attempting to improve—and even save—people's lives, says Mark Harrison, United Methodist General Board of Church and Society.

"If you're concerned about malaria funding, if you're concerned about HIV funding, this is the bill you need to be spending time with," he said.

During the past year, religious leaders have been speaking out about how changes to the U.S. budget for 2011 and 2012 could negatively affect the poor.

Now, for the first time, poverty-focused development assistance for other nations is competing directly with military spending in the U.S.

government's fiscal year 2012 budget, these leaders say.

"Basically, what the Senate has proposed is the flatlining of defense spending and development assistance," said the Rev. John McCullough, a United Methodist pastor and top executive of Church World Service.

"Any amendment that would be forthcoming would translate into a reduction . . . especially of development assistance money," he said.

That, he added, would mean a loss of "the basics" for the world's poor—food and water assistance, shelter, medical care and educational support.

Up for approval is Fiscal Year 2012 Appropriations for the Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs, which funds many of the U.S. programs that assist families in some of the world's poorest countries.

Jim Winkler, top executive of the Board of Church and Society, is urging church members to call their members of Congress to "support the highest possible spending figure for poverty-related assistance internationally."

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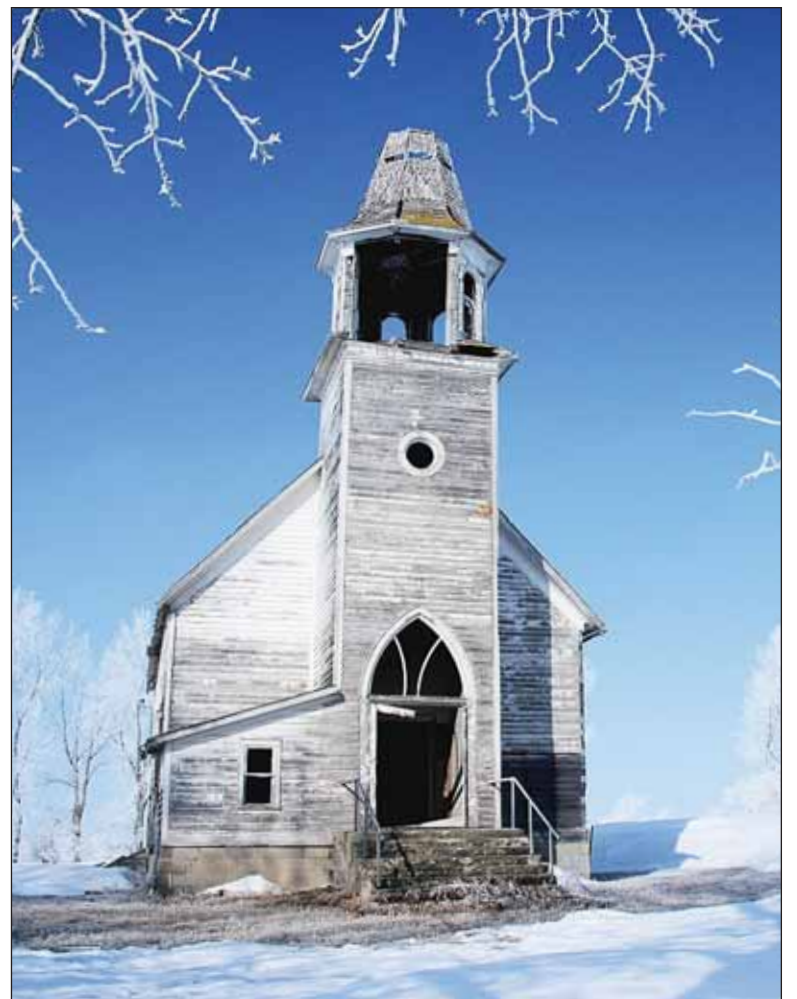
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PHOTOS BY RICK CRAIG

# once upon a church



ABOVE: The abandoned Hurricane Lake Lutheran Church, in Pierce County, N.D., has been a frequent photography subject for the Rev. Rick Craig. LEFT: Klara Lutheran Church ceased to have regular worship in 1997, according to Mr. Craig's best information. The building is on the North Dakota prairie, in Benson County.

## North Dakota pastor uses camera to document faded sanctuaries

As time from pastoral work permits, the Rev. Rick Craig rambles around North Dakota with his camera, and his beautiful, often haunting images of old, inactive churches have won him a following on flickr, the photography website.

Mr. Craig, 55, is a licensed local pastor who felt a call to ministry after many years in the construction industry. He and his wife, Cindy, have three children and two grandchildren. He currently serves UM churches in Cando, Rolla and Rock Lake, N.D.

He answered questions by email

from managing editor Sam Hodges.

### How did you get started taking photographs of old churches?

I have always been interested in "old" things such as old farm machinery, old farmsteads, old rural schools, and old churches, and I have also long been interested in photography, so it didn't take too long to bring those two interests together into one hobby. Once digital cameras became available at reasonable cost, I found that I could visit and photograph the things that interest me to my heart's content.

### Do you have any particular strategy, or do you just get in the car and ramble?

On occasion I will notice something that catches my interest while I am driving from one place to another, and if time allows, I will make a detour to take photos. At other times, I will intentionally explore certain areas. I am able to buy detailed maps of the area where I live that show where every road (paved, gravel, and prairie trail) exists as well as the location of every structure both occupied and unoccupied. I have found these maps to be quite helpful in finding and photographing old churches.

### Is this something you do on your day off?

While I do take the occasional photograph in the course of my travels around the rural parishes that I serve, the bulk of my photos are acquired on the "photo safaris" that I take on my days off. With the aid of the maps that I have, I will plan a route, load my dog or dogs into my vehicle, and drive out to see what we can explore.

### The photos here are of inactive churches. Are you drawn to those, and if so, why?

I am drawn to the inactive churches. Although they often look quite a bit worse for wear by the time

that I photograph them, I know that at some time in the past, these now weather-worn structures were built at considerable cost to their congregations. For many years these churches were the hub of their respective rural communities, and so many of the events that people and families hold dear took place in these churches. After the churches stop holding regular worship services, they slowly begin to decline, and one by one they disappear. Some are burned down, others are torn down, many are moved to different places and "recycled" to serve as storage sheds or granaries. Once their people leave, they no longer have anyone to take notice of their existence. I try to keep at least a memory of them in my photos.

### Do these abandoned churches say something in particular about the history of the Dakotas frontier?

The abandoned churches speak volumes about the history of the Dakotas frontier. Their very existence says that the people who came to the prairies with dreams of a better life were people of faith. The lives of these early settlers were far from easy, yet they managed to give the money and labor required to build so many houses of worship. The fact that so many of these rural churches are now empty or gone completely also speaks to the changes that have taken place

in our rural areas. Market pressures and advances in agricultural technology mean that more acres can and must be farmed by fewer people. The once numerous small family farms have given way to fewer and larger farms. The advances in technology that enable more acres to be farmed by fewer people mean that fewer employment opportunities exist in our rural areas.

As young people mature, they go (as they must) to where employment opportunities can be found, and as more people leave our rural areas, even fewer jobs are left behind. As the population moves into urban areas, our small rural churches close, one after the other, due to a lack of people who can support them.

### Does photographing an old church tend to give you particular emotions? If so, what are they?

The old churches never fail to give me a sense of respect for the sacrifices that were made to build and then maintain them for so many years. I look at the old churches that I find and wonder as to how many babies were baptized there, how many people were married there, how many people gathered there to help each other in their walks in faith, and how the church acted as a gathering place in good times as well as difficult times. As much as I like to photograph old

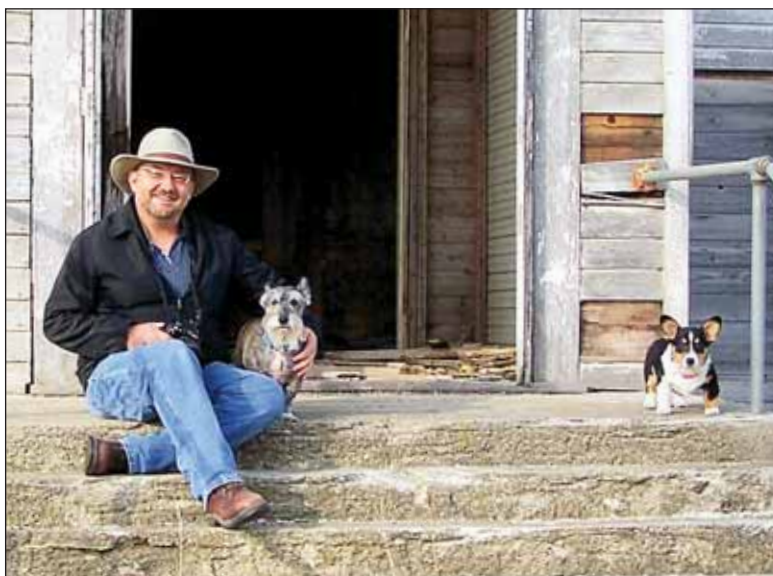
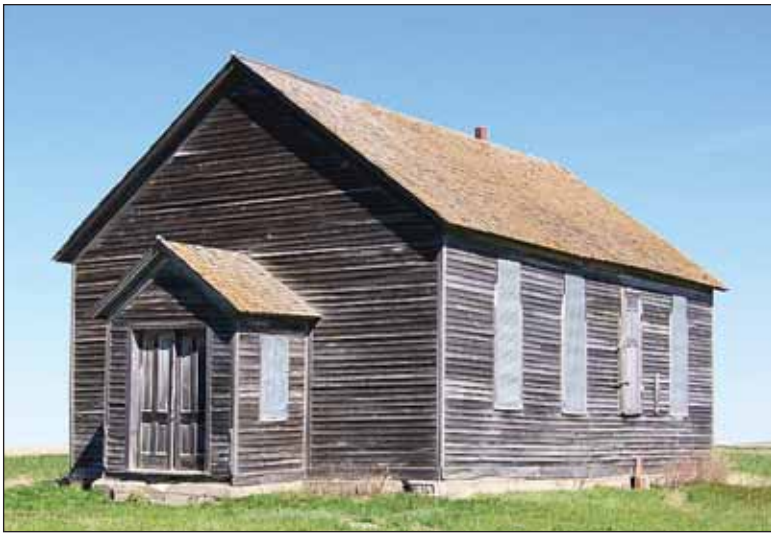


PHOTO BY CINDY CRAIG

The Rev. Rick Craig prefers the company of his dogs Stumpy Jack (left) and Gwendolyn when going on a "photo safari."





**ABOVE:** Frieden Lutheran Church in Emmons County, N.D., was built in 1919 and closed as a regular house of worship in the 1950s, becoming a storage shed. **LEFT:** Ebenezer Evangelical United Brethren in McIntosh County, N.D., closed many years ago and was moved to a nearby farmstead.



The former Mylo Lutheran Church, in Mylo, N.D. "I can still hear the choir singing," said one commenter on this photo, part of a collection of the Rev. Rick Craig's work that is posted to flickr.



**ABOVE:** Linton Methodist Church in Linton, N.D., was sold in the 1960s after the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist congregations merged. It was turned into a house, which still stands. **LEFT:** The long-closed St. John's Lutheran Church is in Arena, N.D.

churches, seeing them empty and decaying always makes me sad. I mourn the loss of community that is provided by a worshipping congregation.

**For our photographer readers, what kind of camera do you use, and are there any tips you would share for those wanting to get effective photos of old buildings like this?**

I have used a variety of cameras in my hobby. After wearing out a couple of "point and shoot" cameras I now use a Nikon D 60 DSLR most frequently paired with a Tamron 18-250mm lens.

As far as photographic tips are concerned, the old adage "practice, practice, practice" certainly holds true in photography. Digital photography enables me to take lots of pictures (I shoot around 10,000 images per year). I keep the ones that I like, and simply delete the others. Take multiple shots from different positions and angles.

Keep the ones you like, and toss the rest. Don't be afraid to try new things. I continually experiment with different camera settings and perspectives. Whenever possible, I will time my visit so as to get sunlight on my subject at the angle I think best for a good photo. We can do wonderful things with photo processing software, but there is no substitute for the light that God provides.

**Do you always take your dogs when you go off photographing?**

We have two dogs. Our oldest, a Westie/Corgi mix is named "Stumpy Jack." Stumpy has been my companion on photo safaris for many, many years. Stumpy knows the "signs" of a pending photo safari. If Stumpy sees me putting on boots, or loading maps and a camera bag into a vehicle, he becomes very excited because he loves to go with me. We recently got a Corgi puppy that we have named Gwen-

dolyn, and she is now learning the "photo safari routine" from Stumpy. I take the dogs with me whenever I can. The only times that I don't take them on photo safaris are when weather or site conditions would be too much for them.

**Do your parishioners and pastor colleagues know about your hobby?**

I make no secret of my photographic hobby, and my clergy colleagues and parishioners have been very supportive. My parishioners are used to seeing my vehicle stopped alongside rural roads, and do not worry so long as the hood is not raised. They know I'm taking a photo of something.

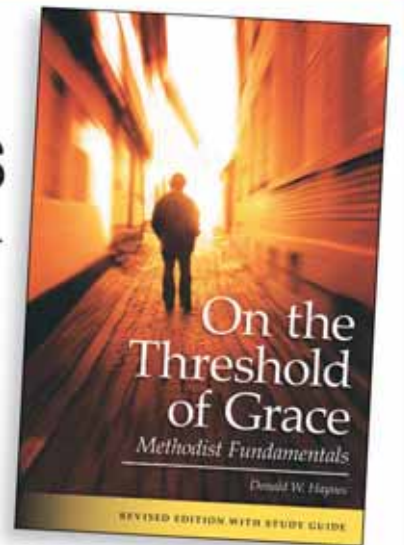
The Rev. Rick Craig can be reached at [imrick@gondtc.com](mailto:imrick@gondtc.com). To see more of his photos of churches and other subjects, go to <http://www.flickr.com/photos/imrickndakota/>.

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## GEN-X RISING

## On stewardship and Dracula's cape

BY ANDREW C. THOMPSON  
*UMR Columnist*

Bela Lugosi's Count Dracula cape is going up for auction. Expected price: \$2 million.

I heard this remarkable bit of information driving to work a few days ago. A Reuters news release later confirmed the blurb on the morning radio. The cape worn by the vampire from Transylvania in the 1931 film, *Dracula*, will be auctioned off next month as part of an "Icons of Hollywood" sale organized by the auctioneer, Profiles in History.



Andrew Thompson

Lugosi was actually buried in his Dracula costume when he died in 1956. Buried in it except for the cape, that is, which remained in the possession of his family.

Now it's for sale. And the auctioneer believes that somebody, somewhere is prepared to pay 2 million dollars for it.

For Christians, the story about Lugosi's cape raises all kinds of questions about stewardship. But more on that in a minute.

Walking up the stairs to my office the same morning that I heard about the Dracula cape on the radio, I found myself preoccupied. I kept turning over in my mind the astonishing prospect of someone actually forking over \$2 million for an 80-year-old Hollywood costume prop.

"Can you imagine what you might do with \$2 million OTHER than buy a Dracula cape?" I kept asking myself.

The whole thing made me trot out a little mental game I sometimes play with myself. Goes like this: Hundreds of years from now, our civilization is likely to be gone. If another civilization takes our place, then those people will eventually ask themselves the question of what caused our downfall.

In my little game, I like to imagine what our future selves will think was the culprit. Was it the creation of cable television and the Internet, which are slowly turning us into techno-zombies? Or could it have been that point sometime in the last few decades when news media and politicians stopped referring to us as "citizens" and started calling us "consumers"?

Now I've got a new candidate for Official Marker of Cultural Decline. It might just end up being the day that

someone pays 2 MILLION DOLLARS for a Dracula cape. Such a precedent can only lead to cultural catastrophe.

As I said, for Christians this kind of thing gives us a great opportunity to talk about our stewardship. The figure of John Wesley himself looms large in any conversation about stewardship for Methodist folk.

If Wesley has a contribution to make to that conversation, it is clearly in grappling with the point that the way we use our wealth is a *moral exercise*.

Wesley insists that there is a right and a wrong way to use the material things. This is so because they don't ultimately belong to us. He explains this as the meaning of stewardship in a sermon entitled "The Use of Money":

"[W]hen the possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, he placed you here not as a proprietor, but a

for yourself or your children. And then, *give all you can*, or in other words, give all you have to God."

For those living in a consumer culture, these words might strike us as extreme. And to his credit I think Wesley realized that his pastoral counsel would be difficult for many to receive in his own day.

"It is no small thing," Wesley cautions in another sermon, "to lay out for God all which you have received from God." It requires "more than ever you had by nature, but not more than you may have by grace."

We live in a fairly frivolous time. Our economy encourages our appetites for all sorts of things. The notion that we should spend our money on something other than our own comfort and luxury—and even more, that we have a moral obligation to do so—will strike many as offensive.

I think Christians should rather think that the truly offensive act is

'Wesley's point is that the use of all goods should have as its guiding motivation the response to God's gift of salvation.'

*steward*. As such he entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds. But the sole property of these still rests with him, nor can ever be alienated from him. As you yourself are not your own, but his, such likewise is all you enjoy. . . . And he has told you in the most clear and express terms how you are to employ it for him, in such a manner that it may be all an holy sacrifice, acceptable through Christ Jesus."

Wesley's point is that the use of all goods should have as its guiding motivation the response to God's gift of salvation. The formula that Wesley uses for this process is *gain all you can, save all you can* and *give all you can*.

His explanation of the three terms is instructive. Wesley goes on:

"*Gain all you can*, without hurting either yourself or your neighbour, in soul or body, by applying hereto with unintermitted diligence, and with all the understanding which God has given you. *Save all you can*, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire, to gratify either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life. Waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether

that we often spend our treasure on absurdities when there are so many churches, schools, hospitals and mission projects in need of vital resources.

It's not just that an item like Bela Lugosi's cape seems silly. It's the sheer lack of creativity involved in the purchase that boggles the mind, the pedestrian nature of spending \$2 million on a piece of kitsch.

It isn't true that all wealth is a zero sum game, where a dollar spent here robs the poor over there of their daily bread. But it is true that the stewardship of one's wealth takes a certain kind of virtue. (Wesley identified that virtue as Christian prudence.)

Not that the person who plans on doing such a thing would care.

So God bless him. And if he needs something to go with that cape, he's in luck.

Dorothy's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* are going up for auction next month, too.

The Rev. Thompson is an instructor in historical theology & Wesleyan studies at Memphis Theological Seminary. Reach him at athompson@MemphisSeminary.edu.

## Together on a journey from darkness to light

BY ALYCE MCKENZIE  
*Special Contributor*

As a recovering workaholic I'm trying to schedule more spontaneous, leisure activities into my week.

I know the irony. Scheduled spontaneity.

Anyway, a friend and I had talked about walking a couple times a week now that the relentlessly oppressive summer heat in Texas has given way to autumnal coolness. She, by her own admission, is a recovering workaholic too.

The only time we could come up with to walk was 6 a.m. on Thursdays. This past Thursday morning I woke up at 3:27 a.m., 4:19 a.m., and 5:41 a.m., apparently anxious about oversleeping. We live on the same street so agreed to each start walking toward the other's house at 6 a.m. I had forgotten that it would be dark and that it was a day and time when, despite our water rationing, it was OK for people to run their sprinklers.

I walked down the dark street, eyes on the lookout for my friend Jeanie coming toward me. Was that her? No, that was a hefty man in a yellow bathrobe saving his newspaper from being soaked by the sprinklers. Was that her? No, that was a tall woman with blonde hair jogging with her cocker spaniel.

I walked for quite a while and began to wonder: Is she coming? Did she oversleep?

So far, no sign of my slight, brown-haired friend. I thought to myself, this is like our life of faith. We're walking in the dark looking for a friend who is, we hope, in that same moment, walking toward us. I'm

walking toward my friend in the dark. When my friend appears, we will walk together as the light dawns.

God is the ultimate reliable friend and walking companion. I believe that God is always walking toward me. I believe that every time I pray, it is because the Holy Spirit has been praying in me. I believe that, every time I think I'm reaching out to God, inviting God into my life, I'm actually RSVP-ing to God's prior invitation to me.

"Good morning, Alyce." There she was right before me. She'd been walking on the other side of the street and suddenly, crossing it, seemed to materialize in front of me. She hadn't forgotten. She hadn't overslept.

We've walked one time so far, so we'll see if it becomes a weekly ritual. I hope it does. Because I need that weekly reminder that the life of faith is walking in the dark toward a friend who is, at the same time, walking toward us. And then walking with that friend as the darkness turns to daylight.

Beyond the metaphorical inspiration, I need that weekly walk because I need to walk and talk with my friend along a dark street, sprinklers spritzing our ankles with fine mist as darkness turns to dawn.

The Rev. McKenzie is the Levan Professor of Preaching and Worship and the Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor at Perkins School of Theology.



Alyce McKenzie



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"The life of faith is walking in the dark toward a friend who is, at the same time, walking toward us," says the Rev. Alyce McKenzie.



## REFLECTIONS

## Looking deeper, when it's hard to give thanks

BY BISHOP WOODIE W. WHITE  
*UMR Columnist*

During my seminary days, I had a wonderful summer ministry experience, which brought together about 25 students from different countries. We lived together in smaller groups in rented apartments in Cleveland, Ohio. We were each assigned to a ministry in various parts of the city.

Each evening we discussed our experiences, observations and learnings. Our mentors directed us as we reflected on what we had seen and experienced. Those discussions answered our many questions and in turn raised more. That summer is still etched indelibly in my storehouse of memories.

Five young adults living in the same apartment made for interesting interaction. It was a time of both growing and learning, and some days were more challenging than others.

One experience stands out.

At mealtime, we each took turns at offering a prayer of thanks. With one exception. One fellow refused to offer Grace. Ever! It led to considerable discussion that seemed to go on most of the summer. His rationale was simple: He could not offer thanks when so many people had nothing to eat. None of our arguments deterred him from this strongly held position. I guess, sometimes it is difficult to give thanks!

During this Thanksgiving season, families and friends will gather for festive traditions. Worship services will take place reminding the community of blessings remembered and even those forgotten.

A tradition in our young family was for each of our children seated at the table to recite in litany-like fashion one thing for which they were thankful. I suppose there are families that still carry out this ritual. As we gather, it is now my grandchildren who recite as their parents once did.

At Thanksgiving, I often think of my friends of more than 50 years ago. I wonder when or if the young man changed his practice of not offering prayers of thanksgiving for a meal, or perhaps other blessings as well.



Bishop  
Woodie  
White

And I also think of those for whom offering Thanksgiving prayers will be difficult. For so many there will be no table around which to gather. For others there will be no one to gather around the table. Or there will be an empty chair as a painful reminder of the absence of one so loved who sat there last Thanksgiving.

There are those who have hit upon hard times. Everything in their lives seems to have fallen apart, and they simply do not feel there is much for which to be thankful. Then there are those for whom a spirit of thanksgiving left long ago.

I sometimes think about how easy it is to be thankful, even faithful, when one's cup runs over. When the table is full and there is more—much more—than needed. When all the children have done well and life is abundant.

I suppose it is easy to sing songs of thanksgiving when a church is full and the community around it responds to every invitation and new outreach effort.

It is important, indeed expected, to give thanks to God for all of life. To do

‘ . . . How easy it is to be thankful . . . when one's cup runs over.’

less is a sign of ingratitude. But for so many, they must look deeper into life to see evidence of “blessings” for which to give thanks. Such blessings cannot be measured in the abundance of things alone.

My wife recently had cataract surgery. As we returned from the hospital, she could not stop commenting on how blue was the sky, how bright the sun. She saw white as white instead of gray, as she had been seeing. All day she was aglow with the rediscovery of sight.

I suppose there are more such blessings that are taken for granted and waiting to be acknowledged. Even for those for whom giving thanks is difficult!

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

## Tip for church marketing: Focus on clarity, not spin

BY JAMES HOWELL  
*Special Contributor*

I'd be content if the postal service delivered mail less frequently. Like everyone else, mostly I get junky, impersonal ads—no matter how snazzy some marketer has tried to make the mailing. Some are from churches, and some are from marketers who pledge to give my church the edge over others. How? By sending more junk mail?

How do we “market” the church?

Or should we refrain from marketing? The newspaper wants us to pay for spreads, but we decline, perhaps because we suspect this will be ineffective, or perhaps because it feels too gimmicky. In traffic I find myself behind cars with bumper stickers for well-marketed churches, but I'm never comfortable with “pitches.” Is my uneasiness just aesthetic, not wishing to be thought of as too bawdy, not risking the fact that we don't have anything all that “hip” to sell? Is my wariness more theological in nature? Or rooted in some delicate holiness?

I love Elaine Heath's *Mystic Way of Evangelism*, where she points out that we have tried banners, bands, upbeat programs, buses, special music events; we've had worship wars, denominational strategies, marketing programs and direct-mail, but these leave us “grief-stricken at our own impotence.”

I love Elaine Heath's *Mystic Way of Evangelism*, where she points out that we have tried banners, bands, upbeat programs, buses, special music events; we've had worship wars, denominational strategies, marketing programs and direct-mail, but these leave us “grief-stricken at our own impotence.”



James  
Howell

In these bleak days, she says, when a “dark night of the soul has descended upon the church,” we need to look to the “wisdom of the great spiritual giants.” The church is in “the kind of trouble that requires leadership from those who are holy.”

Is there such a thing as holy marketing, or is marketing inherently unholy? The essence of marketing is the technique of persuasion—and while we are in the persuasion business, we always tip-toe perilously near the edge of “spin.” Harry Frankfurt of Princeton wrote an enormously important little book on the topic, in which he analyzes this overwhelmingly dominant mode of communication in our era. The essence of spin, Dr. Frankfurt argues, isn't lies or truth, but rather the determination of the “spinner” to say whatever must be said to talk the “spinnee” into something. Church marketing stands a solid chance of slipping into spin. So do we not market? Or risk the danger of spin as a means to some hopefully greater good?

Our church doesn't advertise, or at least not much. We count on word of mouth, of course, but we are especially attentive to whatever we do in public and whatever we put into print. What is the message we push out into the community? How do we market ourselves to ourselves? These are the basic questions we ask.

I think we hope for two objectives that matter—and might even be holy.

One is clarity. Whatever we say about our church must be true about our church. As Melissa Wiginton men-

tions, we Methodists love our three-fold chime, “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.”—but I'd wager most of us question whether we succeed consistently on even two out of three. How can we be clear about who we are? Clarity about reality is achievable, possibly holy, and might not lure in as many consumer-minded spiritual shoppers.

The second objective would be excellence. So many bulletins and newsletters, so many carelessly draped banners in churchyards, so many print pieces or YouTube videos are kitschy, not well-done, full of misspelled words, or with weeds growing around the “Welcome” sign. Can't we do whatever we do with excellence, as if we take a little pride in who we are and in who God is? Granted, our ambition for excellence can easily morph into spin, but excellence can be holy, too; there is an excellence about holiness, right?

I want to reach people. But I want to be holy. I despise spin. But I can be clear: Come here and we will maybe try to love you, and we will talk about a God who will ask you to sacrifice a whole lot. I can strive for excellence, cut the weeds, spell words correctly and suggest by our attention to detail that what we do, we do for God. We'll try to be holy; we aren't just going to pile additional junk into your mailbox.

The Rev. Howell is senior pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, N.C. This was first published in *Faith & Leadership* ([www.faithandleadership.com](http://www.faithandleadership.com)).

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## ■ FEAST Continued from page 1B

Program at Perkins School of Theology, part of Southern Methodist University.

Early Christians celebrated Love Feasts in homes, enjoying a simple meal together followed by communion. By the third or fourth century, some Love Feasts were celebrated as communal, charitable meals which served meat—a rare treat for the poor. By the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the practice of the Love Feast began to fade in the Western church, according to Mr. Stutzman.

The modern history of the Love Feast dates to the 18th century, when the Moravians in Germany introduced a service of sharing food, prayer, religious conversation and hymns. In 1737, John Wesley experienced a Love Feast while worshipping with Moravians in Savannah, Ga.

“After evening prayers, we joined with the Germans in one of their love-feasts,” he wrote in his diary. “It was begun and ended with thanksgiving and prayer, and celebrated in so decent and solemn a manner as a Christian of the apostolic age would have allowed to be worthy of Christ.”

Dr. Hawn notes that the Moravians were an oppressed people, with the earliest Love Feasts taking place on the estate of Count Zinzendorf, where Moravians had fled for protection. Thus, the Love Feast “was not just for nourishment, but a symbol of their being bound together in Christ’s love,” said Dr. Hawn. “It’s the idea of *unitas fratrum*—the unity of the brethren. This meal was meant to bring unity.”

With Wesley’s blessing, the Love Feast became part of Methodist society meetings in England, and those who immigrated to North America quickly made Love Feasts an important part of early American Methodism. But while Wesley’s inspiration came from the Moravian Love Feast, the practice among early Methodists was quite different from the Christmas service that’s now popular in North Carolina.

“For one thing, Wesley’s practice was closed,” said the Rev. Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of worship resources for the General Board of Discipleship. “You had to bring with you a ticket from your class leader certifying that you were in good standing in your class meeting.” These Love Feast services focused on testimonies—which was why the service was closed.

“Some of those testimonies were of overcoming sin or struggling with sin or other issues—not the sort of thing most folks would want to talk about in a more public arena,” he said.

### Modern variations

Today, three denominations observe the Love Feast tradition—the

Church of the Brethren, the Moravian Church, and the United Methodist Church, Mr. Stutzman said.

While the Love Feast wasn’t mentioned in the 1944 edition of the *Methodist Book of Worship for Church and Home*, an order of service for Love Feasts did appear in the 1964 edition. The current *Book of Worship*, published in 1992, outlines a Love Feast in the section on “Occasional Services,” appropriate for annual conferences and charge conferences, as part of Covenant Discipleship groups or congregational suppers, or as special worship during Christmas, Holy Week or Pentecost.

“The Love Feast, or Agape Meal, is a Christian fellowship meal recalling the meals Jesus shared with disciples during his ministry and expressing the *koinonia* (community, sharing, fellowship) enjoyed by the family of Christ,” according to the *Book of Worship*. Testimonies and praise are usually the focal point.

### Communal meal

For the Rev. Russ Whaley, the Love Feast means opening the doors of his church, Zion UMC in Grand Forks, N.D., to everyone in the community for a communal meal. The church has been holding monthly meals, called Love Feasts, free of charge, to anyone who shows up, for the past 10 years. Other churches in town pitch in by providing food; each monthly meal typically draws around 200 people.

“Feeding the body is almost secondary to what we’re doing,” said Mr. Whaley. “There are a lot of folks who come, who need the people contact and the fellowship.”

There’s no preaching or formal worshipping as part of the meal, and while this Love Feast doesn’t follow



PHOTO BY MARK BAILEY

**LEFT: Young women, dressed in the traditional caps and aprons, prepare to serve at the annual Moravian Love Feast service, held on Christmas Eve at First United Methodist in Brevard, N.C.**



PHOTO BY DONALD MYRACLE

the *Book of Worship*’s format, it does echo a traditional Love Feast theme: of sharing with those in need. Zion never accepts money for the meal, even from those who offer.

“It’s a completely free meal with no strings whatsoever,” said Mr. Whaley. “The whole idea is to express the grace and the love of Christ—which is freely given. You can’t attach a price to it.”

For the Rev. Donna Ware, pastor of First UMC in Hillsboro, Texas, the Love Feast was an experiment—a simple meal of donut holes, grapes and water shared as part of a recent worship service. Ms. Ware preached on the parable of the wedding banquet—about how the invited guests didn’t show, so the king gathered folks from the streets to enjoy the sumptuous meal.

“The Love Feast is a good way to talk about how God wants everyone to be at his table,” she said. “We’ve been fed, we’ve been invited; now we need to go out and invite others.”

### Christmas tradition

Both of these variations fit the concept of the Love Feast, because it’s a very flexible form, according to Dr. Hawn, and because both echo the theme of sharing God’s abundance beyond the church’s walls.

But for most United Methodists in North Carolina, a Love Feast will always mean Christmas and the beloved traditions of the Moravian celebration.

Edenton Street UMC in Raleigh, N.C., has been celebrating a Love Feast during Advent since 1988. The earliest organizers turned for help to neigh-

bors in the Moravian church, who gifted the church with a Moravian star to hang in the sanctuary. Edenton Street’s celebration has most of the features of the Love Feast at Brevard UMC—the special yeast buns, the beeswax candles with the red paper skirts, and the caps and aprons worn by the *dieners* (servers in German).

Edenton Street’s Love Feast takes place on the first Sunday of Advent, and year after year, always draws a big crowd.


“For us, it’s a way to start the Christmas season,” said church member Lewanna Stout. “It’s a family event—children 3 and up are invited—and it’s quite beautiful. And when it’s over, I always think, ‘Now I can start my Christmas.’”

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