

The Arkansas United Methodist

LIVING OUR FAITH
December 2018 | Volume 166, Issue 5



Celebrate
Christmas

Hempstead County's
COMMUNITY CLOSET

WHY
It's Important to
TITHE

BREAKING BONDS
in Jonesboro

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STORY IDEA?



The season of outrage!



Caleb Hennington
Digital Content Editor, [@arumceditor](https://twitter.com/arumceditor)

- People also say “Happy Holidays” around this time because Christmas isn’t the only holiday celebrated in December (Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Boxing Day, Omisoka).
- A lot of secular Christmas songs can be just as beautiful as those traditional religious Christmas songs – have you ever heard Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas”? I rest my case.
- And that millennial nativity scene? Don’t you think that Mary and Joseph would have been snapping selfies with the newborn Savior of the world had he been born in 2018 instead of thousands of years ago?

Ed Stetzer, author of the book “Christians in the Age of Outrage,” says the problem with outrage starts with the willingness of Christians to create, what he calls, “echo chambers of ideology.”

“The echo chamber first affirms your ideas, then it amplifies them, and you can start to believe the worst things about people you don’t agree with,” Stetzer said, in a recent CNN interview about his book.

As Christians, we need to understand that – while there are plenty of reasons to be righteously indignant these days – losing your temper at people who celebrate the holidays differently than you do is not a productive way to win people over to Christ.

In fact, there’s a strong chance that this holiday outrage from Christians is the very reason that many people choose to steer clear from the faith.

And I don’t blame them! How bad does it make Christians seem when all people see from you are the things you’re angry about rather than the things that bring you joy?

How are we reflecting the love of Christ when we point our fingers at the “other side” and accuse them of “taking Christ out of Christmas,” when they might not know the birth of Christ is the reason we celebrate this holiday?

Wasting time on the cups we drink our coffee from, the songs we sing, and the greetings we say to each other isn’t worth the energy; but taking care of your friends, neighbors, and community is always worth it.

Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas and do your best this season to “do no harm.”

The holidays are one of my favorite times of the year. Not just for the typical festivities like family gatherings, gift exchanges, the colorful lights, good food, the beauty surrounding the celebration of the birth of Christ, and eggnog – yes, I am a believer in the delicious, sugary, fatty delight that is holiday nog; don’t tweet at me.

But I also just love the spirit of the season. It’s a time when good cheer is aplenty, and folks seem to realize they can take things a little slower and learn to relax – if only for a few days.

Unfortunately, it also happens to be the season for holiday outrage!

If you’re one of those people that love to get outraged around the holidays, the mere fact that I’ve yet to mention the word “Christmas” in this article has probably already gotten your blood boiling.

Why is that?

It never fails; every year Christians seem to have some new inconvenience that sparks the flame of outrage deep within their souls. And they just have to post about it on Facebook.

Red cups! People saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas!” Too many secular Christmas songs! Millennial nativity scenes, complete with selfies and soy lattes!

Each one of these outrages is perceived by Christians as an attack on not only the meaning of Christmas but also their deeply held beliefs in their faith. However, if you just take a few moments to examine each individual outrage, you begin to realize there’s a good explanation for all of them.

- The holiday cups from your favorite coffee shop were never intended to represent Christianity in the first place; they’re meant to represent a general celebration of Christmas, and red just so happens to be a very Christmas-y color.

My Favorite Nativity



Gary E. Mueller
Bishop of the Arkansas Conference

Every year as I unwrap my favorite Nativity from its storage box, I inevitably spend a few moments reflecting while I put all the figures in their proper place. Quite frankly, and somewhat surprisingly, it's always a bit depressing as I remember how often Jesus remains stuck in the manger as merely a sentimental figure, how our culture has tamed the power of what God has done by rebranding Christmas as "the most wonderful time of the year," and how too many people have reached the heartbreaking conclusion that Christmas has lost its power to bring desperately needed hope.

But I don't remain depressed for long because the words of Matthew's Gospel literally shout out, "This baby born to Mary is Immanuel, God with us." And so I start rejoicing in this reality that seems utterly preposterous and impossible to explain, yet boldly proclaims that God has personally

entered into the world in Jesus. Jesus whose birth we celebrate -- but who also brings salvation to the world -- promises to be with us until the end of the age as we follow him and is the Lord of all life.

There is only one way to begin to make any sense of this. God is so passionately in love with humanity God decided to risk plunging into the mess and muckiness of life to give us what we absolutely need but can never get on our own. This is not just church talk from a bishop. It is personal -- deeply personal -- because my soul longs for this kind of love in the midst of my own failings, questions and pain; I suspect yours does as well. And it is why I pray you will be filled with the true joy of Christmas that comes from experiencing that you do not have to find God and convince God to give you something -- God has found you and offers you amazing grace!

I'll continue to stop by my favorite Nativity every day for the next several weeks until I put it up for another year. But more importantly, I'll let it remind me of the eternal truth that God's Christmas gift to us comes in the most unlikely of ways; through an infant born of Mary, a carpenter from Galilee who was an itinerant preacher for just three years, and the Son of God who died on a cross for the entire world. I hope you'll find some time to stop by your Nativity and be reminded, too.

Merry Christmas!



Rev. Wayne Clark named UMFA president & CEO

Rev. J. Wayne Clark has been named President and CEO of The United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas and will begin his new role in January 2019. He currently serves as Associate Vice President for Development and Dean of the Chapel at Hendrix College in Conway.

“I am excited for the opportunity to serve The United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas in this capacity,” said Clark. “Since beginning my ministry in Arkansas, I have had a strong admiration for the Foundation’s work. Being on the board since 2015 has given me even more insight into the many positive ways that the Foundation is making an impact on Arkansas Methodism.”

“The Directors of The United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas are delighted to welcome Wayne as the Foundation’s President and CEO,” said the UMFA Board of Director’s chair, the Honorable Beth Deere. “Wayne has deep roots in Arkansas United Methodism and brings a wealth of experience in development and administration from his twenty-two years at Hendrix College.”

Clark served as Hendrix College Chaplain for 18 years before joining the Office of Advancement in 2015 to lead the college’s Annual Fund, major gifts and planned giving efforts. A native of Malvern, AR and a 1984 Hendrix College graduate, Clark received his master’s degree from the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, in 1989. Since 2012, he has served as Director of the Arkansas Conference Course of Study through SMU and the Perkins School of Theology.

Before returning to Hendrix College in 1996, he served as chaplain for Children’s Medical Center’s Hematology, Oncology and Neurology Departments in Dallas; as minister of Halifax Methodist Circuit in Halifax, England; and associate minister of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas. He has served Arkansas United Methodist Churches in Magnolia and Pine Bluff.

THE GIFT OF A PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Rev. Dane Womack preaches every Sunday as executive pastor at First UMC, Fort Smith. When he looks out at his congregation, he is aware that some of them – along with many other donors to the UMFA Seminary Scholarship Fund – made it possible for him to receive a professional education at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Dane served as a local pastor for two years at Plumerville UMC near Conway while teaching high school after graduating from the University of Central Arkansas. His District Superintendent, Rev. Rodney Steele, was the one who first interested him in attending seminary.

“I was hungry for the education and formation that a seminary education could bring,” said Dane. “I met Roy and Sandy Smith who told me about the UMFA program. Sandy, a UMFA board member, made me feel wanted by the Conference and the Foundation.”

Because of a three-year full scholarship from UMFA, Dane was able to graduate from seminary debt free. He and his wife Jill have two children, and Jill is a physical therapist in Fort Smith.

“I have the knowledge to put into practice in even the worst situations,” Dane said. “At the hospital, for every sermon, and in leading innovative programs for our church, I use the skills I learned at Duke every day.”



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Photo by Patrick Fore on Unsplash

A prayer for General Conference

BY ASA WHITAKER

Featured Contributor and General Conference Delegate

A few days after publishing this column, I will -- with God's help -- deliver a sermon in my local church that I have entitled "Living in the presence of God." As some of you will probably imagine, I have spent a great deal of time, study, and prayer preparing this sermon.

I am struck by the irony of approaching Advent where we as United Methodists will spend those four weeks preparing our hearts so that we might have a full realization of the real meaning of Christmas. While at the same time, my fellow delegates and I are preparing for General Conference with a great deal of time, study, and prayer that we might have a full realization of what it means to be the church.

Since the completion of General Conference 2016, we have been waiting with great anticipation on the proposal from the Commission on A Way Forward. Having received that proposal, we were advised that we must wait a while longer because the Council of Bishops had requested the Judicial Council to determine if the plans submitted in the proposal were constitutional. Their decision was rendered; however, delegates remained in waiting for the Advance Daily Christian Advocate to arrive in the mail so that

we might have a complete picture of the legislation coming before us in February.

We now have a starting point defined. However, there will be many motions, amendments, and additions to come once the proceedings are underway. In the meantime, the posturing of various points of view has not only begun but are in full swing. Disagreement at General Conference is always a part of the proceedings, but the tone is building quickly with accusations, innuendos, and finger-pointing.

The Conference planners have called for and have invited delegates to come together for a day of prayer before proceedings begin. I welcome this. Through all of this I know God is still on his throne, he loves his church and us, and his presence will be in our midst. It is my prayer that we humble ourselves before God admitting our need for his guidance and direction freely through the Holy Spirit, that we open ourselves to the advice of the Holy Spirit, and finally conduct ourselves in such a manner that we will advance the Kingdom of God in the world. If we do this, I believe we will be living in the presence of God. His church through the expression of the United Methodist Church will continue to be a beacon of hope in the world.

I ask for your continued prayers as we do our work and invite you to share your thoughts and concerns with the members of the delegation as we move forward.

This is part of a continuing series from the Arkansas Delegates who will be traveling to St. Louis for General Conference in February 2019.

Looking to the past, preparing for the future

BY KARON MANN

Arkansas Conference Lay Leader and General Conference Delegate

In his book *The Singing Thing*, author John Bell says, “We are creatures of our past, we cannot be separated from it.” He was referring specifically to the music of our past, particularly hymns and religious songs that evoke strong feelings or memories, but smells can elicit memories, too, as can objects.

One of my favorite pastimes is browsing through antique malls, looking for items that remind me of my parents or grandparents. It’s fun to find aprons like my grandmother’s, vintage Tupperware measuring cups like my mother’s, or crystal Candlewick pieces to add to my mother-in-law’s collection. I enjoy using these pieces, thinking about what life would have been like for my relatives when those pieces were brand new. Objects in my house are a mixture of old and new, past and present.

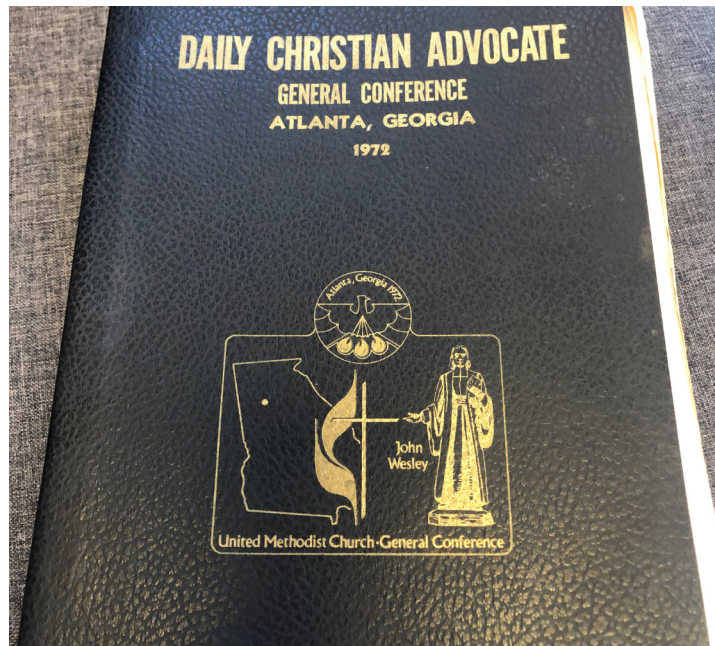
Uncovering pieces of United Methodist history is something I also enjoy. Over the years I have acquired a few pieces from family: an 1876 Methodist Episcopal Church, South hymnal, children’s Sunday School pamphlets from 1902, and a 1940’s Sheridan Headlight article describing my grandfather’s family as “the singing Methodists” from Grant County, Arkansas. I was thrilled to find these treasures.

I continue to collect pieces of Methodist history I find – older hymnals, Books of Discipline from the 1900s, and a booklet explaining why we baptize babies, but my favorite find was recent. I was looking around in an online vintage bookstore site and saw a copy of the 1972 *Daily Christian Advocate* (DCA), a complete compilation of the proceedings from General Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

The 1972 General Conference was the first full General Conference of the newly formed United Methodist Church. One of the items to be received at this General Conference was the report from the Social Principals Study Commission containing the newly proposed statement of social principals. Purportedly there was tension and anxiety over the coming report, especially the section on human sexuality, and much debate was anticipated.

I purchased the DCA and awaited its arrival, hoping to receive the bound copies of the proceedings and read the discussion surrounding the Social Principals Study Commission report, especially the debate over the insertion of the sentence, “we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching.” I hoped that reading the actual words would give me insight into the thinking and rationale that led to the revising of the proposed Statement of Social Principals. I wanted to understand how we got from there to here, where almost 50 years later we are still debating the words and face a 2019 called session of General Conference over the issue of human sexuality.

The document that arrived was so much more than printed words. It was filled with handwritten notes in margins and underlined passages. Typed worship bulletins, budget notes and



handwritten speeches that the owner hoped to give on the floor of General Conference were inserted. In reading it, I felt a little of the experience of the owner (whose name is not recorded anywhere in the book).

When I flipped through the printed legislation and daily reports, they showed the hopes and dreams of our newly formed denomination: a focus on evangelism, much written about the participation of women in the church, and the encouragement of lay participation. In addition to the statement of social principals, new doctrine and doctrinal standards were adopted, as was a revised structure for the church, adding a Board of Discipleship and the Board of Ministries and Higher Education.

In his closing address to the 1972 General Conference, Bishop Eugene Slater said, “May I suggest that the time is at hand when each of us and each group among us must begin to recognize its relationship that it sustains as persons and groups to The United Methodist Church as a whole. It is within this segment of the household of faith that we have our life as Christians. If we are to be built up and renewed in our faith, it will be within the fellowship of the church, the body of Christ.”

As we approach the 2019 called session of General Conference, I pray for the future of our church. Despite our differences I am committed to remaining a part of and supporting our “segment of the household of faith” called The United Methodist Church, and believe that it is possible for faithful Christians to disagree on scriptural interpretation and remain committed to our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This is part of a continuing series from the Arkansas Delegates who will be traveling to St. Louis for General Conference in February 2019.



Learning to give sacrificially through tithing

Giving to those in need is a commandment from God. But do you know why?

BY CALEB HENNINGTON

Digital Content Editor | [Follow me on Twitter @arumceditor](#)

Tithing. It's one of those core Christian tenets that, purposefully or not, often gets forgotten by followers of Christ.

Maybe it's because, as humans born with naturally sinful inclinations, we would rather keep our money to ourselves. It's just easier to be selfish and take care of your own needs and your family, right? Why give money to the church?

You might be surprised to find out that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, actually kind of agrees with that sentiment (to a certain extent)!

In Sermon 50, titled "The Use of Money," Wesley lays out the foundation of teaching regarding money in the United Methodist Church. According to Wesley, Methodists should strive to "Gain all you can...save all you can...give all you can."

Many times, Christians are great at gaining all they can and saving all they can; it's that third part of Wesley's sermon that seems to be the most difficult to put into practice.

There are countless verses in the Bible about wisely using the riches that you possess. One of the first instances of giving back to God that which we have received comes from Genesis 28:10-22, in which Jacob falls asleep and dreams that God visits him at the top of a stairway to Heaven. God promises to give Jacob and his descendants "the land on which you are lying" and that his descendants will "be like the dust of the earth."

After waking, Jacob promises always to give back to God a tenth of the blessings he's received from the Lord. This verse is, of course, where we get the idea of giving one-tenth of our Earthly earnings back to God.

However, tithing isn't a fixed rate. It doesn't mean that you are always required to give back one-tenth of your earnings; no

more, no less.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church emphasizes that church leaders should "find creative ways to turn their congregations into tithing congregations with an attitude of generosity." (§258.4)

It also states that tithing is defined as "the minimum goal of giving," and never outright says a specific number or amount is considered an official tithe to the church. (§630.5)

One of the most beautiful instances in the Bible of giving as much as you can give is the widow's offering, from Mark 12:41-44. You probably already know this verse by heart, but I'll recount it just to make sure.

In these verses, Jesus is sitting and observing people bringing offerings into the temple treasury. He sees lots of wealthy individuals bringing in large sums of money and tossing them into the collection receptacles. But then, Jesus observes a poor widow giving all that she has; just two small coins.

Jesus turns to his disciples and says "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."

Jesus' purpose in pointing this out to his disciples is to show them that what's important is not how much you give, but that you give sacrificially with a heart that is full of generosity.

Tithing isn't just a way for the church to collect money from members; it's an essential part of the Christian faith. It teaches believers how to be generous with the blessings they have received and to give those gifts back to God.

This month provides some fantastic opportunities to give back to both your church and community. Whether it's special Advent or Christmas tithe collections or charitable donations to causes that your church supports, make sure to approach your giving with a joyful heart.

Tithing is an act of sacrificial worship. It's not always easy to give, but by giving, it provides others with more opportunities which will further the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Warm clothes for cold months

Hempstead County Closet provides everyday necessities for county residents

BY SAM PIERCE
Featured Contributor

One of the biggest questions prior to the opening of the Hempstead County Closet in Hope, was how was it going to be filled.

“That was the scary part of it,” Sarah Carrillo, co-coordinator for the closet, said. “People would ask us, ‘Who is going to fill this house? I know this is a good idea, but I don’t know if y’all are going to be able to fill a house with enough stuff.’”

However, despite how scary it was, Carrillo and her cousin, Angie Kidd, prayed about it and “left it in His hands.”

“[God] has filled this house,” Carrillo said. “There have been so many groups involved and so many donations; we are literally the hands and feet of Christ.

“Through every denomination, all the way across, it is awesome to have a common goal that everybody is working towards. It was definitely a God thing, but it was also a community thing, led by Him. It is just amazing.”

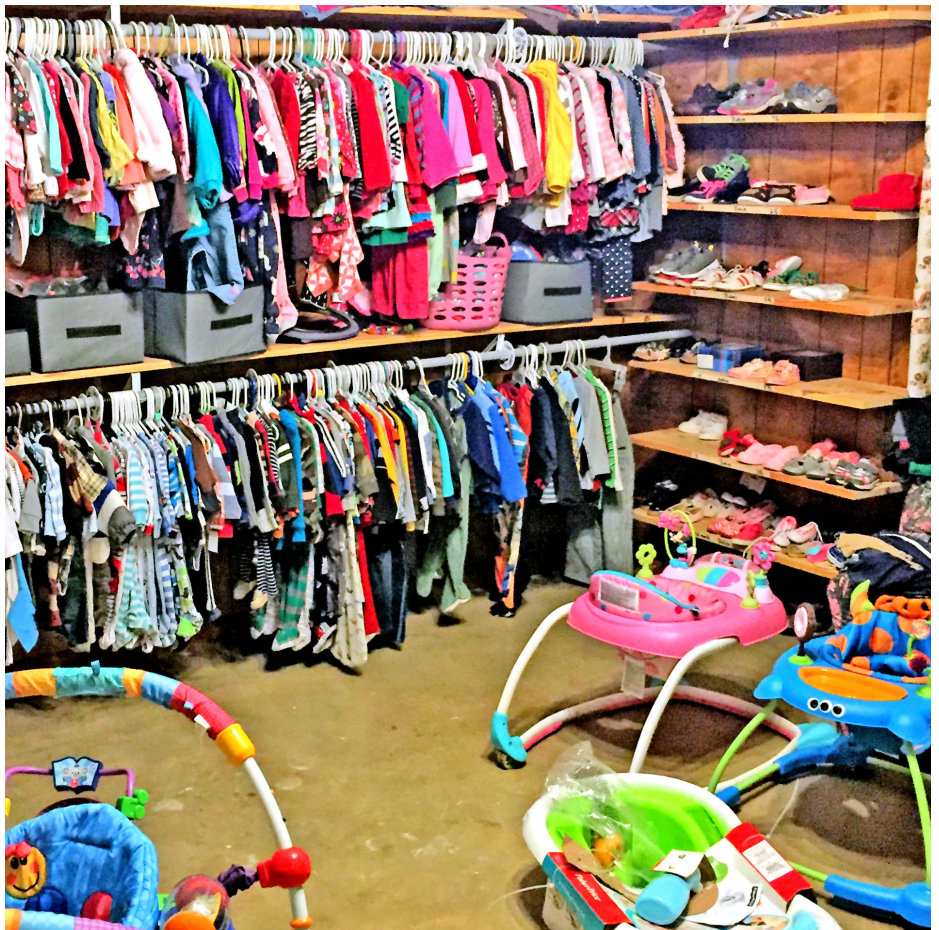
The Hempstead County Closet is a nonprofit that assists families and children with clothes, necessities and other items. Kidd said it is for everyday necessity items including pajamas, warm coats, comforters, blankets, and pillows, as well as hygiene products. She said the response to the needs of children in the community has been overwhelming.

“This was a dream Sarah and I both had a year before it was put into place,” Kidd said. “God has continued to put everything and every person in the path to make this succeed.”

The house is open to parents who are in-between jobs, foster families, or families who have been through a traumatic experience such as a house fire or other disasters.

“We are doing for Him, working for Him and we are working for His children,” Kidd said. “God is showing us that there is hope and love.”

The house, which is located at 601 Hwy 355 West, opened Aug. 1. The building itself belongs to Spring Hill United Methodist Church and was previously used as the church’s parsonage and as a rental house. Kidd, the wife of pastor Revel Kidd, said they live in the town and don’t need the house.



The Baby Room provides clothing, shoes, and even toys to parents who want to give their toddler the amenities they need. || Photo provided by Angie Kidd

“We needed a purpose for it and it just all went perfectly,” Angie Kidd said.

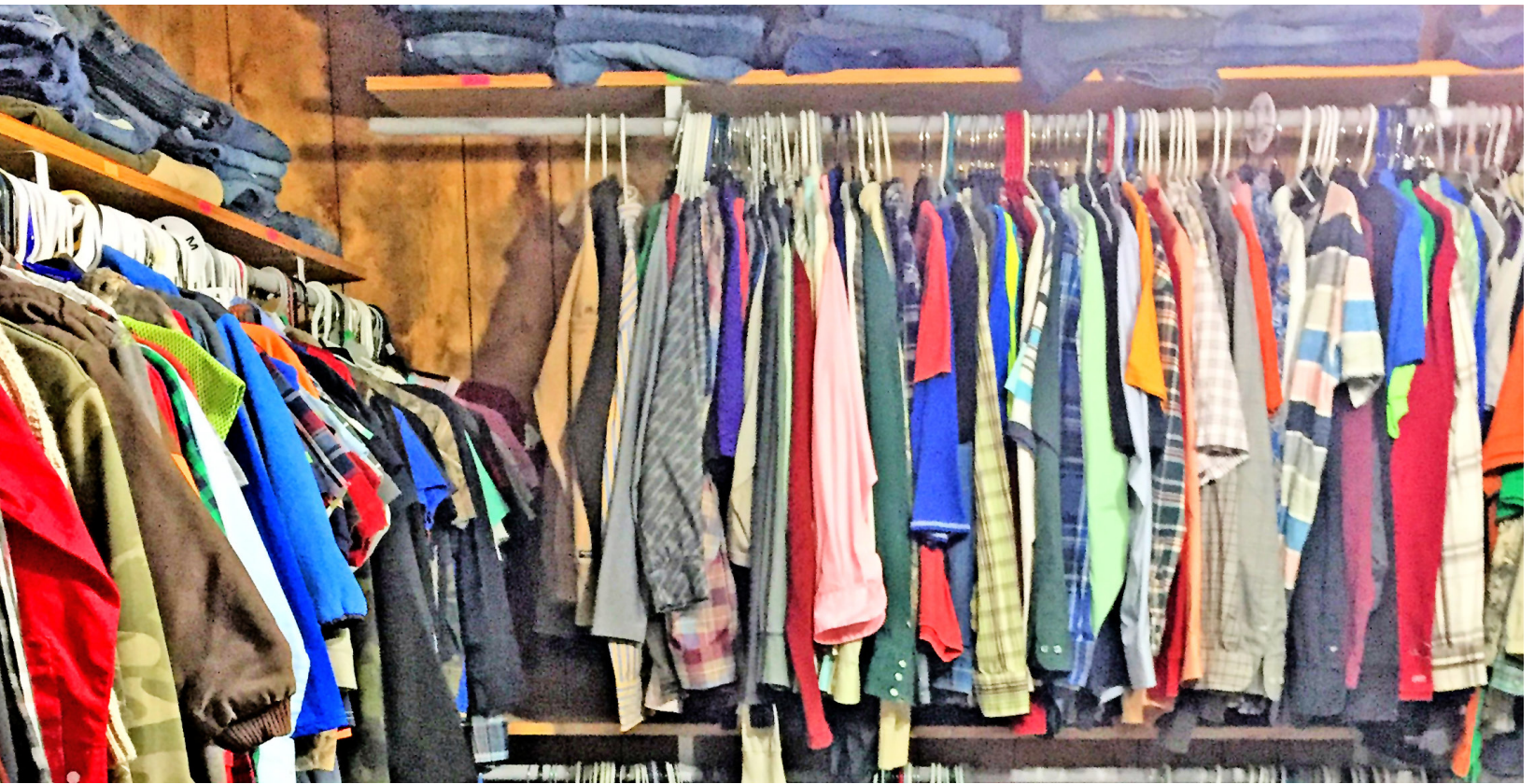
“It was completely a God thing,” Carrillo said. “Angie and I had talked and had been dreaming about it, and it really felt like God was laying this on our heart.

“I have young children, and when I look and see how extremely blessed they are compared to the kids beside them, it breaks my heart. There should be a way to help all these kids.”

Carrillo said she has three children, all under the age of 14. “We just don’t want kids to be left behind for any reason,” she said. “We want to help meet those needs and fill in the gaps.”

Current needs for the closet include:

- Quarters for the laundromat (a continuous need)
- New socks for men, women and children
- New underwear for men and women
- Coats
- Clear Plastic Storage Totes



The Men's Room of the Hempstead County Closet provides clothing to boys and men in need of a new shirt or warm jacket for the winter.
|| Photo provided by Angie Kidd

- Pillows
- Sheets for twin beds and cribs
- Blankets for twin beds
- Diapers, Pull-Ups and Depends

For more information or how to donate, visit the Hempstead County Closet Facebook page. For families in need, it is by appointments only, according to Kidd.

“We sit down and figure out how much of what you need and we keep a record of who uses it and what they receive,” Kidd said. “So we don’t run into someone abusing the system.”

Kidd said the Department of Human Services – DHS – might send a family to them or a family can contact her on their own. So far, there have been close to 60 families that have come through, and she said they have been contacted a lot more frequently as of late.

Kidd said they have also worked closely with The CALL in Hempstead County, which just opened Oct. 28.

Laura Bramlett, the family support coordinator for The CALL in Hempstead County, said when they were planning on opening their branch, Kidd and Carrillo offered the house to help foster families.

“Normally, when The CALL opens, it has what is known as The CALL mall, and that is virtually what the closet is,” Bramlett said. “Foster parents can come and get clothes, formula, diapers and whatever else they may need.

“It is just a place to get it for free instead of going to a store.”

Bramlett, who is currently a legal guardian for an 18-year-old girl, said she has used the closet to get two new pairs of shoes for her daughter.

“They are constantly in contact with DHS and finding out the needs of the children in the area,” Bramlett said. “Once we are able to train our own foster families, we will use them a lot more.”

Bramlett’s husband, Daniel, is the lead pastor at First Baptist Church in Hope. She said while they were living in Texas, they were foster parents for two years, but are not currently licensed for Arkansas.

“One of the best things about this closet, is that so many different churches are working together, it has been exciting,” Bramlett said. “God is bringing together the churches – no matter the denomination – together to meet the needs of children.”

Carrillo said they are following something that God laid before them and getting to watch Him work. She also said meeting people has been rewarding.

“Seeing a child hug a T-shirt or a pair of pajamas like it is Christmas morning is pretty awesome,” Carrillo said.

Kidd said there has a tremendous outpour from Hempstead County.

“This is only due to the love and compassion of people of Hempstead County uniting together to make this happen,” Kidd said. “It has been and will be such a blessing to so many. Sarah and I are the coordinators, but we have several volunteers that assist us with serving in the closet.”

As cousins, Kidd and Carrillo have always been close and worked on several projects together.

“To do this with her has been so awesome,” Carrillo said. “It is something we have talked about for the past year and felt Him leading us to it.

“To see it actually bear fruit is amazing.”

A Moment with Methodist FAMILY HEALTH



How Julie got her daughter back and her life And how you can share your light

This story is true, written by Steve Brawner, a syndicated columnist in Arkansas, and published in the August 22, 2018 issue of the Pine Bluff Commercial. Mr. Brawner graciously permitted us to reprint this column in whole.

After Julie completed her program, they moved back to Mountain Home. She became a Christian, found a job at a pet boarding facility, and married. She now supervises four employees.

Julie gives much of the credit for her comeback to Chuck, her caseworker, who still provides an occasional helping hand.

“He never gave up on me, even though there were times through the process he could have or should have,” she said. “If I did slip up, of course he was disappointed, but he always told me that he believed in me...He was like the only solid, normal person, if you want to say, in my life.”

An agency employee since 2012, Chuck said parents like Julie need lots of contact with the caseworker, adequate services, a support system, and time with their children. Having to explain to a five-year-old why he can't be home with his parent can be difficult, but you have to approach it with respect.

Even when living in a loving and stable foster home, children still have an attachment to their biological parents, he said. That's one reason Arkansas' system is oriented toward reunification.

In fiscal year 2017, 41 percent of the almost 4,000 children discharged from foster care returned home. Another 27 percent went to a relative, while 23 percent were adopted by another family.

Many people invested time, money and effort in helping Julie recover: Chuck, Nanny and Pop, the staffs at Gamma House and Arkansas CARES, the boyfriend's sister who took her to church before she even went to rehab, and others. Donors and taxpayers funded much of the costs.

With their help, she went from being a meth addict whose daughter was taken from her, to being a married mom and taxpaying employee supervisor. And Anna's at home.

Thank goodness for Arkansas CARES, and for Chuck and all those others in Arkansas who cared.

Editor's note: Julie and Anna were able to get the help they needed because of the generosity, prayers and kindness of Arkansas's United Methodists. This season, would you help more Arkansas children and families like Anna and Julie's by making a financial contribution to Methodist Family Health? You can donate online at <https://www.methodistfamily.org/donate.html>, text to give at 501-254-6048, send a check to P.O. Box 56050, Little Rock, Arkansas 72215, or call 501-906-4209 to make a secure donation using your credit or debit card. You also can make a contribution to Share the Light during Special Offering Sundays on December 9 and 16.

By sharing your light, you will help more children and families find stability, peace and hope like Julie and Anna. Thank you for your gift.



Is your church ready for the season of Advent?



The Advent season (and especially Christmas Eve/Day) is one of the most important times of year for Christians and those interested in Christianity. Help them discover the true meaning of Christmas with these simple tips:

Make sure your church's contact information is up-to-date!

No matter how big or small your church is, you should always make sure that the addresses, phone numbers, and websites for your church are correct! Check with your District Administrator about what the Conference has on file.

Make sure your Find-A-Church profile is correct, too!

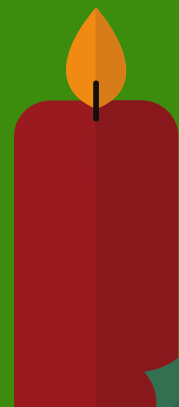
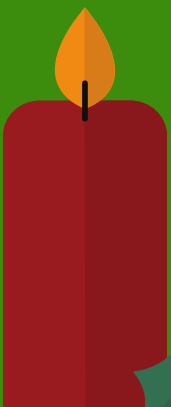
The United Methodist Church maintains a global database of churches that is available to the general public called "Find-A-Church," and it's a great resource to help people find your church! Visit umcom.org/tools/update-your-find-a-church to learn more.

Make your church appear inviting!

Take a look at the exterior of your church. Does it appear inviting? Is it easy to find? Is it clear how to get in, especially for those who are disabled? Is the sign out front (if there is one) clean and up-to-date? Details like these are vital to bringing people, whether long-term members or first-time visitors in!

Your church's online presence is important!

Make sure that your church's website and social media are updated and inviting as well (and it's also a great place to put information about what your church is doing to celebrate the Advent season!)





All aboard the FUMC Christmas Train!

BY MELINDA SHUNK
Children's Ministry Coordinator

Fort Smith First United Methodist church is headed for the rails! The train rails in the park to be more specific. When Sally Ware first started in Children's Ministry 20 years ago, the children and their families walked in the church doors with little to no invitation. Parents had been taught by their parents that behind those church doors their family would be taught the love of Jesus!

Somewhere in those last 20 years parents lost the direction they once had to give their children a church family that helps them experience Jesus. Today, Sally and the program staff at Fort Smith First UMC downtown have meetings about how they can serve the community outside those doors so that people will know Jesus loves them.

Last year, at one of those meetings, they decided to go outside the church doors and meet the families where they are: the Creekmore City Park, waiting to ride the city's Christmas train.

The Children's Ministry team worked with the Mission Outreach team, pastoral staff, and Youth Ministry team to move the FUMC hospitality to the park. The community tradition of the Christmas train is a strong community filled event. It is open seven days a week and typically accepts free will donations from families to ride through the park and gaze in Christmas wonder at the Creekmore light displays. However, on a Tuesday evening in December of 2017, Fort Smith Mission Outreach donated the funds to sponsor an evening's worth of train rides for \$200.

Sally and her Children's Ministry team purchased cookies, prepared Igloo filled hot chocolate and gathered candy canes. They made sure to promote this event to their church families and encouraged them to invite friends or neighbors. The Youth Ministry team had students tie a candy cane poem with worship times to each candy cane. The pastoral staff strategically hung a church logo sign on the cookie and hot chocolate table that was

along the path of where up to 75 people at a time waited in line to ride the train.

Christmas carols were playing while the staff from Fort Smith FUMC greeted the eager children and their families with cookies, cocoa, and conversation. Many of the families tried to offer the traditional donation to ride the train, but they were denied by the loving words of a church member saying, "We have it covered for you tonight. Just enjoy the lights with your family."

Sally shared that through the church's service of hospitality they were able to have wonderful conversations with the parents about communion and what worship options they offered. Their curious guests asked all questions without a church member having to promote it. Children are invited to a Sunday School special event the following Sunday that included pictures with Santa and worship time. Many young families took them up on the invitation for the coming Sunday. FUMC's discipleship goals were to make people feel known, create a culture of connection, and build trust with those who have never stepped in their church.

Last year was their first year to sponsor the Christmas Train but because it met so many of the discipleship goals, the Outreach team -- along with Children's Ministry -- is currently busy planning the 2018 Christmas Train sponsorship. They have already reserved the date and refined what worked and what did not work. They found that the kids wanted to play on playground equipment last year, but it was too dark. This year, volunteers from FUMC will be lighting up the playground so that it is safe for children to play and for parents to mingle a little longer in the park.

Sally estimated that 30 percent of the Christmas Train participants were their church members and 70 percent were from the community. Fort Smith FUMC has found a way to reach those young families who may be off the rails when it comes to sharing their faith with their children. The church has gone out into the community with love and hospitality to offer their church resources as a way to give families opportunities to get their faith formation back on track.

A man with a beard and glasses is playing a keyboard in a band setting. He is wearing headphones and a black shirt. In the background, another man is playing a bass guitar. The setting appears to be a recording studio or a live performance space with a stone wall background.

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Ingathering 2018

This year's Ingathering was full of fun, faith, and community outreach, as United Methodists from all over Arkansas came together to bag 37,000 pounds of beans and 40,000 pounds of sweet potatoes. Bishop Gary Mueller led a devotional between the two shifts, and presented a special award to Brenda Norwood (right), who has served as an organizer and volunteer for Ingathering for many years. Check out the pictures from the day and consider how you can get involved with Ingathering for 2019!





Photos by Stephen Gideon

What is Advent?

And why do we celebrate it?

BY CALEB HENNINGTON

Digital Content Editor | [Follow me on Twitter @arumceditor](#)

By the time you read this article, Advent will be in its second week of observance. Starting on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, – for 2018, that’s Dec. 2 – Advent is a December celebration rooted in deep Christian traditions. Unlike the more widely-celebrated Christmas Eve and Christmas Day holidays, Advent is about far more than gift giving, hot cocoa and the night of Jesus Christ’s birth.

Advent – which comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming” or “visit” – is traditionally a time of remembrance and anticipation for the coming of Christ. It is also the beginning of the liturgical year for followers of the Christian faith, meaning that it is the beginning of six distinct periods of Christian observance throughout the year; beginning with Advent and ending each year with Pentecost Sunday.

According to UMC.org’s “What We Believe” article on Advent, during this time “We remember the longing of Jews for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation and a new beginning. Even as we look back and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a humble stable in Bethlehem, we also look forward anticipating the second coming of Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised by his first coming.” <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-advent>

For United Methodists, the Advent season is full of rich traditions, celebrated in church buildings all over the United States and abroad.

Judy White, a United Methodist member, remembers some of those traditions growing up in one United Methodist Church from her past.

“Advent season not only included the lighting of a new candle each Sunday but also a new feature of Christmas decor to the sanctuary,” White said. “One Sunday, the Christmas tree appeared; another week the wreaths in the altar area; another the poinsettia tree. The growing anticipation was palatable.”

Some of these traditions include the vibrant and elegant decorations used to adorn church sanctuaries.

The Advent Wreath is one such decoration that adds rich greenery and color to United Methodist sanctuaries. The wreath, which is comprised of an evergreen wreath and four candles, is much more than just decoration; it also holds deep symbolic meaning.

Thought to have originated in the time of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, the wreath – which is shaped into a perfect circle – is meant to symbolize the eternity of God. The four candles placed in the middle of the wreath are purple; this symbolizes both the royalty of Christ the King but also the four weeks that make up the Advent season. A larger white candle is usually placed in the middle and is known as the Christ candle.

The order in which the candles are lit – and what each candle represents – varies from church to church. Traditionally, the candles are lit each week of Advent, and the Christ candle is lit last – on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day – as a way to remind Christians that Jesus is the light of the world.

Another traditional Advent decoration found in many churches is the Chrismon Tree.

The word “Chrismon” is a contraction between the two words “Christ” and “monograms.” It is a Christmas tree that is decorated not with the traditional Christmas ornaments, but with ornaments that represent various Christian symbols found throughout history.

The Chrismon Tree was originated in the 1940s by a lady named Frances Spencer, a member of Ascension Lutheran Church in Danville, Virginia. She trademarked the Chrismon name in 1957 and began the Chrismon ministry around the same time.

Many of the symbols used on the Chrismon Tree, such as The Chi Rho – a christogram symbol formed from the first two letters of the Greek word for “Christ” – place their origins in the earliest days of Christianity, when Constantine the Great ruled the Roman Empire.

Advent is a time to reflect on the most crucial time in the history of our Christian faith; when God arrived in human form to live amongst his creation and create a way for all of us to escape the sin of the world into which we were born.

Remember the rich symbolism found within your church walls this season and celebrate the season of Advent with friends, family, and fellow believers in Christ.



Planting the **SEEDS** of success

How a simple community garden grew into more than anyone imagined

BY SAM PIERCE
Featured Contributor

Daniel Shuburte was homeless and a drug addict when he met Jeff Weaver with the Stepping Stone Sanctuary in Trumann, Arkansas.

“He helped me get off the streets and got me off drugs,” Shuburte said. “I stayed at the ministry for about eight months, and he helped me get the job at Aaron’s, where I am currently the account manager.”

Shuburte was one of the first men to come into the ministry to work off his community service hours. According to Weaver, he ended up becoming a resident.

“He has a huge success story,” Weaver said. “He came off the streets, and I begged the store to give him a chance and a job, and he has worked his way up to manager. He is our very first success story.”

Shuburte said, at first, it was a hard adjustment, coming off the drugs. However, he noted Weaver kept him busy, “instead of spending my days out, doing nothing.”

“It has meant a lot,” Shuburte said. “Without it, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I would still be on the streets. It means a lot to me.”

He thanked the ministry for not only his recovery but also his faith.

“Faith had a lot to do with it,” Shuburte said. “Being surrounded with those type of people, it really helped me. Knowing that there are people that want me to do better, it drove me to do better.

Stepping Stone Sanctuary, located at 912 W. Speedway, serves as a homeless shelter, food pantry and soup kitchen. It started as a community garden, but within a year, the shelter was built.

“It has grown into a massive thing,” Weaver said. “It has gotten unreal, to be truthful with you.”

About four years ago, the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church challenged its churches to become more involved with the community as well as help reduce the number of hungry children in the state.

“The first thing that was said, ‘Let’s start a community garden,’” Weaver, who is the lead pastor at Trumann First United Methodist Church, said. “Immediately, our people jumped up, and in like three days, we had the city involved.

“The city donated basically a whole city block, where they tore down a bunch of houses, and they donated that for us to use as a community garden.”

Weaver said within a week, they broke ground and started planting a garden. He said the plan was to start small, but “we started big.”

“The first year, we handed out like maybe 1,000 pounds of vegetables,” Weaver said. “The need was so big, we built a little produce stand, and we would bag up the vegetables.



Residents and volunteers of Stepping Stone Sanctuary pose for a photo outside of the shelter’s community garden.

|| Photo provided by Jeff Weaver

“People were lining up to get those bag of vegetables, and the line got as long as the whole block. We were running out of food.”

Mary Lewis Dassinger said Weaver’s ministry is more or less an off-shoot of the 200,000 Reasons Mission, in which she is the project coordinator.

“Jeff decided to plant a community garden to provide fresh produce to families in need and from that community garden, he has created an enormous ministry,” Dassinger said. “He also works to provide food for the children on the weekends and provide community meals.”

The 200,000 Reasons Mission is an initiative of the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church and began in 2014.

“When this initiative started, an estimated 200,000 kids faced food insecurity, and as of May, that number has been reduced to 163,700,” Dassinger said. “We love Jeff’s story, his heart and his compassion.

“He sees a need, and he meets it. He keeps working and has this energy that many people don’t have. He is really an inspiration.”

Bishop Gary Mueller with the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church said Weaver’s vision was to care for the hungry and the homeless people in Truman.

“Feeding hungry kids is an important part, but the whole ministry is trying to deal with a much bigger issue,” Mueller said. “It just happens when people are open to God’s love and are headed the same way, we can do important work.”

Dassinger said Mueller was responsible for the initiative after wanting a common mission and having members put their faith in

action to have a real impact in the state of Arkansas.

“Methodist churches in every county are doing something to help feed hungry children,” Dassigner said. “For some, it is just making a donation to the food bank or pantry, but for others, it is providing food for the weekend for students to take home in their backpacks. Some are offering community gardens, cooking skills, financial and budgeting skills.

“...Jeff is a bright star in all of that with the Stepping Stone Sanctuary, showing the impact that small churches can make in large ways.”

A year after opening the garden, Weaver became the chaplain for the Trumann Police Department, and while working with the officers, he got to see the need for the homeless.

“I actually found a tent city,” Weaver said. “We have a lot of abandoned homes in Trumann, and we had people sleeping in those abandon homes.

“We saw the need real quick to do something to help these people.”

Within two months after forming a committee with members of his congregation as well as people from other churches, Weaver found a building and opened a homeless shelter.

“We didn’t know how we were going to fund it; we were going on faith,” Weaver said. “We started working, and people started giving us donations. Columbia Forest donated all the plywood and lumber that we could possibly use to build new walls, and people gave us mattresses.”

This is the third year for the shelter and Weaver said while the numbers run up and down this time of year, the shelter can hold up to 60 people. Residents don’t have to pay rent, but they do have to attend church on Sundays and provide that day’s bulletin as proof.

“I think it is a great place,” Shuburte, who now serves on the ministry’s board, said. “If you take it seriously, and take Jeff seriously, he will help you.

“It helped me a lot. I had nothing. The Methodist church and some of the people in the community provided me with clothes, food, and work. They taught me work ethics and helped me get a job.

“I’m proud that I was able to be there. It changed my life.”

Weaver said so many people have jumped in to help them, including other churches in the area.

“I used to have to do all the pickups, but now we have church members going and picking up the food, and we have had a huge increase in our church attendance,” Weaver said.

Weaver is in his eighth year as pastor at Trumann First United Methodist Church. He now serves as the chaplain and a part-time officer for the Poinsett County Sheriff’s Office.

“I have never seen something grow and grow so fast,” Weaver said. “What we have acquired in three years has been mind-boggling — it grew too fast.

“We outgrew our finance; we have to hustle to get grants. Now we have recurring grants, and those are enough to pay our bills.”

Weaver said this was a ministry that was started by faith.

“We had no money when we started this,” Weaver said. “We just knew there was a need, so we prayed about it continuously.

“If this is your will, tell us what to do, and we will be your hands and your feet.”



(Top) The sign marking the location of the Stepping Stone Sanctuary community garden, a ministry of Trumann First UMC. (Bottom) Produce is collected outside of Stepping Stone Sanctuary. Donations are used to supply food to residents as well as the ministries soup kitchen. || Photo provided by Jeff Weaver





Men from the Breaking Bonds program pose for a group photo after working with Arkansas State University in Jonesboro for the day. || Photo provided by Casey Turner

Breaking free

Jonesboro ministry helps men conquer their vices

BY SAM PIERCE
Featured Contributor

According to pastor Casey Turner, there are two ways to look at the past mistakes in your life. “You can either look at it as a curse and allow it to keep you where you are, or you can look at it as a blessing and training to minister to those who have not yet hit rock bottom,” Turner said.

Turner is the director of Breaking Bonds Ministry in Jonesboro. Together, with his wife Tiffanie, Breaking Bonds help the community and Craighead County in breaking free from addictions such as drugs, alcohol, anger, and food.

“God put it into our hearts to start a ministry that not only taught the freedom that is in Christ but also to help others by teaching life skills through the word of God,” Turner said. “...We truly desire to teach people that there is a better way.”

Breaking Bonds Ministry is a dual treatment facility through their outreach ministry and their residential ministry, which began about a year and a half ago.

“My husband and I have the desire to those that are struggling and are at a point in their lives where they want to turn their lives

around, but just don’t have the resources for that,” Tiffanie Turner said. “We have both gone through an addiction, and we know what it is like to be at rock bottom and not have the tools you need or to not have the resources available to help you pull out of that.”

Casey Turner said he and his wife met in 2009, at the end of a long season of drug abuse.

“Tiffanie was in drug court, battling to keep her freedom, and I was still in my addiction,” Casey said. “We were together a year when we turned our lives over to Jesus Christ, and that’s when everything began to change.

“As we grew together in the Spirit, we felt called to be testimonies of what the Lord can do in your life when you surrender all to him.”

Today, the couple has two children, and Casey serves as a pastor at First United Methodist Church in Jonesboro and is a business developer for “one of the largest glass manufacturers in the United States.” He said he and his wife just bought their first home and he recently received his driver’s license back after 13 years.

“I can tell you this, what it took me 26 years to destroy, only took God five years to repair,” Casey said. “God is mighty for tearing down the strongholds of bondage that we carry in our



lives.”

The residential ministry for Breaking Bonds is a seven-month program, during which, men go through discipleship training. The men must come to a Tuesday night worship service and interview to be received into the ministry.

“They are learning how to be a part of the church and becoming productive members of society by learning life skills here,” Casey said.

Part of the program includes life skill training, such as parenting classes, financial classes, marriage classes, resume training, work skills training, and business classes. By the last month, Tiffanie and her husband work with the men on an exit plan.

“We have found, they can complete a program, but if they don’t have a positive atmosphere to go back to, they aren’t successful,” Tiffanie said. “So we try to put that in place before they ever leave.”

Tiffanie, who serves as the chief operating officer for Breaking Bonds, said the residential program is for men, 18 years or older, but the Turners said they are working toward having a women’s facility in the future.

“It is an opportunity to show the grace we have been given,” Tiffanie said. “And that’s what we really try to do. We try to be their accountability and teach them a new way to live.”

Tiffanie estimates in the almost two years since the program started there have been 80 to 100 participants. She said one of their first graduates is now in seminary in Kentucky.

“We are helping the poverty-stricken communities in Craighead County break through to a better way of life,” Casey said. “By helping them find jobs, develop positive life skills and give assistance where it is most needed.”

For Breaking Bonds Ministry, the outreach program is an opportunity to minister and “to be His hands and feet.”

“People who have been in church, but have drifted away for whatever reason, we have seen them get plugged back in,” Tiffanie said. “And those who didn’t ‘fit in,’ we have seen them come into a service and end up staying.”

Part of their outreach includes a free meal every Tuesday night before worship services at the church, a feed the hungry outreach about four times a year, where the ministry provides hot dogs, passes out Bibles and prays with people.

“We do jailhouse stocking for the inmates every year at Christmas,” Casey said. “The bags include socks, Bibles, information about the ministry and stamped envelopes so they can write their families.”

Tiffanie said they make almost 400 stockings every year.

Casey said they rely entirely on donations to “continue to offer such a refuge for men with addiction.”

“We truly need support from the community,” Casey said.

For more information, visit www.bbministriesinc.org.



The group gathers for a regular Bible study at the Breaking Bonds house. || Photo provided by Casey Turner



REFUGE

Refuge is a 2-weekend event for youth in grades 6th - 9th that is put on every year by the ACCYM. It is an opportunity for youth in the Arkansas Conference to experience a beautiful weekend in the outdoors while drawing closer in faith to Jesus Christ.



A Refuge attendee swings from a zipline during a recreational time at the weekend's event. || *Photo provided by Mike Meeks*



Rev. Jennie Williams, the featured speaker for Refuge this year, gives Communion during a night of worship. || *Photo provided by Mike Meeks*





(Top) Youth participate in a large-scale game of Paper Rock Scissors. (Bottom) The praise band leads youth in a night of worship. || Photo provided by Mike Meeks



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7:30 p.m.

First United
Methodist Church
201 NW 2nd Street
Bentonville, AR

**FREE AND OPEN
TO THE PUBLIC**

December 14
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Pulaski Heights
United Methodist Church
4823 Woodlawn Drive
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