

# The Arkansas United Methodist

LIVING OUR FAITH

February 2020 | Volume 168, Issue 2



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FEBRUARY 20, 2020

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- Investment strategies used by Wespath to grow your funds
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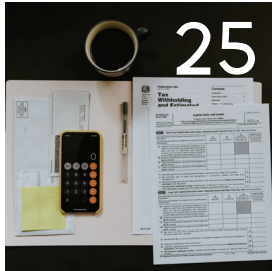
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Bart's Place Eye Clinic Provides Free Glasses to People in Hot Springs



# UNITED METHODISTS OF Arkansas

VOLUME 168, NO. 2 • FEBRUARY 7

Caleb Hennington, Digital Content Editor

Amy Ezell, Director of The Center for Communication

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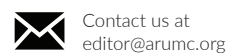
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### STORY IDEA?





# Finding Strength in Our Connectionalism

By Caleb Hennington  
Digital Content Editor, [@arumceditor](#)

**T**his month's stories have made me realize how important our denomination's connectionalism really is.

If you don't know what connectionalism is -- I'm not being snarky, I didn't know either until I started working in the conference office -- it is a significant piece of Methodist theology that ties every part of the United Methodist Church together.

Connectionalism manifests itself in some of our most common practices, including the appointment of pastors by bishops; our church, district, annual, jurisdictional and general conference meetings; the shared funding for our mission work across the globe; the shared ordination ceremony of our elders and deacons; the list goes on and on.

But on a much smaller scale, our connectionalism reveals itself through the work of the people serving our local churches.

The story of an eye clinic at Oaklawn UMC is one example of a pastor who has brought an idea from one church to another, carrying on the mission of providing health care services to people who cannot afford it on their own.

Another is the therapy dog ministry, which started at Quapaw Quarter UMC and was carried over to Pulaski Heights UMC thanks to passionate leaders who saw the program as a way to minister to their community through the power of paws and fur.

The sharing of ideas and ministries is a wonderful strength of our denomination, and more church leaders should be carrying these ideas over into the churches in which they are appointed.

There's no reason that a backpack ministry that worked at your last church in the big city can't be brought over to your new church in rural Arkansas as well.

Even though our denomination seems to be at an impasse, and plans have been made to divide us up, I believe that the ministries we have crafted and the people we have served through shared ideas can still carry on into whatever future lies before the United Methodist Church.

Our connectionalism is our strength. We should always remember that.







Photo by Hush Naidoo on Unsplash

# A Word of Truth in Love

By Gary E. Mueller  
*Bishop of the Arkansas Conference*

**D**ear brothers and sisters in Christ of the United Methodist persuasion in Arkansas, I have been with you, and tasked with leading you, for nearly eight years now. A great deal has taken place in our shared life together. God has been glorified through your work as individual disciples, congregations and the Arkansas Annual Conference. Healing has occurred, children have been fed, people have come to experience Jesus' love and lives have been transformed. And every step along the way, we have been blessed as we have caught glimpses of the Reign of God right here in our midst.

We are now at a critical juncture in our United Methodist Church because there is a proposal on the table that purports to solve our deep and abiding theological differences through separation. This brings much relief to many, both traditional and progressive. It also brings questions and uncertainty to others, both progressive and traditional. And, in the meantime, anxiety grows, tempers flare and polarization increases.

It is in the midst of this reality that I want to speak a word of truth in love.

You need to know that my heart breaks and, then, continues to break more. Not because of what may happen in the denomination, but because of what already has transpired and is even now continuing. Ugly words have been spoken. Hatred has been spewed. Relationships have been shattered. Put it all together and the conclusion is unavoidable: those of us who are the Body of Christ (Jesus' designation, not mine) have conducted ourselves in ways that should embarrass us at best, and shame us at worst.

Laities are unhappy with clergy. Clergy are unhappy with their leaders, especially the bishop. People feel disconnected from the Annual Conference. Almost everyone is demonizing someone. There is little joy, hope or experience of the Holy Spirit. There are few positive words, hardly any glory sightings about what God is doing and virtually zilch trust of others. We blame others, will do almost anything to avoid taking responsibility for changing our behavior, and act as if we are all victims of a broken system we rely on but despise. Almost daily I hear, "Clergy morale is low. Congregations feel disconnected. Trust is gone."

So here is my truth which I speak in love. Other people cannot change things. Not the bishop, your pastor, or even that person with whom you radically disagree about matters of human sexuality. Things will only change when you acknowledge that



you are trapped in a spiritual crisis and then you choose to address it spiritually.

But we are not inevitably stuck in a “Groundhog Day” of despair. Things can change because God is doing a new thing, Jesus’ resurrection is real and the Holy Spirit is at work in our midst.

## Start with Jesus

He is our Lord and Savior. He is the one who calls us to live the Jesus’ way. He is the one who commands us (and even that is not a strong enough word) to love God with everything we’ve got and our neighbor as ourselves. Fall passionately in love with him again and more deeply than you ever have before.

I’m weary. I’m worn out by our caving in to a culture of blame, demonization and polarization. I’m tired of our addiction to distrust. I’m exhausted by our desire to win rather than love. And I’m heartbroken by the way we have become a caricature of something Christian because of our lack of faith.

Yet I want you to know something that will never change. I love you. I respect you. I have hopes and dreams God has filled my heart about you. And I believe with every bit of grace given me by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, that God’s unconditional, saving and transforming love in him actually can transform us one disciple at a time.

It’s time. It’s time for me. It’s time for our church. And I hope you sense the prompting of the Holy Spirit telling you that it’s time for you as well. Let’s be who Jesus has created us to be!

**“Things will only change when you acknowledge that you are trapped in a spiritual crisis and then you choose to address it spiritually.”**

## Take a good hard honest look at yourself

How many negative words do you speak about your brothers and sisters in Christ? How do you add to the toxicity of your church or annual conference environment? How are you harming others through your thoughts, words and deeds? Honestly confess - to God and others - what you have done.

## Act differently

Look at others like you actually believe that Jesus died for them. Stop starting by always judging others before you do anything else. Practice, practice, practice giving others the benefit of the doubt. Say something positive. Repent by behaving in new ways.

## Do what Jesus says

Share his grace. Love, really love, others; especially those you struggle most to love. Start practicing the Beatitudes. Live humbly. Act generously with others. Lift people up.

In case you haven’t figured it out by now, I’ll be as clear as I can:

*In Christ’s Love, Spirit and Power,*

*Bishop Gary E. Mueller*





Photo by Biegun Wschodni on Unsplash

# Anything Made by Man Will Break

By Todd Burris  
*General Conference Lay Delegate*

“Anything made by man will break.”  
These were the wise words of Mr. Jemison. I can’t say that he was wrong, but at the time all I wanted to know was why the air conditioner wasn’t working. I wish he hadn’t been so prophetic when it came to the heat and air in our office. Mr. Jemison retired years ago but every time something stops working I still hear his voice reminding me, “Anything made by man will break.”

A few years ago, a large tree in front of Conway First UMC died. A chainsaw artist was brought in to carve a shepherd out of the base of the tree. The artist carved the shepherd holding a sheep with “I will never let go” engraved on the base. Many people worked hard to preserve the carving. Special oils and varnishes were used. Then one day, I drove up and saw the shepherd laying on its back, still clutching the sheep. No matter how many layers of varnish we put on the outside, we simply couldn’t stop the rot and deterioration happening on the inside.

I was asked to write this article about what the Bible means to me. To me, the Bible is a love story or at least a collection of love stories. In nearly every chapter, there is a story of prophets and disciples showing their love for God and each other. In fact, Jesus tells us this in Matthew 22 when asked, “what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He says to love the Lord your God and love your neighbor. “All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40 CEB)

Hymn #408, The Gift of Love, has long been my favorite hymn.

The lyrics are from 1 Corinthians 13. It’s a great reminder that, regardless of our personal achievements, unless our motivation is love, we are nothing more than a clanging gong or clashing cymbal. Even if I did everything right by the letter of the law, but I did not do so out of love for God and neighbor, then I am nothing.

I keep hearing over and over again that our denomination is broken. Mr. Jemison tried to warn me. I want to fix it. As a delegate to General Conference, I feel like I’ve been charged with fixing it. But all we seem to do is add more layers of varnish. Let’s be clear, God’s church is not broken. Our denominational structure and self-governance are what needs to be fixed and it won’t be fixed with the clanging gongs of resolutions or the clashing cymbals of petitions and amendments because our love story is not about this church. It’s about God and each other.

In reality, it’s not the denomination I’m trying to save - it’s me. Or rather, it’s about my love story. Do I love my church because of the many lives it impacts on a daily basis or do I love my church because it’s simply what I know? Do I love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul or do I go to church because that’s what is expected?

I strive to be better and I’m inspired by those around me. We all struggle with the inner decay of envy and greed. We long for power and relevance sometimes at the expense of others as these are the traits that are rewarded in this life. It is the love that we share in Christ Jesus that binds us together, so I find comfort in knowing that the Shepherd will never let go and I pray that my words are not just another noisy gong.



# A Moment with Methodists FAMILY HEALTH

## Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Blessed are those  
who mourn, for they  
will be comforted.  
– Matthew 5:4



By Kelli Reep  
*Methodist Family Health*

If you have breath in your lungs, you have the ability to grieve. While that may seem like a thickheaded statement, many think children don't or can't grieve like older kids or adults do.

However, children feel grief with the same degree of intensity they do happiness, anger, sadness. But, without knowing how to express what they are feeling, grief can overwhelm and isolate them, and the toll it can take on their developing hearts, minds and spirits can take years to heal.

More than 1 million children nationwide will lose a parent by age 15. Research shows that the death of a parent may be the most traumatic single event to affect the well-being and health of a developing child. Adult depression, schizophrenia, drug problems and alcohol use may be linked to childhood bereavement. Many more will lose siblings, other relatives, caregivers and close friends. These profound losses affect daily lives, academic and social functioning, and growth toward adulthood.

To address this sooner rather than later, there is a program in Arkansas specifically for helping children and their families who have experienced the loss of a loved one cope with their grief and learn to find joy again. The Kaleidoscope Grief Center, a

program of Methodist Family Health, promotes the process of healing through education, therapeutic and recreational services, grief support programs and traditional counseling.

One of Kaleidoscope's initiatives is Camp Healing Hearts, which is a FREE, overnight, family-oriented grief camp for children ages 5-18 and their families. Camp Healing Hearts provides a safe environment where children and their families can develop coping skills — both individually and within a community of others — and in 2020, Camp Healing Hearts will be at Camp Aldersgate in Little Rock from Friday, May 15 to Sunday, May 17.

Every year, Kaleidoscope Grief Center seeks adult volunteers to assist in making Camp Healing Hearts a joyful, restorative experience. Anyone with a heart for those who grieve, including Stephens ministers, youth group leaders and pastors, can create a space at Camp Healing Hearts for restoration and peace. Whether it's swimming, basketball, cookouts, crafts or prayer.

If you or someone in your church can help for as little as two hours at this free grief camp, please contact Tracee Paulson 501-906-4246 or [TPaulson@MethodistFamily.org](mailto:TPaulson@MethodistFamily.org). Or, visit the Camp Healing Hearts page under the News & Events tab on [MethodistFamily.org](http://MethodistFamily.org).

And, if you know a child and his or her family who could benefit by attending the free camp in May, please contact Dao Ward at 501-537-3991 or [DWard@MethodistFamily.org](mailto:DWard@MethodistFamily.org).

# Disaster Response Academy in Review



Janice Mann, Co-Coordinator for the Arkansas Conference Disaster Response ministry, speaks to attendees of the Disaster Response Academy at Trinity UMC in Little Rock. The four-day training event brought in representatives from the national UMCOR team to speak to people. || Photo by Caleb Hennington



Christy Smith, Disaster Response Consultant for UMCOR, opens up the Disaster Response Academy with an overview of UMCOR and why it's important to be prepared when disaster comes to your neighborhood. || Photo by Caleb Hennington



Attendees of the Disaster Response Academy at Trinity UMC received a t-shirt and other gifts for attending the event. || Photo by Caleb Hennington

To watch a video recap of the event, visit [bit.ly/disaster-response-video](http://bit.ly/disaster-response-video)

# Reaching Missional Communities Recap



A round table breakout session at the Reaching Missional Communities allowed participants to discuss ways they can reach their communities in new and different ways for Christ. || Photo by Michelle Morris



The Rev. Rachel Gilmore was the presenter of the Reaching Missional Communities event. Rev. Gilmore is the Director of Recruiting, Assessing & Training for Church Planting at Path 1. || Photo by Michelle Morris

To watch a video recap of the event, visit [bit.ly/missional-communities-video](http://bit.ly/missional-communities-video)



# The United Methodist Museum is now open!



Come visit the museum to see the renovations and new exhibits on display. The museum is located in the lower level of First United Methodist Church on Center Street. For more info contact the museum at 501-904-1280 or by email at [ummac.lr@gmail.com](mailto:ummac.lr@gmail.com).

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# The Holy Spirit Gets Busy at Beyond 2020

By Melinda Shunk  
*Children's Ministry Coordinator*

**W**hen I was a full-time Children's Minister, I often felt that my job looked like simply event planning, but in reality, I was creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of the people who took part in the event. As your ARUMC Conference Coordinator of Children's Ministry, my job title has changed, but I am still creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of children and those who minister to them.

The Beyond 2020 conference was just another one of those events that was planned by the Conference Council of Children's Ministers, the people came, and then the Holy Spirit got busy taking whatever we planned to a level of spiritual growth that we never expected. These moments are HOLY and keep all who are in ministry energized to continue to create more Holy moments for those they serve.

At the Beyond 2020 conference this year, we welcomed 75 attendees, with five of those attendees coming from Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Oklahoma! We had three Children's Ministers who had been in ministry for less than two months. We also had three Children's Ministers who had been in ministry for more than 25 years!

Our guest speaker was the Rev. Dr. Leanne Hadley who is an elder in the UMC from Louisville, Kentucky. She has written two books and has spent her life ministering to children. She taught us to let children minister to us as much as adults minister to children. She taught us how to create sacred circles as a space

**"...the Holy Spirit got busy taking whatever we planned to a level of spiritual growth that we never expected."**

to share the stories from the Bible with our early childhood ages and Kindergartners.

She taught us how to end our time with groups of children by sending them each out with a special blessing using something as simple as blessing balm and eye contact. Rev. Hadley urged us to use the Quadrilateral as a teaching model with our older elementary students to teach them how to wrestle with the scriptures while considering tradition and reason. She believes we can use it with any curriculum we choose to teach in our church.

During her last session, she talked about change, everything is always changing, some love the change some struggle with change, but we get to teach our children that God's love for them is steadfast and unchanging.

This year, we were able to offer breakout sessions as a new format to the Beyond Conference. Attendees were able to choose from three different sessions offered throughout the day that would specifically meet their needs and interest. We had Missy Walley from the Department of Education teach us about how to manage large groups of children. Sadie Wohlfahrt taught us how





Liz Emis, a member of the Bentonville FUMC Children's Ministry Team, shows off a craft made at Beyond 2020. || Photo provided by Melinda Shunk

to work with differently-abled children. Katie McLean and Kelli Swaim brought many models of prayer stations for participants to touch and learn from. We had a Q&A panel with Sadie Wohlfahrt, Pam Lentz, and Carissa Tarkington. Attendees of this breakout session could ask advice on everything from, "What to say to arguing volunteers?" to "How does a CM teach with their own children in the class?"

Karen Swales brought the fun with simple puppet-making techniques for children to create so they can retell the Bible stories they learn. Joan Walker, one of the Cokesbury curriculum writers, taught us what to expect and how to teach the newly released Celebrate Wonder curriculum that is replacing Deep Blue. Rev. Hadley was able to teach a breakout session about children and grief as well as teaching us how to use the Listening Stones as a tool to encourage prayerful conversations. I was able to get in on the last breakout session and teach how to use the Bible Timeline in classrooms as well as some Bible Bootcamp ideas.

Needless to say, we sent each attendee home with an armful of materials and a mind overflowing with ideas to enrich the ministry experience for all in their churches. Rev. Dr. Michelle Morris was there with the ARUMC Center for Communication team and recorded all of the sessions. You can visit CouRSe in a couple of weeks to revisit the event or show pastoral staff what they missed at Beyond when you go to [arumc.myabsorb.com](http://arumc.myabsorb.com). If you thought you didn't have time to spare to come to Beyond this year, please consider attending Beyond 2021. We have already started planning and we will have a seat saved for you and your team.



The Rev. Dr. Leanne Hadley (left) and Children's Ministry Coordinator Melinda Shunk (right). || Photo provided by Melinda Shunk



# Amboy UMC will be the host of a new community garden for veterans

## EPA grant allows for more gardens around North Little Rock

By Caleb Hennington  
Digital Content Editor, [@arumceditor](#)

**T**hanks to a sizable grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, North Little Rock will be the home of two new community gardens specifically developed for the betterment of veterans who live in the area.

The \$30,000 Environmental Justice grant, which was awarded to Arkansas Interfaith Power & Light in 2019, will be used to build a community garden at both the Arkansas State Veterans Home -- 2401 John Ashley Dr, North Little Rock, AR -- and Amboy United Methodist Church in North Little Rock.

“The grant will be used to help at-risk communities in North Little Rock, concentrating on veterans and their families, but also the community in general,” said Scharmell Roussel, the former executive director of Arkansas IPL. Before retiring from that position in 2019, Roussel was a key player in writing and securing the grant from the EPA.

Interfaith Power and Light is a national organization that looks at environmental issues from a faith-based, stewardship perspective. Arkansas’s affiliate organization has been around for about a decade, Roussel said.

Roussel said that Arkansas IPL’s mission aligns closely with the United Methodist Church’s environmental justice position found in the Social Principles.

“Environmental justice is all about helping low-income people eat lower on the food chain,” she said.

In other words, local, healthy and often plant-based diets.

Roussel said that the decision to choose Amboy United Methodist Church for one of the planned gardens came about in part because of the Rev. Candace Barron, pastor at Amboy, and her connection to the veteran community in Central Arkansas.

“Because this project involved both food and veterans, I jumped on it,” Barron said.

Rev. Barron is a veteran of the Army. She served eight years in the Army; five of those years were active duty and three were in the Army Reserve. Barron said she is passionate about veterans issues and often volunteers at the John L. McClellan Memorial

Veterans Hospital in Little Rock as well as the Arkansas State Veterans Home in North Little Rock.

Her background as a U.S. military veteran, as well as her role leading a church, made Amboy a natural fit for the garden.

“Amboy has the space and the willingness to experiment with ideas like this. [The congregation] wants to help in any way that benefits the community and helps feed people,” Barron said.

Although the garden is being developed with veterans in mind, both Roussel and Barron said that it is truly a community garden, and anyone looking for access to fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs can have access to it.

Barron and Roussel are hoping that the people benefiting from the garden’s produce will also be the ones working and tending to the garden. They are also hoping to bring the leftover produce from the gardens to local food pantries, in order to ensure that no part of the garden’s bounty is wasted.

“We are really hoping that this will be an educational piece as well. That this garden will lead to better education on healthy foods and will lead to people starting their own backyard gardens,” Roussel said.

Although the Amboy UMC community garden is still in development, the gardens at the Veterans Home are already in place. Out of the eight homes on the property, two homes have raised bed herb gardens. The grant will allow Arkansas IPL to build more waist-high, raised bed gardens, as well as plant vegetables in addition to the herbs.

Portions of the grant will also go toward providing gardening equipment for the kids at Amboy Elementary School, who recently had some of their gardening supplies stolen. Barron said the kids need gardening tools to work in their school garden, as well as T-shirts that they can wear when gardening to avoid getting their school clothes dirty.

Roussel and Barron hope to see a huge success at the Amboy community garden, which will allow them to add more community gardens in the area. One other place that Arkansas IPL is looking to develop is Gardner Memorial United Methodist Church, of which Rev. Barron is also the pastor.

“This is an awesome opportunity for the church and the community, and we need to take advantage of it,” Barron said.







# St. James Opens Doors to Children of All Needs

Special Needs Ministry will create more inclusive church service

By Sam Pierce

Featured Contributor, [@sjamespierce](https://twitter.com/sjamespierce)

**R**ebekah Harpool served as an intern for the children’s ministry at St. James UMC in Little Rock last summer.

“She had a heart for special needs and I saw it as a sign and a time for us to jump into launching the program,” said Sean Dunbar, the children’s ministry coordinator for St. James. “Rebekah was helpful in getting our environment ready and by August, she helped launch a fundraiser to help us fund this ministry.

“... We are just now really starting to see the traction of our work.”

The Gathering, a Special Needs Ministry mission, officially began on Jan. 26, with the first of its six services – meeting the last Sunday of each month.

“Our Special Needs Ministry’s mission is to provide a culture of belonging, dignity, and purpose to everyone who has cognitive, behavioral, or developmental challenges,” Dunbar said.

“We launched our first special needs service to make it more open and comfortable for those that may have sensory or developmental issues that would make worship hard,” he said. “We have created an environment with bean bags, blankets and sensory boxes, and we are really trying to be intentional to how we cater to this community and allow them to experience the full love of God as well.”

Unfortunately, Harpool was hit and killed by a car on Jan. 8 on the campus of the University of Central Arkansas in Conway. “She didn’t get to see the first service,” Dunbar said. “But she leaves a tremendous legacy in helping us get it off the ground.”

St. James UMC launched its special needs



|| Photo provided by Sean Dunbar

program this past summer on the back of its already established Buddy Program.

“Ideally, the Buddy Program is for any special needs child – whether it is a physical or mental disorder – who needs help participating in Sunday School or worship,” Dunbar said. “We want to provide somebody that can walk alongside that person and help them be comfortable and participate in an everyday church environment.”

Dunbar has been the children’s minister at St. James since 2013 and he said the church has always done the Buddy Program. But it wasn’t formal until this summer.

“Now we have a training program for those who want to participate,” he said. “They learn the best practices and awareness and we also have spots for parents or other caregivers.

“They can register to receive a buddy for whatever church event they need.”

Sometimes a buddy can be used to help calm the children who have trouble sitting still and want to leave the environment. “They can partner that child





with a teen or a young adult, and they would walk with that child around the church until they are comfortable to come back to the group,” Dunbar said.

Currently, the program doesn’t have any kids participating in the Buddy Program. He said he wants more people to come to church and be comfortable and know that there is support for them.

“We have used it primarily in the children’s department, but we would like to offer a buddy for anyone that needs one, whether it is a tween, a high school kid or even an older adult who needs someone to help them experience what the church has to offer,” Dunbar said.

Dunbar said, “There are a lot of blind spots in churches.”

“Things we say with our language, or our body language, has caused a lot of families to be burned at a real church,” Dunbar said. “We wanted to create a place where this underserved population is included.”

Sadie Wohlfahrt is the children’s minister at First United Methodist Church in Bentonville and the northwest district coordinator for the ARUMC Council on Children’s Ministries. She has been serving as a mentor-type to Dunbar during the launch of the special needs ministry.

Wohlfahrt said Dunbar attended one of her recent workshops and is “taking a good amount of what he learned and then conferencing with me about the specifics as he goes along.”

“I’m here to help support them on their journey,” said

**“We want to provide somebody that can walk alongside that person and help them be comfortable and participate in an everyday church environment.”**

Wohlfahrt, who taught special education for 10 years before becoming involved in a church. She has been the children’s minister at FUMC Bentonville for five years.

“One demographic that needs the support of the church are parents of special needs children,” Wohlfahrt said. “We have a lot of work to do, but I think Sean is off to a great start. I think it is really good that he is even aware of the program, and wants to tackle it, because most churches don’t.”

Dunbar said they have also added special needs components to the church’s outreach events including the fall carnival and a Sensory Santa at Christmas. He said the pastors at the church have been super supportive as well.

“During the six or seven years that I have been here, we have had a handful of children that have special needs,” Dunbar said. “It is a super underserved community. The rigors that it takes to participate as a special needs person, just getting out of the house can be difficult and deters participation.”

For more information, contact Dunbar at [childdir@stjameslr.org](mailto:childdir@stjameslr.org).

# Q&A w/ Von Unruh



**T**his winter quarter, the Adult Bible Studies curriculum, used in UM Sunday School classrooms across the U.S., was co-written by two people with Arkansas connections. Rev. Dr. Michelle J. Morris, writer of the student book, here interviews Rev. Dr. Von Unruh, writer of the teacher book, to share insight into this unique moment.

## **Share a little bit about yourself. Where were you born? Describe your family.**

I was born in Pittsburg, Kansas; lived briefly in Southwest City, Missouri; but grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. The moves were the result of career-related advances for my father, who taught high school science courses. Following my graduation from seminary, I moved to Nashville, Tennessee to pursue PhD. studies at Vanderbilt University.

I am the oldest of three siblings. I have been married twice. My first wife died in 2010. I remarried in 2013 and have three grown stepdaughters.

## **You are a retired UM Elder. Where have you served?**

All the appointments I received were in the Tennessee Conference, except for one in the Memphis Conference.

I was appointed both to smaller churches and to larger churches. My shortest appointment was for a single year. My longest appointment was for twelve and a half years. I was also appointed to the Publishing House for several years, where I was honored to be the editor of Adult Bible Studies curriculum.

My final appointment was as the historian and archivist for the Tennessee Conference.

## **How did you get called into ministry? How does writing fit into that call?**

God called me to be a preacher through what I can only describe as a vision toward the end of an evening worship service at a summer church camp in Colorado just prior to my senior year of high school. I immediately recast my life goals and college plans to accord with God's call. However, during my years in college, seminary, and doctoral studies, I decided that my calling was really to teach in the area of Bible or theology. But the more I worked in local churches—which I had done regularly since my early high school years—the more I felt that God wanted me in the local church rather than in the classroom. I still wonder sometimes about the life in academia that I left behind, but know from years of experience that folks in local churches are deeply interested in scripture and the teachings of the church. They long for and are deeply appreciative of clergy who, like themselves, take the Christian faith seriously and are intimate with its documents and beliefs.

## **What is your connection to Arkansas? Why did you retire here?**

The small farm I own in Northwest Arkansas was purchased by my maternal grandparents more than seventy-five years ago. My family is only the second family to own the property, which was a Native American hunting ground prior to the 1830s. Although developers in the area have bulldozed them all away, I can recall as a little guy looking with wonder at the buffalo wallows around the property. We still occasionally happen upon arrowheads and small, partially hewn stone tools that we can imagine might have been used by the native population. I'm proud of the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, there are large portions of the pasture land that have never been broken and still grow native grasses.

Since the farm is now surrounded by subdivisions that have little connection to or



understanding of the land on which they are built, we strive to be good stewards of our property and care for it and its animals—wild and domestic—with patience and respect. Sadly, the tornado that passed across the wooded portion of the property last October uprooted hundreds of majestic oaks and walnuts, many of which had been growing here since before the Civil War.

### **How did you come to start writing for the Adult Bible Studies curriculum?**

After I left the Publishing House in 2007, the present editor of Adult Bible Studies (Jan Turrentine) contacted me to ask whether I would have any interest in writing for the curriculum that I had previously edited. I was both humbled and thrilled that she reached out to me. I have written lessons for the New International Lesson Annual (ceased publication in 2017) once and five times for Adult Bible Studies Teacher; and have penned

several topical articles on scripture and the church year.

### **What do you enjoy about writing for the curriculum?**

Despite the diminishment of Sunday school in many churches and a plethora of other products that are made available to adult classes, Adult Bible Studies remains far and away the most popular adult curriculum produced by The United Methodist Church. The student book is still read by several hundred thousand readers every quarter and the teacher book is used by tens of thousands of teachers. That means the authors of Adult Bible Studies speak to more United Methodists every week than does anybody else in the church—by a wide margin! It is a humbling honor that also imposes a heavy responsibility on writers to be wise, faithful, and helpful in what they say and how they say it.

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## Veritas 2020 Explores “United” Theme

By Mike Meeks  
*Featured Contributor*

**V**eritas 2020 will be held on Feb. 28 through March 1 in Rogers, Arkansas at the John Q. Hammons Convention Center.

Veritas is a unique experience that is put on by the Arkansas Conference Council on Youth Ministry which gathers more than 1,400 youth and their leaders in one place at one time to create a single body.

This event started in the late ‘80s in the old North Arkansas Conference with the vision and dream that it would be an event where churches could come together and share in their common beliefs, their common understanding, and their common struggles for the young people that they were called to serve.

This year’s theme is called United. The task force came up with this name because, in lieu of what is going on within our denomination as a whole, they remain focused on still being united and coming together to share in our common beliefs, our common understandings, and our common struggles.

In 2003, our state was divided into two conferences: the North Arkansas Conference and the Little Rock Conference. There was talk in a proposal to unify the state to be a single conference but that idea was not shared by 100% of the state. At that point, there were two CCYM groups that were meeting at JYMO at Mount Sequoia that year and made a bold statement that, no matter what the conference decided to do, from that point on youth ministry in Arkansas would operate with one unified body; no more North and Little Rock. Just us.

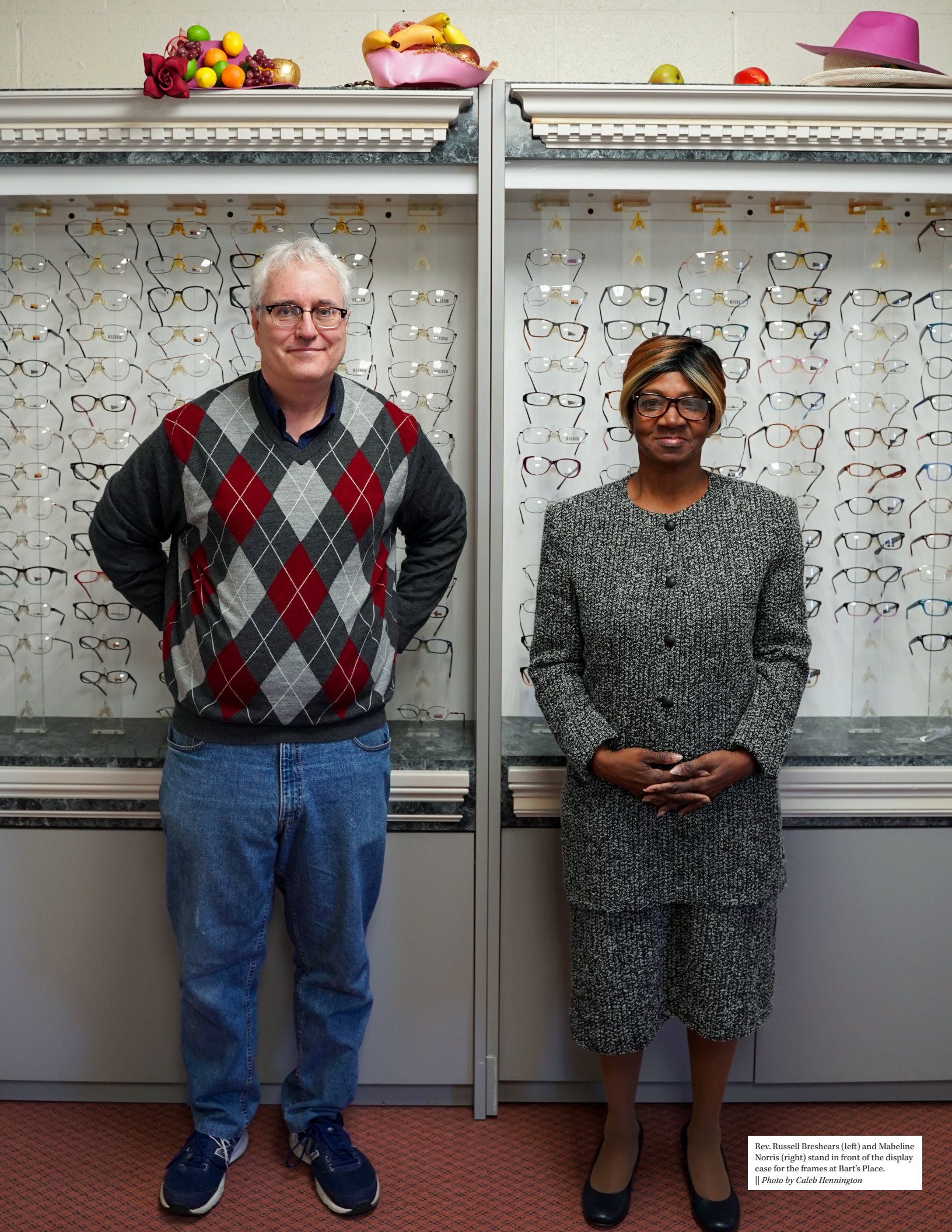


Veritas 2019, held at the John Q Hammons Center in Rogers, Arkansas. || Photo by ACCYM Media Task Force

Youth representatives from both conferences spoke at the annual conference that year and encouraged adults to follow suit. We were better together than we were divided. Being united meant that we could do more and reach more with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The vote passed and from that point on we became united as one conference here in the state of Arkansas.

After that, we saw tremendous growth and revival in the youth events each and every year with Veritas being the most effective. What started out as a handful of small churches with a dream to do big things was now an opportunity to come together and rejoice in the idea that no matter what the world throws at us, even if it’s in our own backyard, we will still be united.





Rev. Russell Breshears (left) and Mabeline Norris (right) stand in front of the display case for the frames at Bart's Place.  
|| Photo by Caleb Hennington



# A Clear Vision

## Bart's Place Eye Clinic Serves Hot Springs With Free Glasses

By Caleb Hennington  
Digital Content Editor, [@arumceditor](#)

In the Gospel of Mark, we witness one of the few times that a recipient of Jesus' miraculous healing power is named. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, receives the gift of sight from Christ while Jesus and his disciples are on their way through Jericho.

Oaklawn United Methodist Church realizes the necessity of a good pair of eyeglasses, and through their Bart's Place Eye Clinic, named after Bartimaeus from the Gospel of Mark, they are able to freely give the gift of sight to disadvantaged patrons in their community.

"We don't have the power to heal the blind as Jesus did but through optometry and ophthalmologists working with us, we can work to restore vision in a positive way," said the Rev. Russell Breshears, senior pastor at Oaklawn UMC in Hot Springs.

About 10 years ago, Breshears was serving a different appointment at Oak Forest UMC in Little Rock. The church was well-known in its community because of the free dental and medical clinics that operated out of its building during the week. But Breshears and church leadership were looking for ways to expand their free clinics into another area: eye care.

"At the time, one of the local eye clinics located in a Walmart was going out of business, and they were getting ready to sell off all of their old equipment. And I said, 'well hold on, we can use that equipment. We have a medical and dental clinic; we really need an eye clinic as well.'"

After some negotiations with Walmart, Breshears was able to acquire the equipment for Oak Forest and move the eye clinic into a room in the church's basement that, because of its absence of windows and natural light, was perfect for eye examinations.

Another miracle happened when Dr. Tim Norton, an optometrist who owns Contact Lenses Xpress of Little Rock and Hot Springs, offered his services for free after seeing a story about Oak Forest's clinics on TV.

"He asked me how much we were purchasing our frames for and I told him about \$15 - \$20 a pair. He said, 'Well, how would you like to pay zero dollars?' It's kind of hard to say no to zero," Breshears said.

The eye clinic at Oak Forest is still in operation, but Breshears was appointed to Oaklawn UMC in 2015, meaning he had to leave the clinic he had been instrumental in setting up.

Breshears, however, wasn't going to leave the idea of a free eye clinic behind in Little Rock. He wanted to bring the knowledge

he gained from the Oak Forest eye clinic to the Hot Springs community as well.

The church quickly latched on to the idea, and Bart's Place opened for business.

Although visitors to Bart's Place Eye Clinic don't receive an eye exam on-site as they did at Oak Forest, the clinic still measures patients' eyes and fits them with a brand new pair of frames for their glasses.

"When we started the eye clinic at Oaklawn, we partnered with the Hot Springs Cooperative Christian Ministries and Clinic. And they do our eye exams and then send people over to us to select their frames."

According to their website, the CCMC treats the sick who can't afford the cost of a doctor's appointment or a prescription, which includes individuals who have no health insurance - Medicaid or Medicare - and need help but have nowhere else to turn.

**"It's a partnership of the church, doctors, and the labs that create the eyeglasses. Everybody working together,"**

When patients come to Bart's, a volunteer measures the distance between the left and right pupils with a device. They then select a pair of frames from a wall of options, just like in a normal clinic. Breshears said that after selecting their frames, patients' prescriptions are sent to Dr. Norton, and in about 2 - 3 weeks, a new pair of glasses will be ready for pick up.

"It's a partnership of the church, doctors, and the labs that create the eyeglasses. Everybody working together," Breshears said.

Every step of the process -- from the examination to the new pair of glasses -- is free for everyone in the community, but the clinic is particularly focused on helping underprivileged and underserved members of Hot Springs.

"We don't have income criteria for the eye clinic, but we say if you cannot afford to get an examination and buy a pair of eyeglasses -- which can sometimes be as much as \$300 -- then the church and the community can help you with that," Breshears

said.

Breshears estimates that Bart's Place gives out somewhere between 50 - 60 eyeglasses per year.

Mabeline Norris, a resident of Hot Springs, is just one of the many people who has benefited from the free services at Bart's Place.

"The way my Medicaid worked, they would pay for my eye exam, but not my glasses. So when I heard about Bart's Place and them giving out glasses to folks, I said 'Oh praise God! Thank you Lord!' because I needed glasses bad and I couldn't afford them," Norris said.

Norris said she has been coming to Bart's Place for about five years and recently found out that she has glaucoma, which means her prescription can change every year. Bart's Place was able to find a pair of bifocals for her, which she said has greatly improved her vision.

"I was just using reading glasses before but now I can actually see!"

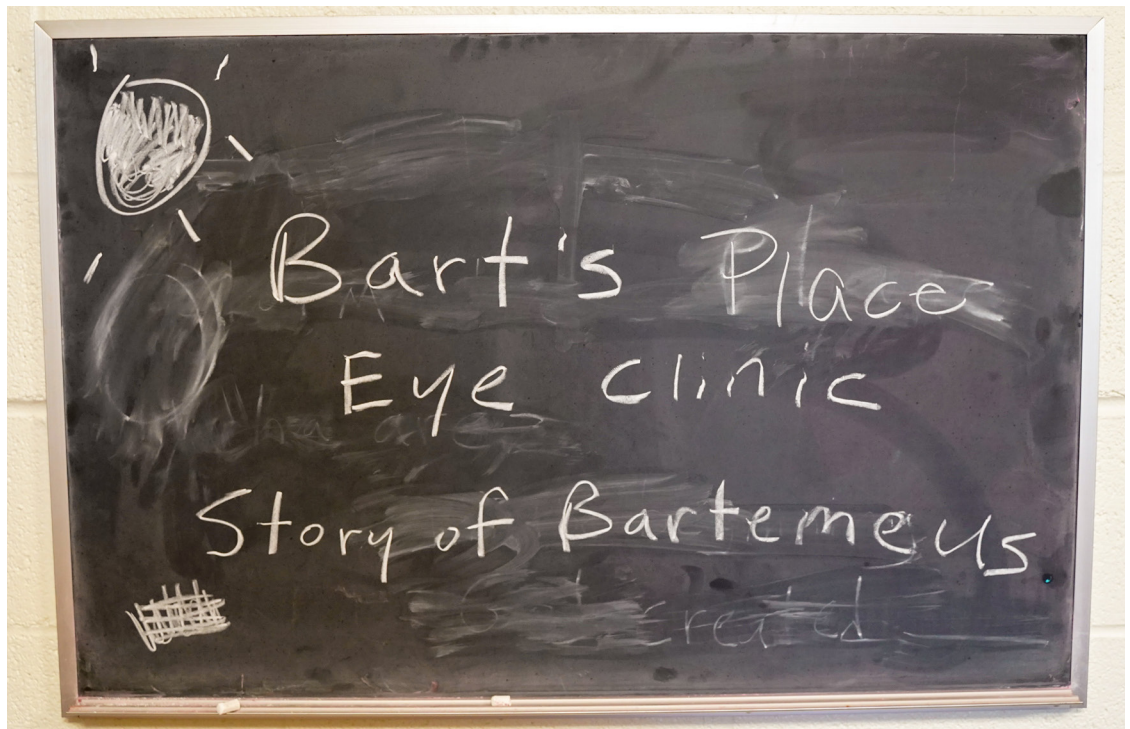
The clinic not only carries frames for adults, but they have a fun and colorful selection of children's frames as well.

"That's because Medicaid only covers one pair of glasses per year for kids, but little kids aren't as careful as adults are with their glasses, so the local elementary schools will sometimes bring the kids who need new glasses to our clinic.

"This is all possible because of the partnerships we've made in the community. Our church is a mid-size church but because we have great volunteers, the space for the eyeglasses, and doctors who offer their services for free, we can do this work," Breshears said.

For Norris, if not for Bart's Place, she wouldn't have the opportunities that she has now. Norris said that she considers herself homeless and spends her time volunteering at different churches in Hot Springs in order to make a little money and build her income back up.

Oaklawn gives her the opportunity to volunteer her time, as well as provide her with the glasses that she needs to see.



A device that the volunteers at Bart's Place use to measure the distance between the left and right pupils of a patient. These measurements are used to select the correct frame size for a new pair of glasses. || Photo by Caleb Hennington

"[Oaklawn UMC] has been a real blessing to me. They show love and compassion to everyone. Anytime I need them, they are right here for me," Norris said.

Breshears said this clinic has allowed their church to become more like the hands and feet of Christ.

"Not only can I tell someone that we can provide them food if they're hungry, but we can now also tend to some of their real medical needs. I believe Jesus ministered to our bodies, minds, and souls. And it's very gratifying when you see someone put on a new pair of glasses, maybe for the first time ever"

Bart's Place Eye Clinic is open by appointment and is located at Oaklawn United Methodist Church, 216 Higdon Ferry Rd, Hot Springs, AR 71913. 📍









Andrew Fleming ( front left) and Tony Elkins (back left) share a meal together with two others. Andrew and Anthony are Arkansas Methodists serving the world in different mission areas as Global Mission Fellows. || Photo provided by Andrew Fleming

## 2 Arkansans Serve the World as Global Mission Fellows

By Sam Pierce  
*Featured Contributor, @sjamespierce*

Shortly after graduating from college, Andrew Fleming was not sure what he wanted to pursue, so he thought becoming a part of the Global Mission Fellows gave him a sense of direction.

“It seemed like a good program,” Fleming said. “And I could go out and have another two years of pretty structured stuff to do and give me time to think of what I want to do in the future.

“That was the beginning of it. As it got closer, and I started talking to some of the other people involved, one of the big reasons, I decided to join, was for the opportunity to serve with people.”

According to the website [umcmmission.org](http://umcmmission.org), “the Global Mission Fellows program takes young adults ages 20 to 30 out of their home environments and places them in new contexts for mission experience and service ... They connect the church in mission across culture and geographical boundaries.”

“It really is a valuable opportunity,” Fleming said. “I’ve never really had a calling to ministry, but this is something that I have wondered for a while. I don’t think I want to be ordained, but this was a good way to explore that a little bit.

“My dad is a pastor, and I know I don’t want to do that because

I have seen all the hard things he has had to deal with it ... I still don’t have the best grasp on what I want to do, but by going through this program, it has given me a better understanding.”

As a Global Mission Fellow, Fleming works for Metropolitan Ministries, a nonprofit organization in Tampa, Florida that serves people who are homeless or at risk. Fleming said he works on the spiritual formation team and helps lead chapel services and bible studies.

“I think we have the space for 50 families on our main campus,” Fleming said. “Families generally live there from three months to a year or even longer. We also serve our community through an outreach program, in order to prevent others from becoming homeless; we provide assistance to them.

“I help organize and plan some of our chapel services and we do three short services a week. I help facilitate the choir that we started and things with our Bible study on campus.”

He said part of his role is focused on outreach by talking and praying with those looking for assistance.

“I think in a way it is a little empowering,” Fleming said. “To be able to do this work with these people and provide for them, while also serving alongside them.

“It forms a sense of community and it is cool to work with all of our clients. The whole process of moving here, and



understanding my place in all of it and some of my privilege and the injustice that I have been complacent in – that has been a humbling experience.”

Fleming’s dad, David, is the senior pastor at Grand Avenue United Methodist Church in Hot Springs.

“Our family is so excited that Andrew chose to pursue service as a Global Mission Fellow,” David said. “He has been a committed Christian since his youth and has always had a heart for social justice issues.

“Having completed his college degree, he has an opportunity with this mission to serve others, to continue to learn about his faith and the world, and to take a break before continuing his education or starting his career.”

Andrew graduated from Watson Chapel High School in 2014 and from Hendrix College in 2018. Tony Elkins, who is also serving in Florida as a Global Mission Fellow, was a year behind Fleming in high school. The pair sang in the choir together and participated in quiz bowl together in school.

“The lessons Andrew learned through his participation in the religious life programs at Hendrix College have provided well for his qualification as a Global Mission Fellow,” David Fleming said.

He said his son’s participation in the choir and in chapel services provided the ability to serve as a worship leader. Andrew also spent a year living in the Bonhoeffer House, an international Christian community.

“It taught him so much about his own discipleship and about sharing faith through precept and example in relationship to others,” David said.

Andrew said having Elkins as a part of the fellowship in the beginning was beneficial and made “it less scary” but he said, since Elkins and Andrew work in different departments, Andrew has already begun forming friendships and relationships outside the two of them.

“I really enjoy it,” Elkins said. “I get to help people who have gone through so much. These kids are so diligent and have so much hope, love and promise and we are able to facilitate that.

“I work with the teen department and I also do different classes with them and help watch over the kids. Right now, we are wrapping up the robotic season and I know what I am doing there, so I am able to guide them.”

He said they have about 20 to 25 kids and have about 10 that really like robotics. He said it is very interesting to give them that activity and for them “to take to it like a moth to the flame.”

“It was a little scary at first,” said Elkins, who has never been but a short drive away from his family. “But I was able to answer the call that God gave me. I found a new family and a good group to help me through it, and through being homesick and all that



Tony Elkins works on a robot as part of his mission field, serving teens in Florida. || Photo provided by Tony Elkins

stuff.”

“One of the biggest ways I have seen God is in the ways I feel supported,” Andrew said. “Especially from my family and from my new friends that I have made here.”

Elkins is a member of Good Faith Carr United Methodist Church in Pine Bluff and earned his mechanical degree from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 2018.

“These kids have been through so much, but yet, they continue to push on and do the best they can,” Elkins said. “Metropolitan is a transitional living facility for those on the verge of being homeless or were homeless.

“Some of the stories that I have heard from them – it is so amazing. It is definitely very humbling.”

“Years ago, I considered serving as a Global Mission Fellow; I had other friends from college who did as well,” David said.

“It is an excellent context for those who are exploring a call to ordination or another full-time Christian service to learn about ministry and about their spiritual gifts.

“It is also one of the best ways that young people of faith take what they have received from their home congregations and campus ministries and ‘pay it forward’ before getting on with the rest of their lives.”

To learn more about Anthony and Andrew’s journeys as Global Mission Fellows and to financially support them, visit <https://advance.umcmmission.org/p-2003-elkins-anthony-e.aspx> for Anthony and <https://advance.umcmmission.org/p-2002-fleming-andrew-d.aspx> for Andrew’s page. 📱

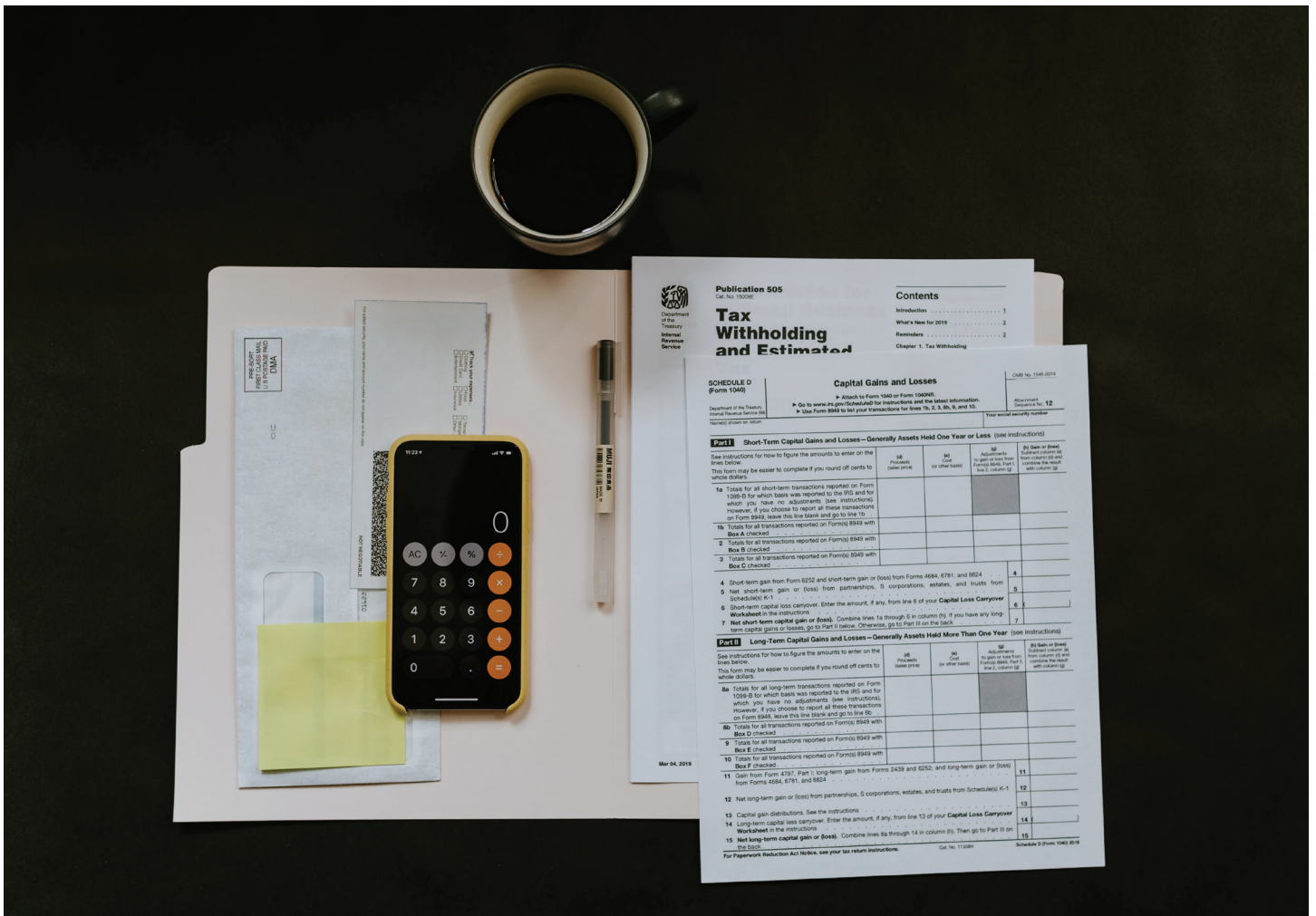


Photo by Kelly Sikkema on Unsplash

# More Than Numbers

## Part 2: The Center for Administrative Services

By Amy Ezell  
 Director of the Center for Communication

When you think of budgets, audits, computer crashes and taxes, do any happy or joyful thoughts come to mind? They definitely do not for me.

But have you stepped foot in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church Center for Administrative Services? Simply stated, this Center holds some of the most warm, genuine, loyal and smart folks you'll ever meet, and they make reporting, budgeting, benefits and technology troubleshooting a pleasure.

I asked each of the people in this Center to share their favorite part of their ministry, and every single one of them shared that they love helping people. No one said they love numbers, or preparing reports or anything like that. They all LOVE our United Methodist people and strive to do what it takes behind the scenes to make things easier for those on the "front lines."

The Center for Administrative Services has three primary

functions:

- Financial administration for the Conference which includes budget preparation, ensuring proper spending and annual audits
- Clergy and retiree benefits
- Property management, including leased office space and sale of closed churches

The roles of this Center revolve mostly around money, but the building and maintaining personal relationships can not be overlooked. One of the most important pieces to know about this Center is that every team member (except for one) has served the Arkansas Conference for at least eight years. Some have served for more than 25 years! As you read more about the valued individuals that make up this Center, you will recognize that their ministry focuses on trustworthy relationships.

Todd Burris, the director of the Center for Administrative Services, has been serving the Conference for 25 years this month. Seeing the collective work of churches and knowing that there is a United Methodist presence in communities across the state are things he lists as the best part of his ministry work.



Something that is not a primary function, but is extremely important, is the support Burris and his team do to help churches and clergy find a clear pathway on reporting taxes. This is something made very difficult by the fact that clergy, as dual-status employees, are considered self-employed by the Social Security Administration while the IRS considers them employees of the local church.

Todd is the supervisor of the Center for Administrative staff and considers most of their work done behind the scenes. “We ensure that the vision set forth by the Annual Conference in how to fund its mission priorities is carried out,” he stated.

Megan Rugg came to the Center in June 2018 and has been a true blessing to anyone she works with. She is the Assistant Director and her background as an auditor in public accounting allows her to not just manage payroll, reporting and reconciling accounts, but also serve as a mentor for local churches on tax reporting, accounting best practices and financial reviews.

Melissa Sanders holds several positions as the Financial Controller, Conference Statistician and Annual Conference Registrar. She has served the ARUMC for 28 years. Melissa has held various roles throughout her tenure, but currently processes and distributes tithes and donations to the prospective Conference ministries. She also manages event and Annual Conference registrations, prepares statistical reporting, and works with local churches every day on various projects.

Mona Williams has served as the Conference Benefits Officer at the Conference for almost 19 years. She oversees all employee benefits for both clergy and laity, active and retired. Ask any

local church or employee, Mona is a person that people know they can trust. She treats her position as a ministry of love to help churches provide financial peace to our clergy and laity so that they may stay focused on making and sending disciples for Jesus Christ. Mona has spearheaded employee benefit programs that allow for clergy and laity to be the best they can be, both mentally and physically.

Wendy Brunson-Daniels serves as the Assistant Conference Benefits Officer and has been with the ARUMC for almost 18 years. In this role, Wendy works directly with clergy and laity on pension benefits and also generates the monthly billing for tithes, apportionments and personal pension payments. When asked what the best part of her ministry area is, she replied, “I get to help take away stress and worry from clergy about retirement benefits so that they may spend more time making disciples who make disciples for Jesus Christ.”

Palmer Lee is the IT Manager and has served the Conference for eight years. Palmer manages all desktop support for the Conference and District offices. He catalogs all computer equipment for all staff, including those working remotely across the state. Palmer has supervised the ReCharge initiative and maintains all communication systems to make sure they are working properly. You will always find Palmer at Conference events, managing all technology for the production team. His favorite part of ministry is working directly with minority churches and equipping them with tech training and assistance.

The Center for Administrative Services is available to provide support to all Arkansas United Methodist churches and clergy. Please call 501-324-8000 for any inquiries. 📞

# LOOKING FOR A JOB?

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Churches are hiring!

To view all available jobs in the Arkansas Conference, visit [arumc.org/jobs](http://arumc.org/jobs)



