

'A Day of Holy Conversation'

*Sitting down together to discuss
human sexuality issues*



Connecting with the



Virginia Advocate

The official magazine of
the Virginia Conference of
The United Methodist Church

FROM THE EDITOR



Neill Caldwell
Editor

Look who's talking

I was just looking at the statistics for the videos of "A Day of Holy Conversation," which are posted on the conference website for anyone who missed the original event. The videos have been viewed more than 3,000 times by people in 44 states and 10 countries. Without anything to compare that to, it seems pretty impressive.

And as for the survey that was circulated after the event, of 228 responders, 206 found the day to be worthwhile (as opposed to nine who did not and 12 who weren't sure). To the question "what did you find helpful?," 134 said the presentations (with different viewpoints), 46 said the small group discussions and 27 said the open conversation in general. For the question "what was not helpful?," the top answer was the negative tone expressed during the afternoon panel presentation. Other answers mentioned small group interactions, IT challenges, lack of diversity on the panels and lack of Q&A time for the presenters.

Director of Connectional Ministries the Rev. Marc Brown also went back and looked at the Twitter feed during the event: there were 42 tweets from 23 different contributors, with the most mentioning comments from panelists Tom Berlin, Virginia Greer or Bruce Johnson.

My short answer to all this surveying is that it's always a good thing to sit down and talk to one another no matter the outcome. If I cannot sit down in love and talk to my sisters and brothers who have differing views than I do, then I am a clanging cymbal.

The outcome of "A Day of Holy Conversation," while not perfect, was pretty good ... as a first step. More talk is needed, and the plan is for that to happen at the district and local church levels, where things could get more ... emotional.

Perhaps there should even be more conference-level talking before we gather again in late June for 2015 Annual Conference. Or maybe we'll be all talked out by then, for this is an issue where there is not a lot of change of heart in the forecast. Sex is a topic that is buried deep in the human psyche, something that we hold strong opinions about.

Unless ... I must admit I did not know what a homosexual person was until my college years. Sure, I joined in making fun of the effeminate boy in my class, just like all the other macho wannabe guys. But I had no real idea what that was all about, really. (And maybe effeminate didn't equal being gay.) When I got my first job out of college in a town where I knew absolutely no one, I took someone's advice to get involved with community theatre. There I became friends with several openly gay people. In the 1980s the AIDS crisis had a direct impact on my family. Later my wife's very best friends, who happen to be gay, became mine too.

At some point I realized that all of us are alike. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) Bless our hearts. 🍷



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Rates for advertising and tributes are available upon request.

Local Church News

Items should be typed (preferably sent via e-mail) or printed legibly, no more than 100 words, and of conference-wide interest. Complete names of individuals, churches and districts should be included. Because of space limitations, the Local Church section prohibits news items related to church members' birthdays (of less than 100 years), wedding anniversaries, receptions for moving and/or retiring pastors, photos of traditional Christmas trees or Easter trees/crosses, and any item over two months old. Color photos are encouraged. Photos returned only if submitted with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Photos included on a space available basis. The editor reserves the right to edit all copy or refuse publication.

Letters

Letters to the Editor are printed on a space-available basis. Letters should be limited to 150 words for space reasons. The Advocate will not print letters addressing a topic beyond two months of the publication of that issue. The Advocate editor reserves the right to edit all letters.

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Cover: The morning panel talks about human sexuality at the Nov. 22 "A Day of Holy Conversation" at Woodlake UMC. Above: The praise band at Woodlake. Photos by Neill Caldwell

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What does it take to change God's mind?

To change God's mind it first took Moses pleading: "Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people... And the Lord changed His mind about the disaster that He planned to bring upon His people." Exodus 32:11-15.

Then it took Jesus, declaring: "Let anyone among you who is without sin, cast the first stone." John 8:7. God's law until then required the stoning of an adulteress.

Whereas Gentiles were not welcome either in the synagogue or early Christian worship, it took Paul to convince God's leadership that all should be welcome without having to be ritually cleansed according to Jewish law: "Now in Christ Jesus you who were once

far off have been brought near..." Eph. 2:13. "We are one in Christ!" That was the declaration changing God's mind.

God's mind has continued to be changed throughout history by the inspired, courageous effort of people like Martin Luther, John Wesley, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and United Methodism's own Frank Schaefer (now I've gone to meddling, I know). Of course familiar names like these are but the "faces" of movements, and it takes the movements to make lasting societal change.

In every case, well-established customs have to be challenged and laws – sometimes very sacred ones – either ignored or outright disobeyed in order for new understandings to emerge and be accepted.

On the other hand, maybe none of those ef-

forts changed God's mind. Just maybe it is actually God's leading through prophetic human action that has caused, and is causing, us humans to change! Now what do you think of that?

-The Rev. R. Carl Ennis is retired and lives in Manassas.

A Holy Conversation

Virginia is famous for its reenactments, and those attending the Holy Conversation had a front row seat; not back hundreds of years to the Civil War, but thousands to the Garden of Eden.

We witnessed the deceiver declaring, "Surely God did not say ...".

And the laity saw that the tree was pleasant to the eyes and upon tasting the fruit, found it good.

"Here pastor, you take a bite too." And he did.

-Scott Hamel is the Lay Leader at Redland UMC, Winchester District

The emergence of the 'Dones'

By Lovett Weems

A friend alerted me to a blog by Thom Schultz on "The Rise of the Dones." At first I thought there must be a misprint. Surely the title meant to refer to the rise of the "Nones," the increasingly large number of people, especially among those under 30, who choose as their religious affiliation "None."

But "Dones" was correct, so I set out to learn more about this new group. Dones are those who typically were at one time the most active and loyal of church members. Now they have left. They did not go to other churches. They stopped going to church completely. Sometimes these persons are referred to as the "dechurched."

Schultz points out the danger for churches. "The very people on whom a church relies for lay leadership, service and financial

support are going away. And the problem is compounded by the fact that younger people in the next generation, the Millennials, are not lining up to refill the emptying pews."

Drawing on research by sociologist Josh Packard, Schultz points to people fatigued with being talked at through countless sermons and Bible studies when they really want to be more engaged and to participate instead of a Sunday routine of "plop, pray and pay."

(Continued on pg. 14: "Dones")

COMMENTARY

'The Loaded Goat'

By Harold Bales

The date was Jan. 28, 1963. Most Americans alive at the time turned on their television sets to watch "The Andy Griffith Show." The title of the episode that night was "The Loaded Goat." It was the first airing of that particular episode.

Only God knows how many times that show has been rerun through the years. That has been true of all the episodes of that classic, abiding piece of American cinematic literature. England had her Shakespeare, western civilization had its King James version of the Bible, and Mount Airy, North Carolina, (upon which Mayberry is loosely based) had "The Andy Griffith Show." That show was one of the reasons God invented television.

Now, just to refresh your memory, the mayor of Mayberry was finaglin' to get an underpass built in town near his brother's service station. He denied it, but everyone knew the mayor wanted to help his brother's business. Well, there was a lot of dynamite blasting going on in this construction project. And, to keep this

story short, a Mayberry citizen had a big goat named Jimmy who had a powerful appetite and would eat most anything. One day Jimmy got loose and ate some sticks of dynamite. This, of course, created panic because of the fear that something could set off the goat and cause him to go "blooey."

Now, I won't retell the whole story, but you

famous fables but better. Aesop didn't have a deputy Barney Fife. But that's a different story.

One of the lessons from the loaded goat is that some people are like Jimmy the goat. They will swallow almost anything. And loaded with the wrong thing, they can go "blooey." It only takes a spark to set them off!

This happens in religion sometimes. Some folks will swallow almost anything if they hear it from a smooth-talking person who claims to be speaking for God.

This is why it is important for us to develop the ability to discern the difference between hogwash and holy water.


The loaded goat phenomenon happens in society all the time. Some folks get filled up with stereotypes about others. It is a kind of social dynamite. Think of the stuff some people carry

in their minds about others who are not like themselves: "They are not my color." "They speak with a strange accent." "They are lazy." "They have a different religion than mine." "They are not patriotic." "They enjoy weird music." "They dress in funny clothes." "They are not from around here." "They want my money." "They want to harm me." "They

are troublemakers."

When we have minds filled with social dynamite we lose the heart capacity for compassion, hospitality, civilization. Almost any little spark can light a fuse and... "blooey!"

Folks, what we've got to do is get a better balance between our IQ – Intelligence Quotient – and our BQ – Blooey Quotient! We are a smart enough bunch, but we've got enough loaded goats among us to make us dangerous!

The story about Jimmy, the loaded goat, turned out OK in the end. I've watched it a dozen times and it always has a happy ending. Things in Mayberry always do. Still, we had better not take anything for granted, lest we allow everything to eventually go blooey! 

-The Rev. Dr. Harold Bales is a retired United Methodist pastor in Kannapolis, N.C. Follow his blog at <http://thesouthernfriedpreacher.com>.



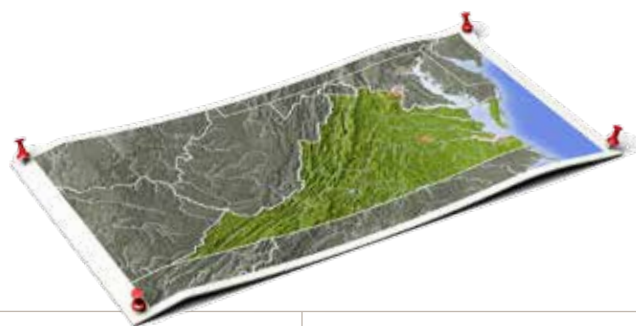
Andy and Barney with Jimmy the dangerous goat.

can watch it on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8COzK95rMBw>). It has been voted one of the 10 favorite episodes of the entire series.

There are always simple messages in the stories from Mayberry. Little lessons that even sophisticated folk can understand. They are sort of like Aesop's

Letters to the Editor are printed on a space-available basis. Letters may be e-mailed to NeillCaldwell@vaumc.org by the first of the month.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Ministers' Convocation to focus on future of Christianity in America



Dr. David Evans



Dr. Asa J. Lee



Rev. D.J. del Rosario

Ministers' Convocation, the annual continuing education event for clergy and church professionals in the Virginia Conference, will be held Jan. 13-15 at the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone.

Two years ago, Phyllis Tickle was the keynote speaker at the Ministers' Convocation as organizers explored the state of Christianity in America. The 2015 Ministers' Convocation looks forward, with the theme "The Future of Christianity in America: Fresh Voices."

Keynote speakers will be Dr. David Evans, assistant professor of Missions, Intercultural and Interfaith Studies at Eastern Mennonite University, and Dr. Asa J. Lee, associate dean for Community Life at Wesley Theological Seminary. Evans has a Ph.D. from Drew University, Masters degrees from Drew (in Historical Studies) and Wesley Theological Seminary (History of Christianity), and Bachelor of Arts degree from Spring Arbor College. Lee earned his Doctor of Ministry degree in Educational Leadership at Virginia Theological Seminary and his Master of Divinity degree from Wesley Theological Seminary. He completed his Bachelor

of Arts degree in Music Education from Hampton University. He also serves as pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church of Arlington.

The preacher for convocation will be the Rev. D. J. del Rosario, senior pastor of Bothell UMC in Washington state. He graduated from the University of Washington and Princeton Theological Seminary for a Master of Divinity. He was ordained an elder in 2009 and is a member of the Pacific Northwest Conference. Prior to this appointment he served as the director of Young Adult Ministries, Discernment and Enlistment at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

Del Rosario is also the nephew of Dr. Romeo del Rosario, director of the Methodist Mission in Cambodia who has spoken at Virginia Annual Conference and traveled throughout the Virginia Conference as one of our Initiatives of Hope partners.

Bishop Young Jin Cho will preach at the opening Communion service.

The Rev. Joanna Dietz and the Rev. Lyndsie Blakely will serve as worship coordinators. Dietz, an ordained deacon, is serving as minister of Music at St. George's UMC, Alexandria District. Blakely, a provisional deacon, is serving as minister of Discipleship at Farmville UMC, Farmville District. The Rev. Leigh Ann Taylor will provide music leadership. Taylor, an ordained deacon, is minister

of Music at Blacksburg UMC, Roanoke District.

Registration is required prior to the event and will close on Jan. 5. You can register online at www.vaumc.org/MinistersConvocation.

For more information, contact the conference Center for Clergy Excellence at **(804) 521-1127 or 1-800-768-6040, ext. 127**. Or visit the conference website, www.vaumc.org, and the dates under "Events." 📌

Training offered for reporting child abuse and neglect

In conjunction with 2015 Ministers Convocation, training will be offered to equip clergy and lay professionals with skills to understand Virginia Conference policy regarding the reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect.

This training is required for all new clergy.

The training will be offered Tuesday, Jan. 13, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., at the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone. The cost is \$10, which includes lunch.

Register online or download the brochure at www.vaumc.org/Clergy-Excellence.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

"Free the Girls": How recycled bras support human trafficking victims

We often hear about human trafficking with statistics that state that there are more enslaved human beings in the world today than at any other time in the history of the world. It seems like such a huge problem, and yet, we wonder...is there anything that I can do to help?

One woman found a way. Lisa Beggs, owner of The Uniform Store in Winchester, was scrolling the Internet one day when something caught her eye. It was a CNN story about "Free the Girls," an organization that collects new or gently-used bras and sends them to Mozambique, where they are given to human-trafficked victims to sell. By selling these bras, these women who are often ostracized by their families and communities are able to make a living wage and sup-

port themselves and their children.

In a program hosted by St. John's United Methodist Women of Springfield, Beggs spoke about how hearing about this program caused her to think about these women and wondered how she might be able to do something for them by something as simple as collecting unwanted bras. Beggs said "every woman has a graveyard of underwear at the back of their drawer. What if these neglected items could be put to use?"

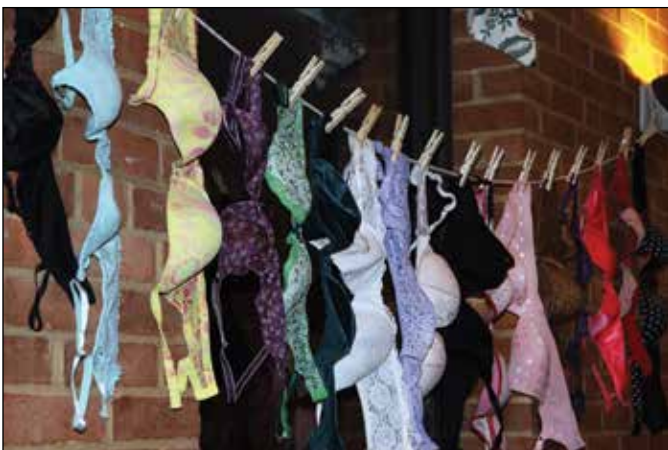
Beggs approached the pastor of Grace Community Church in Winchester with apprehension about her idea. Her pastor approved her suggestion and within a couple of weeks Lisa and her husband had a large decorated basket and flyers at the front doors of her church. At first, she said she got odd looks

from people who came in. However, when she took people by the arm and told them about the program, the idea caught fire among the congregation and community. Beggs hoped to collect 200 bras to send to the Free the Girls dispatch center in Ohio. In seven weeks, she had received 1,200 bras!

Today, there is a collection basket in her store. People stop by, not to buy scrubs or uniforms, but to drop off bras. "Women understand the needs of other women," Beggs said. "When God nudges you out of the box, he will help you in powerful ways that you cannot begin to imagine. You only need to relinquish your inhibitions, and you will see how God will work in your life."

After the evening's program, Beggs went home to Winchester loaded up with more than 900 bras donated by United Methodist Women. St. John's UMC has since decided to become a collection center in Northern Virginia. Bras – new, gently-used or even worn out – can be dropped off at St. John's UMC, 5312 Backlick Road, Springfield. For more information, call (703) 256-6655. 📞

-Brenda Romenius, a deaconess, is director of Christian Education at St. John's UMC in Springfield



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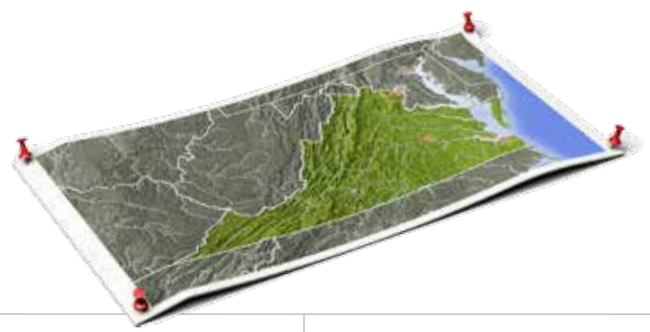
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The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Fifty years later, St. Mark's is a great resurrection story

By Rob Lough

DALEVILLE - Surreal is perhaps the best word to describe it. There he stood, in his black robe and green stole, adorned with its episcopal insignia. The bishop was preaching at our church. Well, actually, he was preaching in our brand new, \$2,000,000 Family Life Center.

Beautiful beams span the ceiling, the bathroom lights come on without flipping a switch, and the sound board both controls the audio and appears as if it can launch a thermo-nuclear device. The kitchen is gorgeous, and the smell... Do you know what new cars smell like? They have a distinctive scent. The same is true of a new building. It simply smells new. I am a preacher. I make my living

by purveying words, yet the best way I can describe the smell is simply to say it smelled "new."

Here we were in the midst of this novel environment, and Bishop Young Jin Cho himself was preaching to us. This event was the culmination of a weekend of festivities including a 24-hour reading of the New Testament, the packing of 25,750 meals for Stop Hunger Now and, finally, the service of consecration.

The bishop was flanked by two district superintendents, six former pastors and 300 members and friends of this church called St. Mark's at the northern tip of the Roanoke District. The excitement in the air was an amalgam of unity, thankfulness and of genuine expectation for what God was going to do next.

But I am getting ahead of myself. You see, this event is the end of the story, or, most appropriately, the end of the beginning of

the story. To share this tale well requires some travel... back in time.

The Botetourt Circuit of the Methodist Episcopal Church, named for Botetourt County, dates back to 1789. The earliest mention found of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Amsterdam is from a series of camp meetings held from 1801-1803. By the 1870s, three congregations – Amsterdam, Cloverdale and Asbury Methodist Episcopal churches – were placed together to form the Amsterdam charge, later renamed the Cloverdale charge.

Over the course of the next 95 years, these churches shared the same pastor and participated in joint mission. But they were distinct congregations with distinct identities. Like all churches, they each enjoyed times of growth and recession. But things began to change in the late 1950s and early 1960s; these three congregations – able to trace their roots back to the time of John Wesley, churches that hosted Francis Asbury himself – were in critical condition. Each congregation struggled with shrinking attendance, financial worries and guilt. The guilt came from the belief that the members of each congregation had witnessed and unwittingly participated in the slow, gradual decay of their congregations.

This is a point that bears further exploration. The members of these three congregations had

Bishop Cho leads the processional during St. Mark's consecration service. Also pictured, from right, Jonathan Harris, Katie Farris, the Rev. Kathleen Overby Webster (hidden behind Bishop Cho), the Rev. Dave Rochford, Brenda Brooks and Harvey Woodmansee.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

strong histories. These were the churches attended by their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and, in some cases, great-great grandparents, and this legacy, passed on to them over the generations, was dying. The writing was on the wall for these little congregations in the Appalachian hills.

Then, something truly amazing happened.

The Holy Spirit began to work within these congregations to grant them a new vision for a future. It was a different future than the one they had always imagined. These three churches initiated discussions around the topic of merging. It became apparent rather quickly that no two churches were willing to simply fold and become part of the third, so the leadership wrestled with the prospect of closing all three and coming together as a new church. In the end, that is precisely what happened.

Fifty years after this took place, I continue to be amazed by it. These were women and men who were willing to prioritize an unknown future over a well-loved past. They chose to become uncomfortable, to forge new relationships rather than cling to old ones; they chose to celebrate faithfulness over ease. And what follows bears witness to the fact that their courage became infused into the DNA of St. Mark's.

In 1965, the newly formed St. Mark's UMC began meeting at the largest of the facilities. Assisted by the conference and district, the congregation got to work in the first four years and built a new space for worship. On Easter Sunday, 1969, St. Mark's worshipped for the first time in its new facility.

It would be wonderful to tell you the next few years were paradise.

But it would also be a lie. Members struggled, at times, to make their mortgage payment. They struggled, at times, to act as one church rather than three. In fact, it took 30 years for the church to take its next significant step. In 1999, St. Mark's opened a new sanctuary. Fifteen years later, here we are in the newly-built Family Life Center.

Certainly, the measure of a faithful church is not its facility. However, as St. Mark's continued to take steps into uncharted waters, the congregation began to grow. This year, St. Mark's will average more than 250 in worship, more than five times the combined average attendance the three congregations enjoyed in 1965.

St. Mark's did not simply happen. It was born, through the power of the Holy Spirit and by virtue and vision of women and men who chose the uncertain future over the comfortable past. Today, Alcoholics Anonymous

meets at St. Mark's four times each week. We offer Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, Grief Share and Divorce Care. We have a staff of nine full- and part-time servants who facilitate ministries for all age groups in the church and help us reach out to our community. We hold Bible studies at local retirement communities, support two missionaries and work at the Roanoke Rescue Mission and local food pantry. We feed hungry children in our town and around the world. In short, St. Mark's is the church in and to our community and world.

But it never would have happened if real people had failed to make faithful decisions. This never would have happened without leaders who were emphatic that this congregation was more than a social club or weekly family reunion. The ancestors of St. Mark's wanted to do more than exist. They wanted to live.

What's next?


I began sharing our story by recounting how surreal it is to have the bishop visit your church and preach from your pulpit. But what I left out was what he said, or more specifically, what question he asked. Having heard the tale of St. Mark's, of God's remarkable faithfulness and of the courage of those who took that difficult step 50 years ago, Bishop Cho stood up and asked simply, "What's

next?"

We don't know the answer to that question... yet. But we know this: we know that those who went before us modeled a faith that made Christ more important than comfort, the future more important than the past. We know that the resurrection is real, not because we have read about it, but because St. Mark's lives it every day.

In truth, this is not the story of three churches that came together. It is the tale of a remnant who chose death, who chose the cross in the hopes that God would be faithful and a new life would come.

One final note: at the end of our celebration weekend, as the service of consecration gave way to a fellowship meal, one of our young people noted that God had given us a special gift on this Holy September evening: a rainbow in the sky over the church. Scripture tells us the rainbow is a symbol of God's promise of new beginnings. That is the story of St. Mark's. Resurrection has come to these hills, and our jubilation about tomorrow could not be greater. So we give thanks to God for those who came before us, for those who modeled life and death, and in line with the spirit they demonstrated in this place, we give thanks to God for what tomorrow will hold.

What's next, indeed! 

-The Rev. Rob Lough is the pastor at St. Mark's UMC.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Community of Faith UMC, partners feed those in need

More than 16 years ago, the Rev. Dr. Rob Vaughn began his ministry at Community of Faith (COF) United Methodist Church near Herndon. During his first year he felt the congregation needed a program or service project in which they could unite, which would be of benefit to the community and for which the church might become known.

Following prayerful requests for guidance and discernment, Rev. Vaughn received a call from Linda Wimpey, founder of FACETS, founded in 1988 to respond to the diverse needs of people impacted by poverty in Fairfax County. Wimpey was in search of

a church willing to host a food ministry for those in need in western Fairfax County. Vaughn's immediate response was "Yes!" He later realized the church had no experience and limited facilities but knew this was what the congregation and community needed.

Celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, COF has partnered with FACETS and Western Fairfax Christian Ministry to offer a food distribution program for the needy of Fairfax County and surrounding jurisdictions. The clients are persons who need food – what they receive means there is money to pay for rent or utilities or gas to get to one of multiple jobs. As one client said, "The food I received each week saved my life. I was able to focus on getting my life together, not worrying about

food." Some families are in need because they have recently been homeless. Some have been victims of domestic violence, and some have experienced a health crisis without insurance. A few are new to the U.S.; many are single parents. The vast majority are employed at one or multiple jobs.

What began as a small stream of 10 to 15 families coming weekly to get canned goods and meats donated by local vendors and distributed initially by a few volunteers has grown to more than 100 families shopping weekly. They receive produce (when available), breads and pastries, canned goods, frozen vegetables, dairy products, and selections of frozen chicken, pork and beef. In addition, child care is offered for clients while they shop.

The COF Food Pantry is now an operation receiving food most days of the week and distributing upwards of a million dollars in donated food yearly. COF has become the benefactor of "Scouting for Food," one of the largest food collections in the Washington, D.C., metro area. "Food collected will stay in the community and help neighbors in need like patrons of the Food Pantry of Community of Faith in Franklin Farm," said Rory Maynard, Scout liaison for the church.

"I've estimated nearly 15,000 food items were donated, filling more than 400 boxes for the food

Members at Community of Faith UMC sort food from local providers such as Giant, Food Lion, MOM's Organic Market, Trader Joe's, Bob Evans, Chipotle, KFC, Famous Dave's, Starbucks and others. Next page, recipients wait in the sanctuary to shop for food.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



ministry,” said Vaughn, an Eagle Scout himself.

From the beginning, Giant in Franklin Farm provided food for the ministry. Recently, Giant donated a truckload of food and other items to the church. A portion of the food is being stored in a newly constructed storage building which the COF congregation, local Scouting groups and others raised funds to build. In addition to food storage, Scout organizations will store equipment and supplies there.

“Although Fairfax County is considered among the most prosperous in the nation, there are still many who will go

hungry without the food we distribute each week,” Vaughn said. According to Vaughn, a donation like Giant’s and those received from other local partners like the Scouts are vital to the ability of the church to feed recently more than 100 families per week. In addition, during Thanksgiving week last year, more than 130 families were served. It is expected that number will grow to 150 or more.

“The large stock of non-perishable food donated by Giant,” Vaughn added, “goes a long way to meeting food requirements for Thanksgiving and Christmas and well into next year.”

Vaughn says he is thankful his congregation has been joined by another faith community in the area. The Franklin Farm neighborhood Epiphany Episcopal Church congregation is helping through financial support as well as providing volunteers to set up the Food Pantry, to distribute food to the clients and in other ways serve those in need each week. Scott Meyer, treasurer and a member of the church’s Vestry, noted that, like COF years earlier, Epiphany had sought the opportunity to bond as a congregation and help others; the partnership with COF filled that need.

Rev. Hillary West, priest-in-charge at Epiphany Episcopal Church, often works at the Food Pantry offering words of support to clients.

She says they are thankful through the generosity of the community and others the Food Pantry is available for all those who need it. According to Rev. West, a guest at the pantry told her she thanks God for the food pantry at Community of Faith.

Nearby Floris UMC receives items from the COF food ministry to supplement its monthly food distribution.

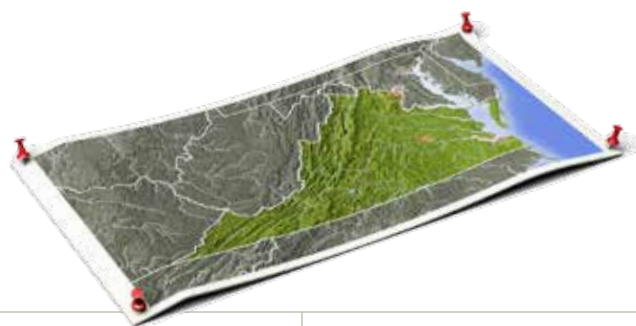
In addition to Giant, Community of Faith receives food donations from local providers including Food Lion, MOM’s Organic Market, Trader Joe’s, Bob Evans, Starbucks, KFC, Chipotle and Famous Dave’s.

Community of Faith UMC is located at 13224 Franklin Farm Road at the intersection with Fairfax County Parkway.

For more information, call (703) 620-1977 or e-mail Vaughn at drrobvaughn@cox.net. 📧



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



What happens in Tipp City shouldn't stay in Tipp City

By Bill Pike

Earlier this year nine staff members from Trinity UMC in Richmond set out on a road trip to Tipp City, Ohio. What would prompt a church staff to squeeze themselves into a church van for a 10-hour drive? A two-day missional conference at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church called “Change The World: Lead Strong.”

Founded by a Methodist circuit rider in 1863, Ginghamburg has experienced a number of transformations, the most significant beginning in 1979 when a congregation of 45 suddenly grew to 300. This growth continued as they outgrew facilities, relocated to Tipp City, built new facilities,

developed diverse programs and established satellite campuses. A jump from 45 to 300 was significant, but today Ginghamburg Sunday services welcome 3,500 people each week.

Since 1979, this mega-church has been led by the Rev. Mike Slaughter, whose vision led to the development of a spectacular campus in a former cornfield. I'm sure their road to success has some interesting stories, but apparently they have found ways to consistently meet the needs of their communities, so Slaughter and his staff must have done some pretty good thinking in that field.

Except for a detour in West Virginia that put us on a twisting two-lane state road as it paralleled the Kanawha River, we made it safely. Each day of the conference was structured with opening music, a keynote

speaker, a break-out session, lunch, a second keynote speaker and another break-out session. Break-outs included eight different topics including question and answer sessions with keynote speakers that included Adam Hamilton, Diana Butler Bass, Rachel Held Evans and Slaughter. I was only familiar with Rev. Hamilton, the leader of the largest United Methodist Church in the United States, in Leawood, Kansas.

I chose topics that were led by Ginghamburg staff members, as I wanted to learn more about the strategies that were working for the church. I attended Slaughter's presentation on “Strategic Planning and Leadership,” a combination of practical strategies developed through his experiences in the growth of Ginghamburg church.

When our staff gathered for lunch and dinner, our own senior pastor, the Rev. Larry Lenow, wove into our conversations questions about what we had learned. These discussions were interesting as we looked at the templates from the break-out presenters and wondered how their successes might be shaped to fit the needs at our church.

All 50 states were represented at the conference, with staff members and laity from churches of all sizes. This confirmed the search among churches to find new means for reaching their congregations, serving their communities

Ginghamburg UMC pastor the Rev. Mike Slaughter in front of the church's sprawling campus in Ohio.





and searching for solutions to slow the decline in church attendance.

In Bass's presentation, she shared data from the Public Religion Research Institute that featured a graph titled "The End of a White Christian Strategy." Based upon an analysis of voters after the 2012 presidential election, the graph reinforced the point Dr. Bass was making: "The world has already changed."

So if "the world has already changed" what does this mean for churches?

I'm no expert on churches, but I don't believe "that's the way we've always done it" works anymore. Instead of bristling against change, churches need to develop the capacity to embrace change.

Perhaps, as Hamilton suggested, this starts with conversation driven by simple questions within the life of the church: What works? What doesn't work? What are your needs? Can you use your skills to lead? Those conversations have the potential for strategies to be developed, strategies to reach our communities with meaning and mission.

Jesus was a gifted teacher. His heartfelt instruction was a charge to change. If I'm to help our church work through its challenges and regain its footing, then I, too, must embrace the same charge to change. 🍷

-Bill Pike is a lay member at Trinity UMC.

By Bill Pike

Unless your church is a new facility or your building has been recently renovated, chances are somewhere in your facility T12 tubular fluorescent lights are being used. Perhaps you have been informed that the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 initiated the phasing out of the T12 lights that are no longer being manufactured. The reason for this change is the inefficiency of the light. So when your local electrical supplier or hardware store runs out of the T12, your congregation might be sitting in the dark.

Now, don't panic, you do have options. For example, you could sink your entire maintenance budget into purchasing every T12 you could locate within a hundred miles, but your Creation Care Committee would probably frown upon that approach. Trinity UMC in Richmond has chosen a different path.

Knowing that our energy cost related to HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) and lighting will always be a budget factor for us, we put together a task force comprised of members in our congregation with expertise in energy. Our task force has been meeting for nearly a year assessing and evaluating our current

Buddy can you spare a T12?

HVAC and lighting systems, and we have learned quite a bit.

Our first step was determining the number of lighting fixtures in the building that use the T12, and we found 440 fixtures with 900 T12 tubes. Because of age, some of these fixtures are obsolete and cantankerous to wrestle with when repairs are needed. So the task force completed an inventory and developed an RFQ (Request for Quotation) for local electrical contractors to submit bids.

Once the bids were returned, the task force reviewed the quotes. The review ignited a series of questions about the projected costs. In turn, this lead us to a comparison calculation of costs to determine the difference if we were to purchase the materials and complete the retrofits and installations ourselves. We found the potential savings for the church to be significant, and these findings pushed the task force to do a few singular trials with retrofit kits, new fixture installs and sensor switches.

In conducting the trials, we gave careful attention to documenting and photographing the steps of the process while adhering to required electrical and safety codes. From the trials, we were able to learn what each retrofit or new

install needed. In this initial process, we also informed our insurance carrier of our project and its goals, and we received some good advice to develop a step by step process for training our volunteers who will be working on the project.

The task force reported our findings to the Trustees, Finance Committee and Church Council, and we were given approval to proceed. A final material list was developed along with safety protocols for the installers. Additionally, the task force has developed a recycling plan for the spent materials with local vendors. Our goal is to complete the project in phases, starting with the oldest fixtures and working our way through the building.

All church buildings are different, but within each of those buildings no matter the size of the congregation there are individuals who have the knowledge and practical skills to apply the same concept at your church. 🍷

-Bill Pike is a lay member at Trinity UMC.

EVENTS



JANUARY

Ministers' Convocation

Jan. 13-15, Blackstone

Annual continuing education event for clergy and church professionals in the Virginia Conference. The theme is "The Future of Christianity in America: Fresh Voices." The keynote speakers are Dr. David F. Evans and Rev. Dr. Asa J. Lee. The preacher for convocation is Rev. DJ del Rosario. Bishop Young Jin Cho will preach at the opening service of Word and Table. Registration is required prior to the event and registration will close on Jan. 5, 2015. For more information contact the Center for Clergy Excellence at (804) 521-1127 or 1-800-768-6040, ext. 127.

Convocation of Association of Conference Directors of Lay Servant Ministries

Jan. 22-25, Williamsburg

Annual gathering of the Association of Conference Directors of Lay Servant Ministries, composed of conference and district directors of Lay Servant Ministries from across the connection. For more information, visit the conference website at www.vaumc.org under "Events" and the date.

FEBRUARY

United Methodist Day at the General Assembly

Feb. 5, Bon Air UMC and State Capitol, Richmond

This is an annual opportunity to help faith communities become empowered to serve as missionaries of justice,

as well as the more traditional missionaries of mercy. By joining together and establishing relationships with our elected officials, we empower members of our congregations to wonder, "How can I make a difference? How can I be a Good Samaritan in our world to its fullest sense?" This event gives congregations a vehicle for reaching beyond themselves and introduces them to the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church in a meaningful way. The cost is \$25, which includes breakfast and lunch. Visit the conference website to register, or for more information, contact the Rev. Pat Shipley at (804) 353-1387 or at plsrevdoc@aol.com.

5 Talent Academy

Feb. 21, Ebenezer UMC, Stafford, and webcast to sites around the conference

Author and activist Shane Claiborne will talk about ministry with the poor in the next teaching event sponsored by the 5 Talent Academy, which helps existing churches with resources and education. Claiborne is one of the founders of The Simple Way, a ministry in inner-city Philadelphia. For more information, visit www.vaumc.org/5TalentAcademy.

Lord, Teach Me to Pray

Feb. 21, Williamsburg UMC

Wendy Miller, who teaches spiritual formation at three seminaries, will lead workshops on prayer. Cost is \$20, which includes lunch. For more information or to register, visit the conference website at www.vaumc.org under "Events" and the date.

("Dones," continued from pg. 4)

Schultz asks if they will return. "Not likely, according to the research. They're done. ... It would be more fruitful if churches would focus on not losing these people in the first place. Preventing an exodus is far easier than attempting to convince refugees to return."

Often I will ask a pastor to think of a few people in the congregation who, if they left in the next year, would cause the church to


be most vulnerable. Once they come up with their list, my follow-up question is, "What personal engagement have you had with them in the last two weeks?" Usually the answer is "none," precisely because these are the people who are most loyal and dependable. They do not "require" or insist upon attention. But not giving attention to them is dangerous.

Pastors, staff and congregational leaders need to

spend time with the most active people to stay in touch with their thinking and feelings. Such ongoing connection can pick up clues about concerns or opportunities that would be missed otherwise. Decisions to leave are not made suddenly. They have been brewing for some time. Once people leave, often the clues that something was not right become all too obvious in retrospect.

Finding ways to talk with long-time, active

members about their spiritual journeys and the connection of those journeys with your congregation can go a long way toward understanding the heart of the congregation and issues that can guide congregational leadership.

Remember that leaders listen. Good leaders make sure they are finding time to listen to the most faithful well before any of them become "Dones." 

-The Rev. Dr. Lovett Weems is director for the Lewis Center for Church Leadership.

DISCIPLES HELPING TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD



▲ In November, **Farmville UMC** hosted a community-wide Operation Christmas Child packing party, led by church member Sarah Stokes. Participants packed 2,116 shoe boxes to be delivered to children around the world.



▲ In November, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts from Troop 1509 helped fill the shelves of the "Milk & Honey" Food Pantry at **Rising Hope UMC** in Alexandria. The Scouts collected 1,850 bags of non-perishable food items, according to pantry manager Melissa Lee (pictured, left).

To have your church or church organization featured in the "Disciples helping to transform the world" section, e-mail your story and photos to NeillCaldwell@vaumc.org by the first of the month. Stories should be approximately 100 words, and photos should be 300 dpi jpgs.

▼ In November, members of the **McGaheysville UMC** and members of the Student Honor Society of Spotswood High School packed shoe boxes for Operation Christmas Child. More than 205 boxes were packed for delivery to the local distribution center.



▲ Members and friends at **Main Street UMC in Suffolk** recently packaged more than 20,000 meals in under two hours for Stop Hunger Now.

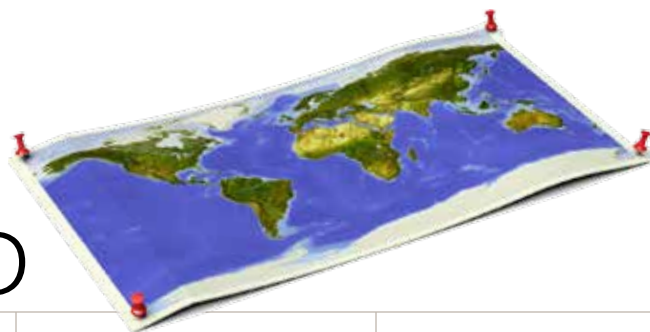
▼ To honor the church's history in the Civil War and honor those in McGaheysville and the Shenandoah Valley whose lives were affected, church member Robert Holloway has created a replica of the McGaheysville UMC as it was during the 1800s. The ornament is made of wood and hand-painted and was the highlight at this year's Annual Bazaar in October, where more than \$9,000 was raised for mission programs.



▼ Recently Junior High and Senior High Youth at **Market Street UMC, Eastern Shore District**, received monetary donations to make 12 "no sew" blankets for the local Eastern Shore Coalition Against Domestic Violence. An additional \$150 was given to the local food bank.



Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD



Number of new churches rise, but overall vitality dips



Easter service celebrated at Providence UMC in Tennessee.

By Heather Hahn

If you invite them, they will come. Just ask the Rev. Jacob Armstrong, pastor of Providence United Methodist Church in a Nashville suburb. Six years ago, the church held its first service in a city park with about 140 people. About half were visitors who came to show the support of a nearby United Methodist congregation.

Today, Providence has a regular worship attendance of about 1,000 – enough to fill a drafty middle school gym for two services even on a cold, rainy Sunday morning. Many of those worshipers are new to church.

“I think it attests that people are looking to connect with Christ and connect with each other,” Armstrong said. “What we’ve learned from new people is that people come because someone invited them.”

The young congregation is so successful it is now helping to mentor other church planters, including a pastor who started a United Methodist congregation in a neighboring town last year.

Providence is a bright spot highlighted in the Congregational Vitality Report presented to the Council of Bishops recently.

The news on the vitality front is decidedly mixed. The report showed U.S. church

starts are on the rise – from 116 in 2012, to 145 last year.

Over the past two years, 688 new faith communities have started in the denomination’s central conferences – church regions in Africa, Asia and Europe. Faith communities include small worship groups that may never grow big enough to be considered churches.

The same period saw a drop in what the denomination defines as “highly vital congregations.” Such congregations in the U.S. dipped 7 percent from 34 percent in 2012 to 27 percent in 2013.

The denomination measures a congregation’s vitality by growth, member involvement in church, engagement in the community and giving.

The recent data follows another report earlier this year that showed in 2012 a surge in U.S. vital congregations as well as an increase in professions of faith.

“We’re in a time of transition and working on turning things around,” New Jersey Area Bishop John Schol, a leader of the denomination’s Vital Congregations Initiative. “Any time you’re in transition and turnaround, you’re going to see progress and you’re going to see unevenness in the progress.”

In 2013, six U.S. conferences increased in highly vital congregations, while 47 decreased. Ten conferences increased the percentage of congregations growing in worship attendance, while 42 conferences saw declines. Overall, U.S. churches

saw a 2 percent reduction in worship attendance.

Worship attendance is growing in only about a third of U.S. churches.


Still, the denomination is ahead of where it was in 2010, when it began its current focus on vital congregations. That year, only about 14.8 percent of U.S. United Methodist churches were identified as highly vital.

“We saw good progress immediately after conferences and congregations set goals,” Schol said. But he added other factors could have contributed to last year’s decrease, including clergy retirements.

To reverse decades of declining U.S. membership, Schol and other denominational leaders say United Methodists will need to maintain focus on congregational vitality. Planting churches is part of that focus.

Indeed, Schol said, new congregations are often among the most vital. They have a sense of calling, know their communities’ needs and can prioritize reaching new people for Christ.

Also, they tend to be planted where the population is growing.

The denomination is still closing more churches than opening new ones. In 2013, 375 churches closed, according to United Methodist Council on Finance and Administration statistics. 

—Heather Hahn is a reporter for United Methodist News Service.

Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD

Mission team witnesses miracle of children hearing for the first time

PORT AU PRINCE, Haiti – It's a miracle of biblical proportions, says Gil Hanke, top staff executive of the General Commission on United Methodist Men.

In October, a six-member Hope of Hearing mission team tested 351 children and fit 97 with hearing aids.

It was Hanke's 26th trip to the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. This time he led a team of three audiologists, one audiometric technician, a

college freshman. Hanke served as the speech pathologist. Most of the team was from Texas with support from Texas Annual Conference, UM Men and others.

"Each day we were at a different location, and each day was a special blessing," said Hanke, a native of Virginia.

"Eight days before we left the U.S. we did not have enough hearing aids to do what we expected to do," said Hanke. "But within that last week, donations came in from several sources and every child we tested who could benefit from a hearing aid got one. God is good."

"The roads are much

better, and overall the country is cleaner," said Hanke, who also led two mission teams rebuilding the area following the 2010 earthquake.

"There continues to be massive construction, including a high rise Marriott Hotel in downtown Port au Prince. There are no longer tent cities, and most of the damaged buildings have been cleared, but not rebuilt."

While working at the Haiti Deaf Children's Home at the Mission of Hope, Executive Director Kathryn Montoya gave the team a tour of the school. They were joined by a team from Hear the World Foundation. 🇸🇰

Gil Hanke posing with a little girl who received a hearing aid in Haiti.



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A Day of Holy



Conversation:

Youngest panelist has words of wisdom for all



By Neill Caldwell

And a young adult shall lead them. There was a lot of talking on November's "Day of Holy Conversation" – hosted by Woodlake UMC in the Richmond District and webcast across the conference at multiple sites – but it was generally agreed that the youngest panelist shared a lot of wisdom in her brief comments.

Virginia Greer, a student at United Methodist-related Shenandoah University in Winchester, related a story about traveling with her family on a long journey in the car and her parents getting angry and frustrated with each other. When the family stopped for gas, Virginia's dad returned with something of a peace offering: a flip-flop-shaped air freshener with a coconut scent. "And my mom doesn't even like coconut," Greer said.

The point, she said, is that The United Methodist Church's 40-plus years of arguing over human sexuality is like her family's situation in the car. "There are many moments at church events where people are arguing, people talking over each other and people in the back who just want to get out," Greer said. "When we ought to be thinking of how we can show love when it is most needed. ... We're Christians; we're used to loving someone we can't understand. But we can do so much better..."

"If we want to get anywhere together we need to agree that loving one another is more important than being right," Greer continued. If we can do that, she concluded a few moments later, "we're going to lose the easy answers, the feeling of safety and of being right. But we gain the Spirit."

(Continued on next page, "Christ")



Virginia Greer is a student at Shenandoah University in Winchester.



("Christ," continued from previous page)

It was a positive message late in a day of positivity, with a few minor exceptions. People on social media during the day's program called out the Rev. Bruce Johnson for using the phrase "bless your heart" in addressing Greer, saying that although he said he "didn't mean it in a condescending way" it still came off as very condescending. And there were tweets complaining that the morning session's three panelists were all middle-aged, white and straight.

Generally there were no breakthrough moments. The conservative speakers stressed that the covenant in the *Book of Discipline* has been and is being broken, meaning the church is already in schism. The progressive speakers argued for full inclusion for all on the basis of that's what Jesus taught us to do. And the "centrists" on the two panels used, "We hang in there and find ways to work things out together."

The "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," how to look at Scripture with reason, experience and tradition, was also mentioned several times.

Bishop Young Jin Cho set the tone for the day with his message at the outset of leaning on Christ and the Holy Spirit. Facilitator Dr. David Hooker used a gentle hand of guidance in both morning and afternoon panel discussions. Following each, there was time for small group discussion, both at Woodlake and the remote sites scattered around

the conference. And, finally, everyone came together around Christ's table to share Holy Communion.

"As I participated in A Day of Holy Conversation," said the Rev. Marc Brown, conference director of Connectional Ministries and chair of the Common Table that organized the event, "I was especially encouraged by the comment that Virginia, representing the voice of the Young Adult Council, shared about hope being present when persons engage in holy conversation even when there are no easy answers. It's my prayer that A Day of Holy Conversation was a step forward in hope as we continue to consider what it means to be disciples of Jesus."

Bishop Cho, in his opening sermon, likened the debate over sexuality to a storm, particularly the storm that panicked Christ's disciples while he slept.

"If Jesus is the answer to the storm," Bishop Cho said, "then we need to trust in the Holy Spirit to still guide our churches. ... We must let the spirit of Christ be our Lordship as we listen to each other. No person owns 100 percent of the truth. All human beings have their short-comings and are moving on to perfection. We should be more humble and open to each other, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit together.

"The bottom line of this issue is that it's a faith issue," the Bishop concluded. "Are we willing to give up our own agendas and be willing to follow the guidance of the Lord?"

Presenters for the morning presentation were the Rev. Rob Vaughn, on behalf of Methodist Federation for Social Action and Virginia Reconciling United Methodists; the Rev. Greg West for the conference's Evangelical Fellowship; and the Rev. Tom Berlin, representing a centrist position.

Participants for the afternoon panel were Greer, Johnson, West and Vaughn, along with the Rev. Gina Anderson-Cloud and laywoman Rives Priddy.

There were thoughtful comments made across the spectrum of thought on human sexuality issues.

"We are a family but a family in deep disagreement," said West at the outset of the day, long before Greer's analogy. "I would urge progressives to reconsider the authority of Scripture and the tradition of 2,000 years."

Vaughn countered that "it's not what the text says but what it means and how we interpret it. ... Taking the Bible seriously means digging deep to learn what God wants from us."

Vaughn reminded the audience that the early church gave up circumcision and strict dietary laws to be more inclusive to Gentiles.

Berlin brought a belt from his daughter's closet to illustrate how trying to hold two ends together is a huge point of tension. "I'm disappointed in both the disobedience to the *Book of Discipline* and the calls to divide the church," he said. Berlin quoted Jesus's greatest commandment and



Paul's statement that we are all one in Christ. "We all interpret Scripture all the time. We'd love for it to be simple but it's not."

He also said that his personal opinions about gay people have changed over the years. "I've had college friends who have 'come out' in recent years tell me that they didn't come out in college because of how I might react. ... If I am uncomfortable around homosexuals then that's my sociology and not my theology."

Vaughn pointed out that the vast majority of scientific studies have shown that gender attraction is not a choice but a physical part of our makeup. "We don't choose sexual orientation. If this is how God made the diversity of creation – and we agree that God made no junk – who are we to say God made a 'mistake'?"

West countered that the jury was still out on the science about human sexuality. But he also concluded that most of us have "made up our minds" on this topic and simply "seek affirmation of our positions."

The afternoon panel was larger and more diverse. Vaughn started out by outlining some of the changes that progressives will seek at the 2016 General Conference, but also urged that people "do no harm" and stop injuring others with harsh language.

West said that the church has reached a crisis phase after more than 40 years of debate on homosexuality. "The division has already grown when you have episcopal leaders and pastors deliberately breaking our covenant and encouraging others to do so. And there is a pattern developing in the church that when pastors break this covenant and perform same-sex weddings the punishment is symbolic and the reward is real. We already have schism; we already have separation." He also quoted Mark Chapter 3, where Jesus says "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

West urged an amicable separation. "Both sides are sure they're right. There are people of good will on both sides. Paul and Barnabas separated but mission continued. Our (Methodist) church began with separation from the Church of England."

Anderson-Cloud talked about her experience as a church planter trying to reach the unchurched, and said "Our denomination was founded on casting a wide net and taking the cross into the fields and slums. We need to move beyond this political process of taking sides. ... Our divisions are ripping us apart but our mission – to make disciples for the transformation of the world – unites us."

She also urged participants to read the Rev. Adam Hamilton's "A Way Forward," but West countered that Hamilton's plan will only transfer the conflict to the local church.

Priddy, the only gay panelist, agreed that the church was broken. "Our numbers (in The United Methodist

Church) have dwindled, but many of those are our gay brothers and sisters and their families who have left the church" because of the way they have been treated.

Johnson said that there were "reasons that we're still in disagreement after 42 years... there are some things on which we just won't agree."

"When you start changing the definition of marriage, who's going to say what marriage is," said Johnson. "If we're going to change that, or acquiesce to a society that wants to change it for very un-Christian reasons, then where will it stop? And what will the church do? If today we bless same-sex unions then tomorrow when the polyamorists show up at our door and we want to love them as Jesus loves them then what are we going to say?"

At that point Dr. Hooker reminded the audience that the "men after God's own heart" in the Old Testament had multiple wives.

Anderson-Cloud cited the church's rejection of homosexuals as "one of the top five reasons people won't try church. ... I'm concerned about our perception (with unchurched persons)."

Vaughn concluded that he would rather have a "bias of inclusion rather than exclusion."

"I don't see a way ahead when we're going in two different directions," said Johnson.

"It takes conversation," added Anderson-Cloud, "and that's what we're doing today."

Priddy expressed hope that "this day is only the beginning of how we talk to each other. Yes, we do disagree, but God is among us." 🌸

-Neill Caldwell is editor of the Virginia Advocate.





REFLECTIONS

A Day of Holy Conversation was, in my estimation, very successful. The moderated panel discussions were informative, challenging and respectful.

There were a good range of views presented and explored. The event organizers did an excellent job of considering most of the details and contingencies that would be presented. There were a couple of places where the overall experience might have been improved:

- ❖ The time for both the moderated panels and the time for small group discussions would have benefited from more time for exploration and in-depth discussion.
- ❖ I was not present in any of the small groups, but I can imagine that with more time AND the presence of in-room facilitators those conversations would have been more fruitful.
- ❖ It is always helpful to have some “harvest” time to hear back from the discussions in the small groups.
- ❖ Although they are small minority voices, it is clear that both African American, Hispanic/Latina and Korean Methodists have unique views on this question. The overall exploration of a way forward will benefit from hearing those voices as well.

Overall, while there is room for improvement, the event was quite successful. I was pleased with almost every aspect, and I am particularly impressed with the technological coordination that allowed the conversation to be conducted statewide. This could be an excellent example for other conferences to adopt.”

-the Rev. Dr. David Hooker, guest facilitator

I thought ‘A Day of Holy Conversation’ was exactly what I hoped it would be: a time where United Methodist persons across the conference were able to hear primarily three points of view on human sexuality, and openly discuss our response as the church on these issues. We were able to peacefully hear and, hopefully, gain a better understanding of issues of sexuality that are different from our current understanding. I felt the “conversation” was to educate, not try to change people’s hearts. I pray that we will find God’s guidance.”

-Rev. Mike Davis, Journey UMC, Richmond District

I came away with a calmness that was unexpected and I think it is due to the grace-filled presentations and the small discussion group in which I participated. Coming home I had three insights:

- ❖ A 15-year-old ‘preacher’s kid’ in my small group had a very realistic view of what The United Methodist Church will reflect in the next 20 years.
- ❖ There is genuine anguish when a young adult feels called to the ordained ministry and is banned by The United Methodist Church from fulfilling that call.
- ❖ And a question.... would God call someone who is not worthy?

So four words ... calm, realistic, anguish, worth ... this is what I came away with.”

-Susie Wolf, lay member at Kenbridge UMC

I thought ‘A Day of Holy Conversation’ went as well as it possibly could have – Virginia United Methodists around the conference engaged in humble and honest conversation around an emotional issue in which we are not in agreement. This is not the first time this conversation has happened, but it’s the first time it has happened in this way. My hope is that the ongoing conversations leading up to Annual Conference and General Conference will continue to embody the same humble and honest tone.”

-Rev. Christopher Bennett, Ebenezer UMC

I was surprised by the depth, meaningfulness and grace embodied in the event, both on-site in Richmond, and especially in our small group at St. Luke’s in Yorktown. It is amazing what happens when people of all different perspectives come together in an environment of graceful listening and learning. Our small group discussion was filled with folks witnessing to their own personal experiences and faith perspectives and listening compassionately and openly to one another. We didn’t all agree, but we all stayed engaged and graceful. Because of that, I believe that we all left more hopeful for our church and for the future. I was especially thankful for the witness from Richmond of Rev. Tom Berlin and Virginia Greer. Their witnesses to their faith journeys were ones that we can all learn from and rejoice in.”

-Rev. Max Blalock, William and Mary Wesley campus minister

I was impressed with the participation and level of respect, grace and depth amongst small group members. I also found the speakers to provide a great overall summary of the issues and appreciated their vulnerability and presence with one another and the conference. I was especially touched by the young adult voice, Virginia (Greer), and the hope.”

-Rev. Debora Porras, pastor at St. Luke’s, Arlington District



The conference has had a conversation. The laity and clergy joined in holy conversation, focused on listening and honest sharing face-to-face with mutual respect regarding human sexuality. This experience has challenged us to trust just a little more in each other. One step. We need to model this beginning for future conversations that can only strengthen the church. God is with us."

-Warren Harper, Virginia Conference Lay Leader

I was pleasantly surprised by the day. I was happy to see speakers looking for places where they could lift up others on the panel, even if they stood on opposite sides of the issue. I was moved to hear a young adult be prophetic and call us to love each other and call us to do better. As we move forward I hope that more stories, more conversations will happen with people who may be in a different place on this issue. Instead of talking about people, perhaps we could talk with them. As we move forward I hope and pray that we could have the same amount of interest in discussions on race and poverty. The United Methodist Church can lead the way forward on discussions about race and poverty instead of lagging behind our culture. It seems like our country desperately needs it!"

-Rev. Dr. Justin Allen, Dean of Spiritual Life, Shenandoah University

I believe the 'Day of Holy Conversation' was a witness of the presence of God in the midst of diversity – an epiphany moment! There was much prayer and preparation for this day, and Bishop Cho set the tone for the day through his sermon. As Christians who believe differently on the issue of homosexuality, we must exhibit Christ-likeness in and to the world. The way forward is to remove our own agendas and trust God!"

-The Rev. Bob Parks, Farmville District Superintendent

I think the event went well. For the most part everyone involved spoke in a calm and inviting way and respected others' opinions and stance. Because of this calm and inviting language, I found myself intently listening to and learning from others who do not share my views. I think that our next step to this conversation is to take it to local churches. This conversation should not stop because the event ended. Individuals should discuss what was said and how the church can become one in the midst of such disagreement."

-Nick Ruxton, a young adult member at Trinity UMC in Chesterfield and new member of the conference Communications staff

One of the small group questions asked what we like about being United Methodist. The answer surprised me, though it shouldn't have: the open table. The great majority of people in our small group named the open table as the thing they like best about being United Methodist. It was a moment of deep wisdom in a day with sometimes-high emotion and sometimes-closed minds. In the context of a day spent discussing an issue that's still hard for our church to discuss, this was a reminder and a call. Communion is the central act of Christian worship, and for United Methodists, the table is the place we stand side-by-side at the invitation of Christ. No exceptions. I wonder how our ongoing conversation – and our hearts – might be transformed if our congregations recovered the practice of weekly communion, if every week we stood in the one place where none of us is host and each of us is equally a sinner in need of redemption and a beloved and grace-gushed child of God. At the Wesley Foundation at UVA, our weekly Sunday night worship always includes communion. It is at the heart of our worship and our life together, and it's often mentioned wistfully by alumni who've moved on to churches where this is not the practice. We all hunger for this feast and this rare communion with one another and God. What if we took John Wesley's 'duty of constant communion' seriously and moved back towards our original Methodist and Christian worship pattern? I wonder where this would lead us, who we might become, and how our conversation would sound next year."

-The Rev. Deborah Lewis, campus minister at the Wesley Foundation, University of Virginia

I am grateful that we were able to have the conversation, truly listening to each other and without hostility. The immediate and urgent issue before us is a broken covenant, a rejection of our shared covenant, the *Book of Discipline*. We already have separation in our church, so the question is: Can there be a miraculous mending? With God all things are possible. However, if the mending does not happen, will our Bishops and other leaders guide us to a friendly, more permanent separation? I hope so, because without such leadership, the losses all around will be much greater and more prolonged. 'Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?' - Psalm 85:6."

-The Rev. Greg West, Virginia Conference Evangelical Fellowship



REFLECTIONS

“A Day of Holy Conversation” was the result of selected leadership from the Methodist Federation for Social Action/Virginia Reconciling United Methodists, a centrist voice, the Common Table, and the Conference Young Adult Council working together. Representative voices were selected by each group to share the current concerns of progressives, traditionalists and centrists in the morning presentation as well as responses about possible next steps for The United Methodist Church. The goal was to inform and engage in a time of listening.

As I participated in ‘A Day of Holy Conversation,’ I was especially encouraged by the comment that Virginia Greer, a senior at Shenandoah University representing the voice of the Young Adult Council, shared about hope being present when persons engage in holy conversation even when there are no easy answers.

It is my prayer that ‘A Day of Holy Conversation’ was a step forward in hope as we continue to consider what it means to be disciples of Jesus.

On a personal level, I would like to share that the prayer, gracious care, and grace-filled conversation that I encountered in the four months of preparation for ‘A Day of Holy Conversation’ has been one of the highlights of my 37 years of appointed ministry. Being in Christian conferencing in preparation for this conference event fills me with hope for the ways the Holy Spirit will be present in the future of The United Methodist Church.

-the Rev. Marc Brown, conference director of Connectional Ministries

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“This ‘Day of Holy Conversation’ brought hope and empathy into a discussion that has often been marked by a determination to be right and prove another wrong rather than a determination to be in community. Now let’s keep talking. Let’s keep seeing the humanity in each other. And let’s not forget the many other holy conversations we need to have as a church. The fact that our best people for theological discourse are still straight, white, cisgender, middle-aged men reveals that although we have come a long way, the race, gender and age power dynamics in our conversations are still heavily influenced by situations of privilege. In order to truly become the diverse church we could be, we must celebrate progress without losing sight of the hope for perfection.”

-Virginia Greer, Shenandoah University student

QUESTIONS

These questions were offered for small group discussion during the Nov. 22 event:

GUIDING ADVICE: As you listen to each participant, consider recording:

- 1) differences you note or better understand;
- 2) common themes you perceive;
- 3) values you share;
- 4) gray areas you observe; and
- 5) any surprises or fresh questions you have.

Morning Session

- 1) What is at the heart of the matter for you as an individual?
- 2) What is your current view on human sexuality? How, if at all, have your views and understandings changed over time? To what do you attribute the change?
- 3) Many people who have participated in dialogues like this have said that within their general approach to this issue they have some dilemmas about their own beliefs, for example, value conflicts or ambivalent feelings. Do you experience any mixed feelings, value conflicts, uncertainties, gray areas or dilemmas within your overall perspective on this issue that you are willing to mention?
- 4) What did you hear, either from the presenters or from other group members, that raised a new question, clarified something, or opened a new doorway of fresh thinking for you?

Afternoon Session

- 1) Why did you choose to become United Methodist? Why do you like being United Methodist?
- 2) In whatever way forward the church chooses, what is important to you?
- 3) Long-term visions inform what steps we take today. Imagine the future of the United Methodist Church, what does it look like in 20 years? Together in mission and ministry, what criteria would we need to follow today to achieve such a future vision?
- 4) Identify one way this conversation has enriched your understanding of what you share with others, where and how you differ from others, and/or what you still do not understand.



The Rev. Marilyn Heckstall gives instructions for a small group discussion.

“TOUCHSTONES”

Touchstones for Creating Hospitable Space
(Adapted from the Center for Courage and Renewal)

- ❖ **Be 100 percent present, extending and presuming welcome.** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this place and presume you are welcome as well.
- ❖ **Listen deeply.** Listen intently to what is said, listen to feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes “To listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery – may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”
- ❖ **It is never “share or die.”** You will be invited to share in pairs, small groups, and in large circle. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate.
- ❖ **No fixing.** We are not here to set someone else straight or to help right another’s wrong. We are here to witness the mystery of community as reflected in the stories we share.
- ❖ **Suspend judgment.** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.
- ❖ **Identify assumptions.** By identifying our assumptions, which are usually transparent, we can set them aside and open the sharing and learning to greater possibilities.
- ❖ **Speak your truth.** You are invited to say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard and your contribution respected. A helpful practice is to use “I” statements.
- ❖ **Practice confidentiality care.** We create a safe space by respecting the nature and content of stories shared. If anyone asks that a story shared be kept in confidence, the group will honor that request.

- ❖ **Turn to wonder.** If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, or shutting down in defense, try turning to wonder: “I wonder what brought her to this place?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

Watch the conference website for a monitored blog on the question to “how can we move forward in mission and ministry together?”

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Timeline...

of unity and differences within The United Methodist Church

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| <p>1738 John Wesley and Charles Wesley experience the assurance of salvation.</p> <p>1739 Wesley disputes the Moravians over faith, sin and passivity.</p> <p>1740s Disagreements over lay preaching, after Wesley appoints Thomas Maxfield as the first Methodist lay preacher.</p> <p>1741 Wesley refuses George Whitfield access to Methodist preaching houses over a dispute about free grace and election.</p> <p>1750-60s Ongoing controversy over the doctrine of Christian perfection.</p> <p>1770s Wesley disputes the Calvinist Methodists. John Fletcher writes several "Checks Against Antinomianism."</p> <p>1784 Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) is organized at the "Christmas Conference."</p> <p>1789 Philip William Otterbein organizes the first annual conference of his followers.</p> <p>1792 First quadrennial General Conference of American Methodism is held in Baltimore.</p> <p>1792 The first major schism in American Methodism occurs as the Republican Methodist Church, later the Christian Church, is formed.</p> <p>1796 A group of African Americans withdraws from the John Street Church forming the nucleus of what will become the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion in 1820.</p> <p>1800 Jacob Albright forms three classes among the Germans in Pennsylvania. Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm found the United Brethren in Christ.</p> <p>1816 The African Methodist Episcopal Church is formed.</p> <p>1820 The African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion is organized.</p> <p>1824 Feeling the abolition of slavery impossible, the MEC turns its attention to regulating the treatment of slaves by its members.</p> <p>1828 The Associated Methodist Churches, forerunner of the Methodist Protestant Church, is formed.</p> <p>1830 The Methodist Protestants granted laity representation in the General Conference and the annual conference.</p> <p>1843 The Wesleyan Methodist Connection is formed by persons favoring the abolition of slavery withdrawing from the MEC.</p> <p>1844 The Methodist Episcopal Church is divided, north and south, by the Plan of Separation. The issue of slavery also divides the Presbyterian and Baptist denominations.</p> <p>1845 The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, is formally organized.</p> | <p>1858 The Methodist Protestant Church divides over the issue of slavery.</p> <p>1870 The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church is organized out of the MECS. (The name is changed in 1956 to Christian Methodist Episcopal Church)</p> <p>1876 The MEC General Conference votes to allow annual conferences to divide along racial lines.</p> <p>1877 The Methodist Protestant Church, divided in 1858 over the issue of slavery, formally reunites.</p> <p>1887 A Japanese layman was ordained and given full clergy rights in California in 1887.</p> <p>1899 The United Brethren General Conference of 1889 approved ordination for women.</p> <p>1892 Women were admitted as delegates to the General Conference of The Methodist Protestant Church.</p> <p>1893 Women were admitted as delegates to the General Conference of The United Brethren.</p> <p>1904 Women were admitted as delegates to the General Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church.</p> <p>1922 Women were admitted as delegates to the General Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.</p> <p>1939 The Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church reunite to form The Methodist Church (MC).</p> <p>1940 First meeting of the Central Jurisdiction (MC)</p> <p>1946 The Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) is formed from the merger of The Evangelical Church and the United Brethren in Christ. In order to facilitate the union of these two churches, the United Brethren accepted the Evangelical practice, and women lost their right to ordination.</p> <p>1956 The MC General Conference adopts Amendment IX, which provides a framework for the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction.</p> <p>1956 Women in The Methodist Church are granted full clergy rights.</p> <p>1968 The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren merge to form The United Methodist Church.</p> <p>1972 The issue of homosexuality was first openly debated in the church at the 1972 General Conference. General Conference (GC) adopts a statement affirming the sacred worth and civil rights of lesbians and gays. An amendment from the floor adds that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."</p> <p>1976 GC also changes the Social Principles' wording on gay unions to read, "We do not recognize a relationship between two persons of the same sex as constituting marriage" A "footnote" is approved "to restrict</p> |
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ordination of gays and lesbians" (RCP, 2000b, p. 9; Moore, 2000a). It is not printed in the 1976 *Book of Discipline* but does appear in later versions of the *Discipline*. Three reports adopted related to funding: "- no agency shall give United Methodist funds to any 'gay' organization or use any such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality;" mandated "the use of resources and funds by boards and agencies only in support of programs consistent with the Social Principles of the Church;" prohibited "funds for projects favoring homosexual practices."

- 1980** At the UM GC, a futile attempt is made to include in the *Discipline* the phrase "no self-avowed practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in the United Methodist Church." GC adopts a statement saying, "The United Methodist Church has moved away from prohibitions of specific acts, for such prohibitions can be endless. We affirm our trust in the covenant community and the process by which we ordain ministers."
- 1982** The Judicial Council rules (Decision 513) that nothing in church law prohibits ordination of homosexual persons.
- 1984** GC adopts new language about homosexuality: "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve . . ."
- 1988** A change in the Social Principles statement is made with the addition of the italicized phrase and sentence: "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."
- 1988-1992** Four-year study by the Committee to Study Homosexuality.
- 1992** In a majority report, the Committee to Study Homosexuality asks GC to remove the language in the Social Principles "condemning homosexual practice and replace it with an acknowledgement that the church 'has been unable to arrive at a common mind' on the issue." GC delegates vote 710-238 to retain the 'incompatible' language.
- 1996** GC legislation includes a ban on same-gender union ceremonies." Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." An attempt to replace the "incompatibility" clause with one acknowledging that UMs are not able to arrive at a "common mind" fails. The ban on ordination of homosexuals is left in place, and clarifying words

are added to the *Discipline* that define "self-avowed, practicing homosexual" as one who "openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual."

- 1998** The Council of Bishops issues a statement pledging to uphold the *Discipline*, "including the statements on homosexuality . . . contained in the Social Principles, including the prohibition of ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions by our ministers and in our churches." They also affirm their "pastoral responsibility to all peoples, including those who feel excluded from the church."
- 2000** Delegates vote down a recommended change to the wording of the Social Principles that would state that United Methodists are not of one mind with regard to homosexuality. Delegates vote to maintain the UMC's position on homosexuality, to maintain the "incompatible" language, to uphold the ordination ban for homosexual persons, and to keep the same-sex union prohibition. A new statement was added to the Social Principles: "We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends."
- 2004** A resolution, "As United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples throughout the world" passed 869-41. Delegates solidly reaffirmed the denomination's positions on homosexuality and their action was backed by Judicial Council decisions announced during the conference.
- 2008** Delegates to the 2008 General Conference on April 30 rejected changes to the United Methodist Social Principles that would have acknowledged that church members disagree on homosexuality.
- 2012** General Conference delegates reject an attempt to replace existing language in the *Discipline* about homosexuality with a statement that United Methodists, in effect, agree to disagree. In July, the Western Jurisdiction adopts a resolution declaring that its annual conferences will live as if the *Discipline* (§1 161F) prohibitions of homosexual behavior "do not exist."
- 2013** Several annual conferences in the Western Jurisdiction endorse the 2012 jurisdictional resolution to live as if par. 161F "does not exist." The New York Conference adopts a resolution commending those who perform same-sex weddings. The Judicial Council rules that these resolutions are permissible. Methodists in New Directions, New York Annual Conference, begins posting weekly stories of clergy who perform same-sex unions

(Continued on pg 33: "Timeline")

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY



The 'Sunday sneeze':

Making an impression for first-time guests

By Jonathan Malm

Have you ever been caught sneezing in a photograph? It's embarrassing. Nobody looks good sneezing. That one snapshot captures you at your worst and immortalizes that version of you – that distorted image of you.

Now what does this have to do with your church?

Each Sunday is one snapshot of your church for a first-time guest. That one experience they have is forever burned into their mind when they think about your church.

Whenever someone mentions your church's name, they'll scroll through the photo album in their mind and conjure up that image of their one Sunday visiting your church.

What does their picture of your church look like? Is it an accurate representation of your church? Or is it a distorted picture of your church sneezing?

Of course, you might ask, "What does a church look like when it sneezes?" Here are a few things I've seen in churches I've visited:

- ❖ **Creepy Sneezes:** A guest speaker who's (1) boring, (2) weird or (3) heretical.
- ❖ **Angry Sneezes:** An outburst from the stage over the pastor's frustration with the tech team.
- ❖ **Stinky Sneezes:** A weird smell in the room. "Am I in a nursing home?"

These are just a few of the sneeze snapshots I have in my head from churches. It's like I walked in one Sunday, snapped a pic and left. I'll never go back to those churches, but that picture is in my head for eternity. If a friend asks me about my experience with the church, I'll tell them about the sneeze.

It doesn't matter how great the music, the message, the graphic design, the lighting or the sound quality. None of those things stick out. Just like in a sneezing photo, you don't notice a hairstyle, clothing or jewelry. You just notice the sneeze.

That's why every Sunday is so important. Each Sunday is a snapshot of your church.

Sure, you see the last 52 Sundays. You see your church's past successes. You see the sum total of who your church actually is. But it doesn't matter what those last 52 Sundays look like to the guest who shows up on a "sneeze" Sunday.

So how do you avoid sneezing on a Sunday morning? How do you en-

sure guests' snapshots are accurate representations of your church?

Realize this may be your only Sunday.

Pretend this is your only church service for the whole year. Would you be OK with every element of your church service if this were the only one?

Remember the intention of everything.

Why are you doing what you're doing in this service? Be it baptisms, baby dedications, a guest speaker or communion; keep those purposes clear in your mind as you plan your service. Don't do anything 'just because' or because there's 'nothing wrong with it.'

Communicate clearly.

Explain to your congregation what's going on. If you experience a hiccup or full-on sneeze, be upfront about it. Explain what happened and move on.

Let's love our first-time guests by being intentional with our Sunday services.

Unfortunately, sneezes happen. But they shouldn't be the norm. Let's love our first-time guests by being intentional with our Sunday services. Let's show them an accurate picture of who we are, because this may be your only chance. 🐾

-Jonathan Malm is the author of "Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors"



Learning from growing churches in England

The archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in York Minster.
Photograph: John Giles/PA

By Lovett Weems

The Church of England set out to learn from the 18 percent of their churches that grew in the decade up to 2010. A study conducted between 2011 and 2013 sought to investigate the factors influencing church growth in the Church of England.

While there is “no single recipe” for growth, they concluded there are some ingredients closely associated with growing churches. In many ways, these factors mirror findings in the United States from the Faith Communities Today research and that of others.

Leadership: Those studying the Church of England found a strong correlation between growth and qualities of leaders when these qualities are combined with an intention to grow. Leadership qualities that stood out included the abilities to motivate, envision and innovate. Such qualities, according to the study, lead to growth when found in a leader who makes a priority of numerical growth.

Mission and purpose: Churches with a clear mission and purpose were far more likely to grow. Two-thirds of such churches grew compared to one-quarter of churches without such clarity regarding purpose.

Willingness to reflect and adapt: Self-reflection was a prime characteristic of

growing churches, whereas “doing things by default” was more common among declining churches. Worship is a good example. No particular style of worship led to growth, but how the worship style was chosen was critical. Growing churches openly considered their options so that worship became “chosen rather than inherited.” Growing churches were willing to experiment and fail until they found the right match between tradition and culture. “Vitality comes with reflection and choice” is how one person put it.

Lay leadership: The quality and participation of lay leadership was found to be critical alongside clergy leadership. Active involvement of lay members throughout the congregation’s ministry was a hallmark of growing churches. They also found that rotating leadership roles was important, especially if younger members and new members are included in leadership and service.

Focus on growth: Three avenues of growth tended to be found among the vital congregations. First, the orientation of the congregation was outward toward engagement with the community and with those not involved in church. Second, a welcoming and carefully planned engagement with new people in the church focused on establishing



ongoing relationships. Third, two-thirds of the growing churches offered programs to help existing church members grow deeper in their discipleship.

What about declining churches? While 18 percent of churches were growing in the decade under review, 27 percent were declining, with the remaining 55 percent remaining rather stable. The number one factor associated with decline was the inability of churches to retain younger generations. Growth was found where there is a high ratio of children to adults. A church with no children or youth is very likely to decline. Churches with young people are twice as likely to be growing

What we will never know: It should be added that there were some factors the researchers found that had no significant association with growth or decline. These included the theological orientation, gender, ethnicity, or marital status of the clergy. They

also included the style of worship so long as the worship was considered and agreed upon.

As with all such findings, we look for clues for our congregations in order to take our own next faithful step. But we always keep such data in perspective. A section of the report titled “Church Growth: What We Will Never Know” cites the words of the Rev. Canon John Holmes: “With all these hypotheses there needs to be a proper humility and caution. The ways of God are not always easy to fathom or chart, least of all predict. Any wise student of church growth should always acknowledge the mystery of God’s loving action in the world and admit that there are times when we really don’t know why this cathedral or church has grown in this way at this time. But then God is God and we are not.”

-Dr. Lovett Weems is director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Devotions from International Lesson Series

LIVING THE WORD



The Rev. Jason C. Stanley is an ordained deacon appointed as the associate minister of Youth and Education at Peakland UMC in Lynchburg. Jason holds an Associate's in Early Childhood Development from J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, a Bachelor's in Religious Studies from Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, and a Masters in Christian Education from Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond. Jason is married to the Rev. Megan J. Saucier, associate pastor at Heritage UMC in Lynchburg. Read Jason's blog at <http://jasoncstanley.com>.

Jan. 4, 2015
Teach us to pray
Luke 11:1-13

Mary Clark is an elderly African-American woman who lives in a little cedar block house in Montpelier. She has lived in this small house for decades, mostly by herself. Every so often, children or grandchildren visit and spend a few days with her. But everyday at every meal, she has a special guest.

Ms. Clark has two chairs at her kitchen table. She is not shy telling me that the second chair is Jesus' chair. She shares every meal with Jesus, and this is her time to be with Jesus. Ms. Clark shows us what it means to have a deep relationship with Jesus that is filled with constant communication.

Our lives are filled with constant communication. We post statuses, write blogs, tweet, Instagram, Google, e-mail, text and every once in awhile, call someone. Yet, in the midst of all of this communication, we too ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus, like other rabbis, offers a model for his disciples on how to pray. This model we call The Lord's Prayer, which looks different here in Luke than the more familiar in Matthew.

Jesus' teaching does not stop with what to pray, but continues with how to pray. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray confidently and boldly. Being bold is to be daring and fearless. But being bold is also being free in behavior and manner. There are no limitations.

Jesus tells the parable of the friend who is persistent in his request for bread (11:5-13). The friend reveals his persistence through asking, searching and knocking. It reminds us of the persistent widow who continually approached the judge asking, seeking and perhaps even knocking for justice (18:1-5).

The message is clear. Prayer is not limited to times of suffering and need. Prayer is not limited to times of desperation. Prayer is consistent and persistent communication with God. It is not the Facebook or Twitter kind of communication. It is the "sit at the dinner table and tell me about your day" kind of communication. God the parent wants to hear about your day, the good and the bad.

Thomas Long says that we pray, "not as outsiders, but as God's children, tenderly, honestly,

and confidently. In our secret, whispered prayers, we are known so well that God, like a mother listening with her heart to her children, can finish our sentences."

Perhaps we need to set a chair at the table for Jesus.

Jan. 11, 2015
Somos uno
John 17:6-21

When I traveled on mission trips to Costa Rica, no matter where we were, we were always welcomed with open arms and warm hearts. Often we were invited to sit around a table where coffee and cookies were offered. This simple act of hospitality reminded me of going and sitting around the kitchen table at my grandparents.

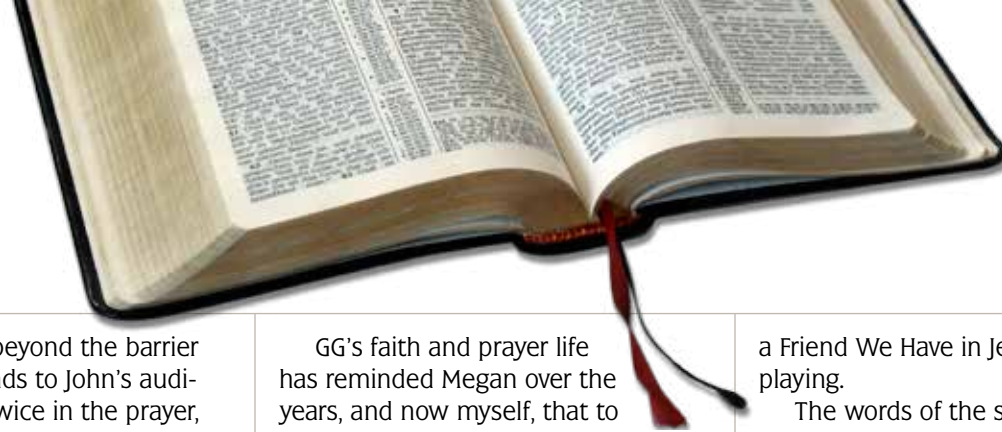
The table would grow as an aunt or another cousin or two would randomly show up. As we gathered around the table, we would share stories about our lives, our churches, and things we noticed in the news. There would be lots of laughter, and every once and awhile a disagreement. No matter what we had been doing that day or where we had been, we were united around that table.

Our friends in Costa Rica taught us the phrase "somos uno," or "we are one." Even though there were so many differences – our skin tones, our hair, our language, even our worship – we were one.

Lately, there seems to be a lot more things that divide us than unite us. At dinner parties, in coffee shops and at church meetings, we find ourselves debating with others over politics, theology, the authority of Scripture and more. Despite these differences and the conflicts they create, Jesus prays for unity among the people of God.

We learned as we served side by side with our Costa Rican brothers and sisters, that the spiritual unity that binds us together is stronger than any differences we may have. We are one because we share together in relationship with Jesus Christ; a relationship built on the love of God and love for others.

Jesus is gathered around a table with his disciples. By the time we get to today's Scripture, Jesus' dinner table conversation has turned into a very intimate prayer for his disciples.



This prayer goes beyond the barrier of time and extends to John's audience and to us. Twice in the prayer, Jesus prays for the church to "be one" (verses 21 and 23).

Prayer unites us. Let us gather at the dinner table, break some bread, tell our stories, and celebrate the unity that is between us.

Jan. 18, 2015

Let us be bold

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

My grandmother-in-law, GG, is a petite, slightly shy woman. She has lived in Louisiana all her life. She makes the best cornbread around. She goes to church every Sunday. And she is a strong woman of faith who believes in prayer.

It is not uncommon for my wife, Megan, and me to learn that GG has been praying us through something. Sometimes it may be things that seem insignificant. Yet, in the prayerful hands of GG, it is not too insignificant to take to the throne of grace. At other times, we may be facing a challenging situation, and we will say, "We need to call GG and ask her to pray."

While she is shy in some ways, GG is bold with her prayers.

In the preacher's sermon in Hebrews, confidence and hope have been addressed. The preacher reassures the congregation that though things are changing and they seem random and chaotic, Christ the High Priest presides over it all. The preacher comforts the congregation by reminding them that the High Priest experienced human suffering and "he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:18).

In this portion of the sermon, the preacher turns to prayer. The preacher sets out to encourage the congregation to do as GG does, "approach the throne of grace with boldness" (4:16).

GG's faith and prayer life has reminded Megan over the years, and now myself, that to have a vital ministry is to have a vital prayer life. GG's prayers are not the fast-food kind, where you pull up to the Prayer-To-Go-Drive-Thru and order a productive day with a side of grace and a cup overflowing with joy. GG's prayers are reflective of the deep relationship she has with Jesus the High Priest, built on a solid foundation of constant communication. GG's prayers are bold because she knows and trusts Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She knows that grace comes to us over and over again through Jesus Christ, the High Priest.

Bishop Cho has reminded us that to be vital congregations, we must have a vital prayer life. This bold, vital prayer life is daring and even audacious. Our prayers are not like ordering at a fast-food restaurant. Prayer should never be that casual. Instead, it should be grounded in our relationship with Christ, bold in asking, seeking and knocking for healing, justice and peace.

Jan. 25, 2015

Prayer in action

James 5:13-18a

I was driving home in the pouring rain. I had just had a horrible day at work, which was clouded by the fact that my father had recently been diagnosed with prostate cancer. To be honest, I was angry with God. I did not understand why God would allow this to happen. As a result, my prayer life suffered.

My car at the time had no CD player or an iPod hook up. The radio barely worked. If I wanted to listen to something, I had to listen to any number of old cassette tapes we had at our house. I don't remember what cassette tape was in the car that night, but I remember being taken aback when the old hymn, "What

a Friend We Have in Jesus" started playing.

The words of the song pierced through my soul in a way they had never done before: "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged: Take it to the Lord in prayer!" That was all I needed to hear. I needed to take it all – the stress, the horribleness, the challenges and trials I was facing – to the Lord in prayer.

I pulled into some parking lot and started praying for my father. I prayed for healing, peace and understanding. In the back of my mind, I was hoping for the cancer to leave his body so he would be back to his normal self.

During this time, I had a number of close friends who were praying for me. They knew that I was struggling and doubting. Their prayers were not limited to the prayer room. They put their prayers into action by nurturing me. These loving actions in the different forms they took, reminded me that this thing called faith is an active thing.

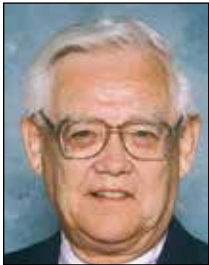
James teaches that faith without works is dead. A vital prayer life leads to a vital and active faith life. While we pray for the sick, we prepare dinner for them. While we pray for the families who are hungry, we organize a food drive. While we pray for those in prison, we write letters and visit.

God answered my prayer from that rainy night, though not in the way I had hoped. My friends, through their prayers and loving deeds, helped me experience healing, peace and understanding. Dad, a short six months later, claimed the promise of the resurrection. 📖



CLERGY & DIACONAL

DEATHS



The Rev. Warren Reeves, of Virginia Beach, died Nov. 9, 2014. Reeves began his ministerial career in 1950 at Fishersville.

He went on to serve Goshen-Craigsville, Cloverdale, Keezletown-Fellowship, Fellowship-Linville-Edom, Stephens City, as associate pastor at Trinity in Richmond, and then Nimmo. He retired in 1991. He is survived by his wife, Lou Reeves. Services were held at Nimmo in Virginia Beach.

David B. Chattin, 56, died Nov. 12, in Florida. He was the son of retired clergy **the Rev. Norman Chattin**.

Claudia Davis, 40, died Nov. 20, 2014, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. She was the sister of **the Rev. Ray Max-Jones**, pastor of Lincolnia UMC, Alexandria.

Hilda Mitchell Hindman, 99, of Richmond, died December 5, 2014. She was the mother of **the Rev. David Hindman**, pastor of Duncan Memorial UMC in Ashland, and a member at Lakeside UMC.

Olive Janss, of Salinas, Calif., the widow of **the Rev. Edmund Janss**, died Nov. 2, 2014.

Clara Lee Martin, 94, died Nov. 19, 2014, in Colorado. She was the mother of **the Rev. Dr. John T. "Jack" Martin Jr.**, pastor of the Boyce-Millwood-White Post Charge in Charles Town, W.Va.

Martin Moon Jr. died Oct. 28, 2014, in Gaithersburg, Md. He was the father of **the Rev. Peter Moon**, pastor of Woodlake UMC, Richmond District.

Paul Jefferson Newsome died Nov. 24, 2014. He was the father of **the Rev. Kenny Newsome**, senior pastor of Pender UMC, Fairfax.

Elizabeth Walters of Morattico, the widow of **the Rev. Gordon D. Walters Sr.**, died Oct. 28, 2014.

Michael Lipscomb Whitfield, 66, of Chester, died Nov. 27, 2014. He was the organist and choir director for Wesley UMC in Hopewell.

Patti B. Russell, 87, of Richmond, the long-time Virginia Conference archivist, died Dec. 2, 2014. A native of Oklahoma, Russell spent most of her adult life serving in various positions in The United Methodist Church. Her main areas of interest were in worship and church history, serving on worship committees and commissions at every level of The United Methodist Church, as well as the World Methodist Council. In addition, she started the Virginia United Methodist Church Conference Archives and served 31 years as its archivist. She was also the editor of the historical publication, *Heritage*, for 18 years. In June 2014, the Historical Society of The United

Methodist Church recognized Patti's contribution and service to preserving the history of Virginia Methodism by presenting her with the Ministry of Memory Award. She was also active in social programs, serving as director of the Stuart Circle Meal Ministry for many years and serving at the Virginia Interfaith Center. She is survived by her husband, Jack B. Russell; and a daughter, Robin Alison Rankin of Richmond. A service was held at Duncan Memorial UMC in Ashland led by the Rev. David Hindman. The family requests contributions be made to the Patti B. Russell Archives Endowment, Virginia United Methodist Foundation, P.O. Box 5606, Glen Allen, VA, 23058.

BIRTHS

Isaiah Timothy Henry was born Nov. 13, 2014, to **Michael and Alison Henry**. Michael is the director at Ochonahock on the Bay Camp in Belle Haven, Eastern Shore District. Grandparents are **the Rev. Jon and Mary Grace Woodburn**, Oakland UMC, Danville District.

Bishop Charlene Kammerer (center) and Steve Mansfield present Patti Russell with a framed proclamation on the occasion of her retirement.



("Timeline" continued from pg. 27)

or weddings. In October, Bishop Melvin Talbert performs a same-sex union service. A number of U.S. clergy perform same-sex services during the year, some of which go to trial and others are resolved by just resolution.

2014 In March, Bishops Wenner and Wallace-Padgett file complaints against Bishop Talbert, and the supervisory process begins in the Western Jurisdiction. Over the summer, three annual conferences pass resolutions supporting pastors who perform same-sex services in defiance of the *Discipline*. Several bishops make public statements about the issue, some denouncing church trials and others declaring that they will uphold the *Discipline*.

Information from:

General Commission on Archives and History

"Historical Statement" of *The Book of Discipline*, 2012

Pre-1784 entries are from Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, Abingdon Press, 2003.

The second sentence from 1972 – the comments in 2008 are reduced and primarily came from <http://www.foundryumc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Timeline.pdf> that originally came from official UMC links. The final sentences in 1976 and 2000 originally came from (newsdesk@umcom.org). However, that link is no longer viable.

The 2012-14 entries are from "Crisis Points in the UMC," at www.methodistcrossroads.org.

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FROM THE BISHOP



New year brings new opportunities

A new year has dawned! A new life (every day is new) and a new opportunity have been given to us! At the beginning of this new year, I pray that the grace and peace from our Lord will be with you now and throughout the year.

I am very excited about the new year. Although we are still facing challenges, I have not lost joy and gratitude in my heart in serving my beloved annual conference. Although we still have a long way to go, I am deeply grateful to our Lord and to all of you for the changes taking place in our conference. By the grace of God, we see some signs of hope for a new future.

I thank God that the conference-wide conversation on human sexuality on Nov. 22 went well. It is a very difficult and sensitive agenda that The United Methodist Church has been

struggling with for many years. We conducted this conversation in a calm and respectful manner although there are differences among us. I am deeply grateful to the members of the work team who made the preparations for this conversation. They had differing thoughts and perspectives on this issue, but they respected each other and prayerfully prepared for this gathering. They worked hard to make this conversation a meaningful one.

Of course, one conference-wide conversation will not solve all our struggles related to this issue. But it was a good beginning, and I hope there will be follow-up conversations in the districts and in local churches, especially as we approach our Annual Conference in June. My prayer is that Annual Conference will be a time of prayerful discernment on this issue, not a time of judgment and confrontation.

This year marks an important time in my ministry. I am now in the second half of my tenure as your bishop. So far, I have worked hard to spread the culture of prayer. I still believe that our churches cannot be transformed without rediscovering spiritual vitality, and prayer is the first step towards spiritual vitality in our churches. I will continue to preach on "Lord, Teach Us to Pray" wherever I go and encourage the churches to become Prayer Covenant congregations.

We have scheduled our 2015 Bishop's Convocation on Prayer for Saturday, March 21. The theme for this year's convocation will be "Breakthrough Prayer" and the Rev. Sue Nilson Kibby, director of Connectional and Missional Church Initiative for the West Ohio Conference, will be our speaker. The focus will be how to pray more effectively for a revitalization of our churches and ministries. We have set May 24 as our conference-wide Day of Prayer for the renewal and revitalization of our churches. Please mark these important dates on your calendar and begin praying now for their success.

Our Imagine No Malaria initiative has been making good progress. According to a recent report, we are approaching almost one-third of our goal of saving more than 100,000 lives from malaria. I deeply appreciate all the clergy and laity and children who have been a part of this life-saving mission. We have six more months to go. I invite you to remember our catch phrase "Every Life Save a Life" and join this great opportunity to make a difference in many lives being lived in another part of the world. Your prayer for this initiative is absolutely essential.

Implementing Discipleship Circles at the district level has been delayed. Because of a staff change in the conference, we have not made as much progress as we had hoped. But under the leadership of our new staff person, Cheryl Edley-Worford, the evaluation of beta groups is under way and a training program for facilitators has been launched. It is my hope that during the new year more beta groups of Discipleship Circles will be organized and their designs tested in order that the conference may be better prepared for expanding discipleship groups at the district level.

Whenever I hear that people are praying for our conference and for me, my heart is touched and uplifted by such love. I know my shortcomings, and I know I cannot do this ministry without God's help and your prayer support. Our conference cannot be turned around without the power and guidance of our Lord. Your prayers make a difference in our churches and in the conference. So please keep on praying for our new future. I will deeply appreciate that.

May the Lord continue to bless our churches and all of you in our journey together during this new year. 🍀

In Christ,

ONE LAST WORD

Rockingham Court UMC holds blessing of the animals

One by one they were all blessed during a Sunday service. Lil' bit. Lucky. Snookers. And plenty of others.

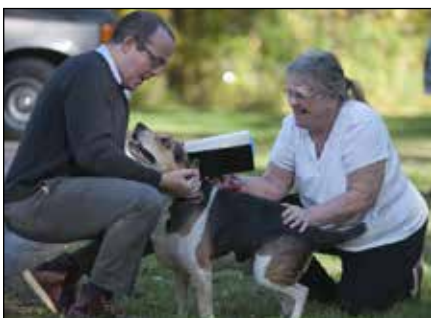
The animals (and their owners) were part of Rockingham Court United Methodist Church's second Blessing of the Animals service, which is intended as a reminder of how pets bless the lives of their owners and how owners must care for their pets.

"They give us blessings throughout the year," said Kathy Wickham, owner of Lil' bit the dog. "Our pets are so important to our lives."

Wickham, a vet technician, helped the Rev. Craig Newman offer blessings during a brief service Sunday afternoon held in the grassy area behind the church. Newman, who had his own dog Beauregard in tow, thanked the group for gathering, gave a few brief remarks and read a piece of scripture before blessing each pet.

"I've always wanted to do it," he said of the service, which started last year.

Newman said the tradition dates back to St. Francis, patron saint of animals, and the informal service gives thanks for animals and reminds people they are trusted to care for their animals. He said all pets are welcome, though Sunday's crowd comprised mostly dogs.



The Rev. Craig Newman of Rockingham Court UMC blesses Pat Skeen's beagle Mason.



Kathy Wickham prays for her pets Monty and Lil' bit at Rockingham Court's 'Blessing of the Animals.'

During the service there were a few barks, some squeals and a faint purring.

The latter came from Lucky, who appeared to be the only cat in attendance. The 10-pound calico belonged to Will Prillaman and his daughter.

"She don't particularly care for dogs," Prillaman said.

Lucky was outnumbered Sunday and spent most of her time in a carrier.

Prillaman said he enjoys the service and being able to see all the different animals.

"Normally you don't get to see everyone's pets," he said.

Of the 30 or so people and their pets who gathered Sunday, there were two dogs in attendance that couldn't help but be seen.

Victoria Person's dogs Snookers and Pepe Le Pew (like the cartoon character) were dressed to impress. Each wore a dress; Snookers' was complete with light pink sequins.

"They give so much to our lives," Person said. "They really do profoundly influence how the day goes." 🐾

-Annie McCallum for the Roanoke Times



Tweets heard 'round the conference

Taylor Mertins @TCMertins
sermonizing with the snow #staunton #advent

Courtney Layman @CML1133
Saturday morning, I ran Nutzy's Funn Run, a 5k fundraiser for United Methodist Family Service.

Floris UMC @FlorisUMC
Young Adults: Come show off your Fred Flintstone skills this Friday! #BowlAmerica #YoungAdult

Ebenezer UMC @EbenezerUMC
What matters most is not the accomplishments you achieve, what matters most is the person you become.

Sarah Willis @Sarah_Money
I grew up really wantin gold fronts but that's what you get when Wu-Tang raised you.

Bret Gresham @revgresh
Love wearing my orange and maroon in Charlottesville! #hokies #11inarow

Tim Hares @TheTimHares
Got my first 100 on a college paper!

VAUMC Youth @vaumcyouth
Chillin' with Cho #vaumc #IAM #imagineinomalaria



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