

Advocate



**Making waves
(and disciples)
in Sunday school**

Connecting with the



Virginia Advocate

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

FROM THE EDITOR



Madeline Pillow
Editor

Being Intentional

Intentional. What does that mean?

Merriam-Webster defines it as "Something done in a way that is planned or intended."

At the beginning of each new year, I set out goals for myself to pursue. They can be little things like re-learning French or more universal like being more positive in my everyday life.

One of my goals this year is to be intentional: Do things with a clear head and with purpose. Whatever I set out to do, I don't want to do it lazily, put important things off or let opportunities slip away.

The whole idea is that if I am being intentional, I am looking to the end goal and trying to see all sides. I am thinking about the causes and effects and making my decision with this in mind.

Our feature this issue is about adult Sunday schools. While some may claim they are on their way out, we can't view Sunday schools with the same lens that they started with in the 19th century. Back then, these classes not only gave religious instruction but also provided a larger education. Its focus was also centered on evangelism.

Today, churches have committees and departments that take on a church's ministry in a way that was completed by just the Sunday school at one time. This has allowed these classes to become more focused on fellowship and discipleship. But this change should not mean that the classes shrink away from connecting to the church around it and the community.

In this month's feature, the churches that I talked to have one thing in common no matter what they are doing in Sunday school: They are being intentional.

With purpose, they are changing things that aren't working, realizing the gifts within their own ranks, pursuing new ways to challenge their minds and finding a connection to the larger community around them.

The way I see it, if you are doing something with intention, you are blazing a path to success. Because if you are passionate about it, willing to work around whatever problems arise and sharing it with others, why wouldn't you succeed?

Is there something that you are striving towards in your life right now? Maybe add a dash of intention and see what comes out of it. 🍷

Until our next issue,



Editor's Note: I appreciate those who reached out to me about this issue and those who answered my questions. Spread the word that I am looking to tell YOUR stories. If you are doing something that you think is interesting; is having an impact on your church, your community or could impact our conference; let me know even if it has nothing to do with our upcoming feature. Reach me at: madelinepillow@vaumc.org.

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Deadlines

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Advertising/Tributes

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.

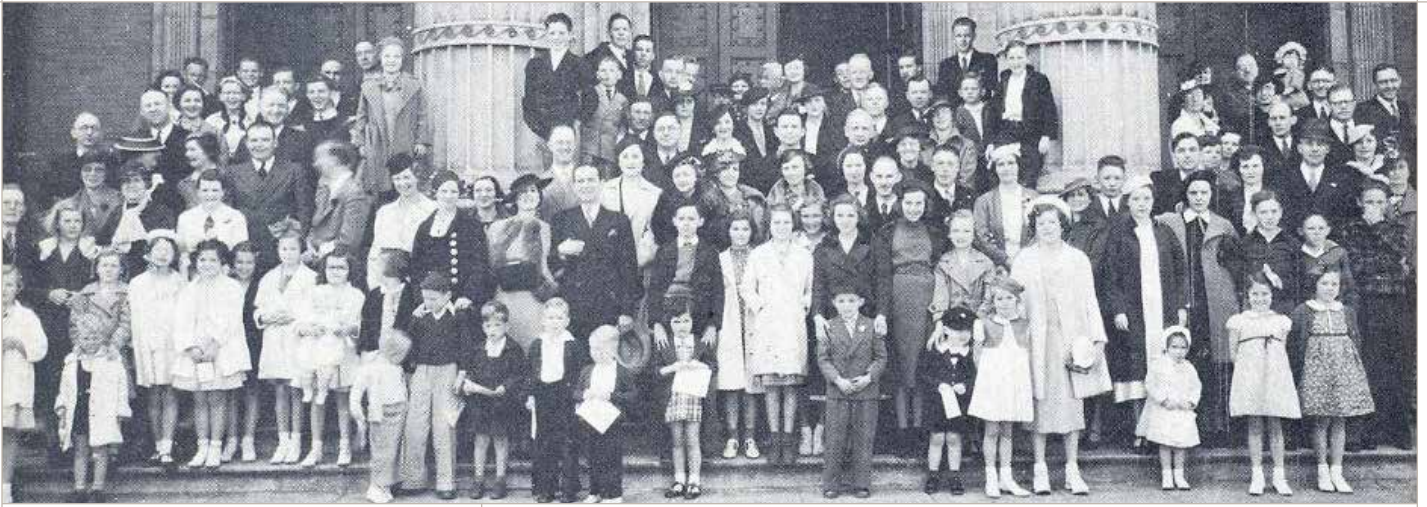
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(Above) Sunday school class at First UMC in Oakland, CA, 1937.
(<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~npmelton/oak31.htm>)



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LETTERS

PETITION FOURTEEN

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

Evangelical Fellowship responds to Annual Conference vote on Petition 14

We write in response to the Annual Conference's vote to approve Petition 14. Petition 14 resolves to petition the General Conference 2016 to remove its declaration that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." We share the Annual Conference's passion that persons with same-gender attraction be welcomed and loved in our churches. Our doors are wide open. They'll remain wide open. Indeed, Jesus Christ's atoning grace is for all: "whosoever will may come!"

It is not for loving the marginalized that we fault the conference but for turning a momentous corner. Fifty-three percent went on record deliberately, departing from decades of United Methodist practice and centuries of Methodist teaching. More than that, by written ballot the Annual Conference willingly took leave of a millennia of apostolic teaching. In doing so, as Alan Hirsch puts it, our conference minimized "the necessary tension between gospel and culture by eliminating the culturally offending bits."

Even more shocking, it rebuffed the Holy Scriptures themselves! Tragically, John Wesley's descendants in the Virginia

Conference have fallen victim to the age-old mirage that the present generation knows what no other before it knew.

The cavalier treatment of the Word of God is breathtaking. Not only has the Annual Conference now become a divisive voice in greater United Methodism, but a schismatic voice in global Christianity.

We are deeply saddened by the action of our conference. In concert with similar actions by other annual conferences and the disobedience of clergy performing same-sex ceremonies, our annual conference's action only jeopardizes the unity of our church and puts us on a course to inevitable division.

Many supporters of this petition expect the forty-seven percent who dissented to live and work with "business as usual." Such an attitude betrays an ignorance of Holy Scripture, a denial of the burden of God's Word and a naiveté of the gravity of our divide. The approval of Petition 14 is not a way forward for unity but a harbinger of division; not progress in love but regress in disorder; not advancement in civil rights but enslavement. Petition 14 is not about transforming a lost and confused culture, but a stark witness that the culture is transforming the church!

We realize the action of the Virginia Conference does not alter official

United Methodist teaching. Since only the General Conference can act for The United Methodist Church there is every reason to hope the General Conference will not change the church's stance on homosexuality. Please join together to pray for the General Conference and for our Virginia delegates. Above all, we encourage you to rely upon the sovereign God revealed in Jesus Christ.

At our annual Evangelical Fellowship conference banquet, Dr. William J. Abraham, Albert C. Outler Professor of Wesley Studies, challenged attendees to acknowledge the historical gravity of our church's present situation. Facing a possible fourth schism in the history of the church, he reminded us that the Holy Spirit has always guided and enabled the faithful to persevere in living and proclaiming the Good News of God's saving and transforming grace in Christ. He exhorted us to recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ and to uphold the "Gospel once for all entrusted to the saints." Let us keep this in mind as we hold to our sure and unfailing hope in the Triune God. While no one knows the future, we are confident that by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ's Church will prevail.

— H. O. Thomas, Ph.D.
President, Virginia Conference
Evangelical Fellowship

COMMENTARY

Young missionary calls for local, international mission support

This summer I had the opportunity to be a missionary in Eleuthera, Bahamas, with an organization called Bahamas Methodist Habitat (BMH) as a summer staff member. Bahamas Methodist Habitat was founded in 1992 after Hurricane Andrew and since then has grown to a year-around disaster response organization.

As a missionary I learned the work behind building a home. I learned the value of life and how talking to and being with the person right in front of you is the most important task that you can accomplish in a day. I was taught again and again that our schedule for getting things done is not the same as God's schedule. I saw how the global church works together to support mission opportunities.

I know that a few of you reading this are wondering, "Missions, in the Bahamas? This has to be a joke, right?" and if I had a dollar for every time I have heard that I could have personally paid to finish some roofing projects. Some projects BMH does include roofing, major and minor home repair, new home builds, community programs for children, work with the Zion's children home on Current Island and many other things which show God's love to a people that are already full of God's love. I didn't go to the Bahamas

to save lives, but in fact, the experience of being a missionary for seven weeks changed mine forever.

I wanted to write this for the Advocate to say that young people are passionate about many different ministries. Some of us, like myself, enjoy international construction ministries. Some enjoy homeless ministries. We, as a church, should be encouraging young people to explore areas of ministry that interest them. Without encouragement, I never would have taken this summer position, nor would I have taken a Calling21 internship in 2011 that has now led me to my post-graduate career.

I encourage you to support both local and international missions. Without funding and in-person

volunteers, organizations like BMH would not be able to support the communities they serve.

And lastly, I encourage you to take time to pray. Pray for those you know who are discerning a call to ministry. Pray for the ministries which our global church is providing. It is not easy to be in ministry. It is not easy to be a missionary. But I've learned through mission that God does not call us to the easy way of life but instead challenges us to look for new ways to make God's kingdom on earth. 📌

— Emily Howdyshell
is director of Emergent Ministries
at St. Luke's UMC in Yorktown
and alumnae of Calling 21, Virginia
Conference intern program.

—Photos courtesy of Bahamas
Methodist Habitat

Bahamian children get ready for the playground with young adult missionaries.



COMMENTARY

Tools needed for spiritual renewal

As I write this, I am preparing to go to the first session of the two-year Upper Room Academy of Spiritual Formation #37 meeting in Alabama. I'm also reflective of my journey as a disciple of Jesus and the blessings that have sustained me over the years. In the time we are living, I believe it is important to find and use every tool for personal spiritual renewal. "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

What we can do is to go to our roots. Several Scriptures have aided this journey:

"In returning and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength." (Isaiah 30: 15)

"Stand at the crossroads and search for the ancient paths." (Jeremiah 6:16)


"Every teacher who has been instructed about the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a house that brings out of his storehouse treasures old and new." (Mt. 13.52)

Richard Foster mentions various "streams of living water" that are traditions of renewal in the Christian community: charismatic, contemplative, holiness, social justice, incarnational and evangelical. Each Christian has strength in some areas and weaknesses in others. It appears to me that the streams are coming more and more together in a common wave of renewal.

What has helped me in my journey? There are major sources of renewal such as the Upper Room Academies of Spiritual Formation (There are two groups offering five-day academies in North Carolina, with our

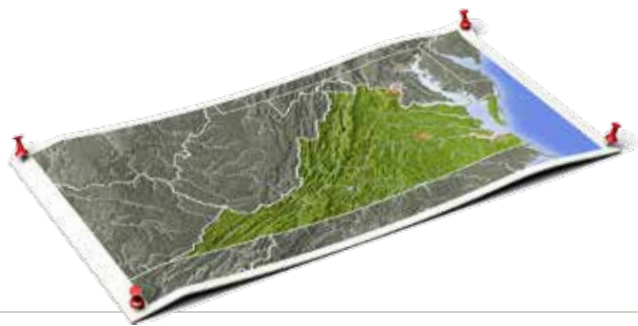
own Virginia five-day starting this October. There will be a two-year Academy starting in Pennsylvania soon – check the Upper Room Academy website for the Academy), Aldersgate Renewal Ministries (a Methodist-related ministry promoting empowerment by the Holy Spirit), Disciple Bible studies, the Kindred Project, the Spirit Care for clergy programs, a program for clergy and laity called School of the Spirit sponsored by Davidson UMC in the WNC conference and group and individual spiritual retreats.

These events have led me to daily spiritual practices that help sustain the Spirit in day-to-day living, such as fixed-hour prayers (see Phyllis Tickle), being shaped by the Word (lection divina) and examination of conscience and centering prayers. Spiritual formation, I believe, involves both wonderful mountaintop experiences and daily practices of drawing near to God.

The two-year academy is an investment in time and resources. It involves a lot of reading, travel, prayer and stepping out into new territory. It will include teaching, meditation, fellowship, silence and solitude, covenant sharing groups and mutual support. I commend this program and the five-day academy to all my sisters and brothers. 

– Paul Beighley
Retired Elder, co-pastor Brodnax
Charge, Farmville District





The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

Faith knows no age limit

By Mame Ward

What do 11- to 13-year-olds have in common with

a 90-years-young lady? Apparently a lot, according to Avé Holbrook, who was one of seven students confirmed in May 2015 at Sterling United Methodist Church, Arlington District.

"These kids have obviously been raised in Christian homes, and so was I," Holbrook said. "I was so proud to be allowed to further my Christian education with these young confirmands. Of course, it was with our pastor's and ministry administrator's approval," she grinned.

The entire class consisted of seven students: three boys, three girls and one young-at-heart. Most instruction was given at the church, but on one cold, snow-covered weekend in the winter, the group traveled to nearby West Virginia for a two-night retreat in a rustic cabin setting.

The confirmands' journey included religious classes each week from September 2014 through the third week of May 2015. Each confirmand was assigned a sponsor-mentor who took this faith journey along with them and also helped create a large banner to be hung in the church sanctuary sharing a Bible verse that inspired the confirmand's faith. Once completed, these

newly-minted voices for Christ stood, individually, before the congregation to present their statements of faith.

Because of her strong faith and commitment to continue learning all she could about God, Holbrook proudly stood among the other students at two separate services on Sunday, May 17, and proclaimed her faith in a 500-word description of her belief in God, how she came to her faith and how she plans to live it out.

In her youth, Holbrook attended a Presbyterian church because there was no Methodist church nearby. Nor were there additional classes to help children learn more about God. "You just absorbed your faith, week after week and year after year, by attending Sunday school and church," Holbrook said. "Still, I had so many questions left unanswered, even though I've read the Bible from cover-to-cover three times."

While wanting to deepen her faith, Holbrook also impressed her fellow confirmands with her energy, curiosity and joy. During their retreat at the cabin, Holbrook played in the snow, threw snowballs with her fellow confirmands, stayed up late playing cards and roasted marshmallows over the fire, a first for Holbrook.

"Avé was a delight to

have in class," said her instructor, Phil Mohr, Church Ministries administrator at Sterling. "She brought perspective to all of us. She was a hardworking, conscientious student and brought joy and laughter to the class. Avé had the patience of a saint with our middle-schoolers, and she has a deep abiding desire to learn about her God which deepens her faith at any age."

The Rev. Randy Duncan shared with the congregation that Holbrook's confirmation set church history as she became the oldest confirmand on record. But for a fellow confirmand, Nick Morris, her journey is an even more important reminder, "It's never too late to do something that you really want to do," Morris said, "and it's never too late to grow your faith. That's what Avé did."

— Mame Ward is a member of Sterling UMC, Arlington District

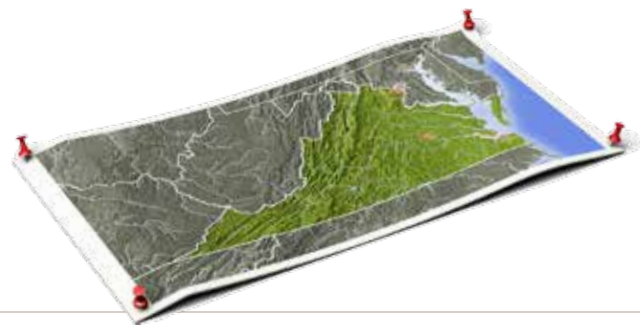


Holbrook presents her statement of faith to complete her journey.

Holbrook with her family and Rev. Randy Duncan.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



10 young adults travel to Cambodia



Cambodia mission team members:

Mary Burton
Joy Carrington
Carl Chapman
Katie Chapman
Nathan Decker
Ayshia Jackson
Adam Jenkins
Lauren Lobenhofer
LaSherr'e Osborne
Sarah Willis

Ten Virginia young adults went to Cambodia this past July as part of the first-ever Virginia Conference trip to Cambodia designed for young adults. They came from all over the state and held various roles within the church. Three were from campus ministries at Norfolk State University, five were clergy and two were youth ministers.

All were changed as they visited ancient worship sites near Siem Reap, shed tears at the Killing Fields near Phnom Penh and co-led a youth rally at Battambang Methodist Church around the theme of "The Armor of God."

Working with the young leaders of the Cambodian church, they co-led a five-district youth rally and a one-day Vacation Bible School for local churches. They joined in Sunday preaching and

worship, teaching break-out sessions on topics like Violence in the Media, Biblical Storytelling and Living a Spiritual Life. All were tasked with exploring what it means to be a Christian in a different culture and to make disciples through their relationships.

The team wants to thank the Rev. Glenn Rowley, director of Justice and Missional Excellence, who spear-headed planning for the trip, as well as all the churches who contributed to Initiatives of Hope and supported the trip with prayers and finances.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

Mission trip to Cambodia offers lessons in social justice

By Adam Jenkins

How does United Methodist mission translate into social justice? The team and I were asked to tackle this question on the first-ever Virginia Conference young adults mission trip to Cambodia. It was an exciting time that had us on tour to three of Cambodia's major cities.

After flying into Siem Reap, we were taken to Battambang via bus accompanied by a driver that would be responsible for all our travels for the majority of the trip. At Battambang Methodist Church, our task was to lead a youth rally of approximately 120 Cambodian 14- to 25-year-olds. This was a wonderful time of praise, worship, small groups, games, food, campfire, river trip, village mission and creation care.

Three pastors of the team and two of our youth ministers led small group breakout sessions. Each was given a different topic to discuss with the youths. Pastor Joy Carrington of Norfolk State University spoke about violence that pervades culture. Pastor Nathan Decker discussed how to find God in simple things. Pastor Lauren Lobenhofer taught how to interpret Scripture and apply it to daily life. Youth ministers Sarah Willis and Mary Burton talked about drugs and alcohol. These

were intimate discussions in which budding leaders were able to exchange ideas and find commonalities to help shape the future of the Cambodian mission.

In the villages, youths ran service projects. At the same time, our team

of Cambodia. We realized quickly that Battambang was a special place, and the true disparity found in the wide economic strata was made real.

Everywhere we went we encountered beggars, people pleading for us to buy their fruit or trinkets

Small group sessions allowed the Cambodian youths to talk about different societal topics.



leaders hosted Vacation Bible School-style activities to spread the word of God to the 3- to 6-year-olds in surrounding areas by encouraging them to look forward to a life of ministry, worship and praise with the Methodist Churches. It was quite amazing to see evangelism take the form of hair washing, song and dance.

After the week-long rally in Battambang, the team traveled south on our bus to Phnom Pehn, capital city

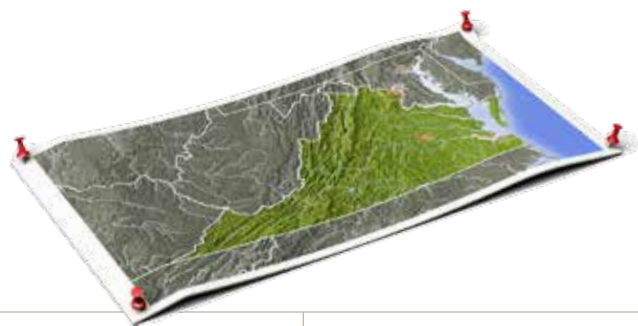
in order to make a little bit of a living. We also met those that had found landmines while farming their fields. Poverty took on a completely different face: an eye-opening reality. As a team, we saw both the great luxuries enjoyed by a few and the lack of basic necessities known by many.

The mark of genocide upon a war-torn nation was all too clear, and vis-

(Continued on pg. 10: "Cambodia")

The youths we met are eager and filled with the love of Christ. The Spirit is alive in them and is moving in a contagious way.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



flourished and is exceeding expectations by managing to achieve its lofty goals for autonomous function.

Such goals could not be met without mission teams such as ours. For each of us that went, \$750 was contributed to the youth rally, to help provide transportation, food, and fund mission efforts into the villages and out on the streets of Battambang. Without these important times of learning, teaching, spiritual rejuvenation and practice, the hard work of our missionaries would be dead in the water. It was clear to see that my team, those dedicated disciples of Christ, were transforming agents translating mission into social justice. 📌

— Northern Neck native Adam Jenkins is a certified candidate of the Virginia Conference, assigned laity pastor at First United Methodist Church in The Dalles, Oregon, and a graduate of the Claremont School of Theology.

The team meets with the United Methodist Women in Cambodia.

(“Cambodia,” continued from pg. 9)

ible reminders such as the Killing Fields and Toul Slueng torture center drew sharp emotions from our team. Pastor Carl Chapman spoke of feeling angry that such an atrocity was allowed to happen so recently at the hands the Pol Pot regime. Had we not learned anything from the Holocaust?

Despite this horrific tragedy, however, the younger generations are surprisingly optimistic and hopeful. Cambodia has much potential, and the youths we met are eager and filled with the love of Christ. The Spirit is alive in them and is moving in a contagious way. The mission in Cambodia is making tremendous progress with complete autonomy scheduled for 2019 or 2020. That is an incredible feat considering the mission is only about 15 years old.

This would not be possible without the dedicated work of Romeo del Rosario and other General Board of Global Ministries missionaries who have been hard at work in Cambodia during this time. Through their efforts, which are sponsored through the Advance, the Cambodian mission has

(Right) Lauren Lobenhofer and the pastor of Daunmeay Methodist Church share the joys and challenges of rural church ministry.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

When in Cambodia, dance as the Cambodians do

By Lauren Lobenhofer

I didn't plan to learn to dance in Cambodia. But there was no sitting off to the side at the Youth Rally in Battambang. If you weren't dancing, one of the youths would tug you onto the floor and begin to demonstrate the proper moves. In my experience, there's no such thing as a wallflower in the Cambodian Methodist Church.

I was amazed by the spirit of empowerment in the Methodist churches we visited in Cambodia. The people we met seemed to understand that ministry is not a spectator sport. In the churches we visited in Siem Reap, Battambang, Daunmeay and Phnom Penh, no one sits on the edges without participating in worship. Everyone sings praise songs and does hand motions. Beyond that, everyone prays aloud. Through the practice of Tong Sung Ki Do, worship looked like the first Pentecost. Everyone present would pour out their hearts to God by crying out to the Almighty: weeping or whispering prayers. The people we worked with took the definition of liturgy seriously as the work of the people.

This spirit of empowerment went far beyond just worship. It also showed through in hospitality. Whenever we were in a gathering where people

In my experience, there's no such thing as a wallflower in the Cambodian Methodist Church.

were speaking in Khmer, the folks around us went out of their way to give us guidance and to offer translation so that we could participate. It was seldom an assigned task, people simply recognized that we were out of our element and took it upon themselves to assist.

The place where this culture of empowerment was most obvious, though,

was in Christian education. I witnessed people in their early twenties helping teens with Bible study during the youth rally. I saw those same youths helping children learn songs when we led an afternoon of Vacation Bible School at Daunmeay Methodist Church. I even saw eight-year-olds assisting four-year-olds with crafts that they had only just learned themselves.

One of the Cambodian missionaries we worked with, Sophany Heng, shares this spirit of empowerment every day. Sophany came to faith through the work of Christian missionaries without the support of her Buddhist family. She answered God's call to ministry and, assisted by a scholarship from The United Methodist Church, went to seminary. But instead of simply using that

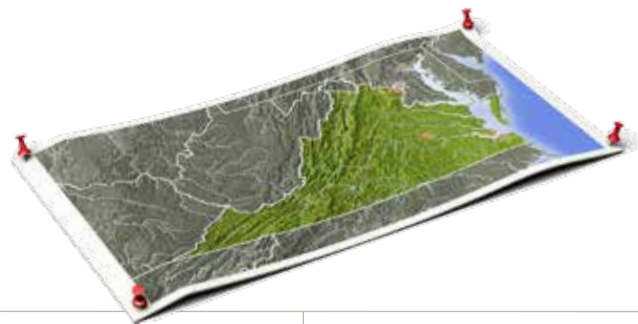
degree to help others, she uses it to enable others to serve. Sophany organizes United Methodist Women programming across Cambodia so that women in local congregations have the resources and support to minister to their communities. She aspires to go to school for social work.

The Holy Spirit is moving in Cambodia. God is making disciples and empowering them to serve. Through the Virginia Conference's ongoing relationship of prayer and support with the Cambodian Methodist Church, we get to be part of this powerful work God is doing. May this same spirit of empowerment grow not only in Cambodia, but in all of our churches as well. 

— Lauren Lobenhofer is associate pastor at Bon Air UMC, Richmond District. Pictures courtesy of Lauren Lobenhofer.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Pastors of small congregations told to motivate church members with plans

By Madeline Pillow

Nearly 150 pastors of small congregations were told to motivate their parishioners with plans, execute those plans and then celebrate victories in order to be vital. They were participating in Small Membership Congregation Pastor Training held July 11 at the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone.

"Churches that are in decline don't want to even talk about tomorrow because they don't believe in tomorrow," Dr. Lew Parks, Wesley Theological Seminary professor, told the group.

Parks encouraged participants, pastors of congregations with fewer than 150 in worship, to fight against narrative collapse by finding their church's story and maintaining it for their congregation. He said pastors are the "framers of reality for people" which solidifies their role as leader in preserving their church's story.

The event centered around the theme "His Eye is on the Sparrow" (from the hymn and Matthew 10:29-31).

Parks, who teaches United Methodist polity, leadership and administration in small churches at Wesley Theological Seminary and directs the Doctor of Ministry program, is also pastor of Calvary UMC in Lemoyne, Pa. Over the past several years, he has been working with lay and clergy leaders of small churches around the country.

"It's so powerful that he himself is overseeing a small church and can offer insight to pastors in similar circumstances," said Mark Ogren, Virginia Conference director of Congregational Excellence.

The Rev. Chris Fair, pastor of Antioch UMC, Fredericksburg District, agreed. "It was nice to hear from someone who could speak not only from an academic standpoint but also as a part-time pastor," Fair said.

Parks had a two-part lesson for the morning session of training. In session one, he noted that small congregations make up the majority of churches in the conference, so their importance should not be understated.

In part two, Parks said a number of churches are in various stages of vitality from growing churches, churches in a stasis, to declining churches. The difference in vitality in these churches is in part not finding and upholding the church narrative.

Pastors find meaning

After lunch, attendees broke into small groups based on geographic location to learn more about each other and share their ideas for best practices in their congregations.

Fair said his small group talked about the pastor as an "outside thinker," noting that to be effective in this role, pastors must be trusted in order to introduce new ideas that will be viewed in a positive light rather than seen as criticisms.

Bobby Thompson, Danville District lay leader who helped organize the event, said participants told him they found the event useful. "To me, the sincerity of their comments indicated that pastors benefitted both from the information presented and being able to have conversation with other small congregation pastors as to the rewards and challenges of minister-



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

ing to small congregations," Thompson said.

Bishop Young Jin Cho led closing worship.

The event was sponsored by the conference Small Church Leadership Team and the Center for Congregational Excellence.

This focus on congregational training for small membership churches was initiated in January 2011 when now-retired Bishop Charlene Kammerer named a team of laity and clergy to the Small Church Leadership Initiative Task Force. The July 11 event was created in response to a report completed by the team, feedback and planning since their creation.


Feedback is now being

received to improve future gatherings. Parks suggested that future training include a closer look at topics such as how churches can grow larger or maintain healthy equilibrium.

Ogren said he hopes this training will remind attending pastors that the conference values them and their work as well as give them new ways to see the strengths of the small congregation. He also said he hopes the presentation by Dr. Parks helped pastors look at their churches with new eyes.

"Allowing the pastors to see and look for vitality in their congregations and encouraging them to learn the deeper narrative

of their congregations—such as founding stories, characters and saints and community and regional history—are things that can be put into practice," Ogren said.

A similar event will be held 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at Belmont UMC, Richmond. This day of training will focus on helping laity and clergy teams from small congregations bring new vitality to their churches. The event will again feature Dr. Parks and will be live-streamed from Belmont UMC to five additional locations throughout the conference. 

— Madeline Pillow is editor of the Virginia United Methodist Advocate.

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The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Mission Encounter offers lessons on societal struggles, personal spiritual growth

by Madeline Pillow

More than 190 clergy and lay men, women and youths gathered at Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center July 24-26 for Mission Encounter, an opportunity to learn about being partners in God's global mission and to grow spiritually through study and worship.

Participants chose among three studies to focus on over the weekend: a geographic study, "Latin America-People and Faith," a spiritual growth study, "Created for Happiness: Understanding Your Life in God" and an issue study, "The Church and People with Disabilities."

For Lori A. Valentine de

Segovia, study leader for the geographic study, the class was a challenge.

"The challenge to the instructors was to teach nearly 3,000 years of history for approximately 35 countries in one weekend," de Segovia said. "In short, we scratched the surface."

Her class started by defining the terms "Hispanic," "Latino" and "Spanish" as well as what is Latin America. During class discussion, students commented on the pervasiveness of certain societal issues and the similar struggles that Latin American and North American countries have faced, including gender, violence, slavery and indigenous prejudices.

"It felt like an oppor-

tunity to give a voice to those who often are not part of the traditional discourse in our country," de Segovia said. "This opportunity was a way that the UMW belief of transformational education helps us to diversify who we have personal and spiritual connections with."

De Segovia said she hopes this study "will serve as a starting point in which to syncretize multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic education in our Methodist communities."

Darlene Runaldue, instructor for the workshop "Created for Happiness: Understanding Your Life in God," found her study to be a bonding and renewal time for both herself and her class.

Earlier in the year, when she was asked to lead a class at Mission Encounter, Runaldue agreed with enthusiasm and anticipation because of her love for teaching and discipleship. But when she learned the title of the study, Runaldue said she felt a sense of dread. "How would I ever lead a class on happiness," she said, "when I myself am so out of sync?"

Although she still felt apprehensive at Mission Encounter, Runaldue decided to tell the truth to her class, "I humbly stood before my class and told them I felt like the least qualified person to lead such an important study and that if they would bear with me we might be able to help each other," she

Voices of Youth 2015 perform for Mission Encounter participants.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

“Are you more
than you have
become?”

Meaning, are
there interests
and passion
inside of you that
you have yet to
allow God to use
and, if so, what
might they be?

said. “I asked if anyone in the class had had an especially tough year, and if so, we would be mindful of the title of this study and not work toward being happy, so much, as seeing happiness as a journey. It was the best I could do. I felt I had to be honest.”


The class had time for discussion in order to better pursue questions that were brought up by participants. One poignant question was, “Are you more than you have become?” Meaning, are there interests and passion inside of you that you have yet to allow God to use and, if so, what might they be?

The class also talked about happiness and how Christian thought has changed over time. Happiness and joy used to be interchangeable, but now, Christians feel that one fulfills the other. This wasn’t true in John Wesley’s time. There were no “happy hours” or people remind-

ing him to go to his “happy place.” As Runaldue noted, “We have forgotten that our happiness and holiness are integrally related. We can only be truly happy when we are doing, behaving and acting on our love for God and out of God’s love for us.”

It was a class that, although it caused apprehension, created a meeting place where all participants realized they were on a journey together. The class departed almost in silence, deep in reflection.

This reflection has left a mark on Runaldue. “I cannot thank my class nor the Mission Encounter school enough for asking me to do such a difficult thing,” Runaldue said. “It was like holding the mirror to my own face. I’ve grown. I’m still a work in progress, but at least, I have a better understanding of this ‘journey’ I am on. I pray it be so with all of you.”

Mission Encounter is a cooperative event sponsored by the Virginia Conference Board of Global Ministries and Virginia Conference United Methodist Women. 

— Darlene Runaldue is director of Program and Adult Ministries at Grace UMC in Manassas. She is certified in Christian education and a trained Stephen Ministry leader.

— Lori A. Valentine de Segovia is on the Commission on Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy and is an alternate delegate to 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences.

— Madeline Pillow is editor of the Virginia United Methodist Advocate.

— Photos by Betsey Davis.



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Adult Sunday school movement



John Wesley teaching his Sunday school class,
by Alice Barber Stephens, 1897
Heritage Auctions, Public Domain

helps make disciples



***“For where two or three
gather in my name,
there am I with them.”***

– MATTHEW 18:20; NIV

By Madeline Pillow

United Methodists have been at this for a long time – educating others about Christ. And Sunday school has been a main feature of this education. At first, the focus of Sunday school was solely for poorer children who were not receiving education of any kind. United Methodism’s own John Wesley, before the larger movement created by Robert Raikes, started the first Sunday school for children in Savannah, Ga.

When education became more formalized, Sunday school then focused just on providing religious education. It later became an institution for all ages.

(Continued on next page: “Sunday school.”)

("Sunday school," continued from previous page.)

In the late 19th century, a push began to create adult Sunday schools based on the Word and taught by trained leaders. But it was Dr. John W. Shackford, part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, who began the first real school at Lake Junaluska in 1917 to educate leaders for adult Sunday school classes. The idea was for short-term, intensive schools that would provide those with training to teach their classes.

The popularity of this idea, and the successful experiments that followed, led to its adoption by the Methodist Episcopal Church and, eventually, United Methodism.

From these experiments came a system that developed trained specialists. During a time before curriculum relative to teaching the Word existed in institutions of higher learning, teachers with appropriate training were important. At the time, some said that these training schools provided more education than what pastors received at their institutions.

In its early beginnings, Sunday school was not just about education and fellowship, it was also about evangelism. Sunday school's scope today seems to have changed again to one of mainly discipleship and fellowship. And while it can be argued that Sunday school is declining, it is still a strong part of religious education for many churches. And there's a larger purpose: As Mark Ogren, Virginia Conference director of Congregational Excellence, says, it is to continue making disciples.

And this is in line with the Wesleyan tradition. Wesley manifested his theology through educational efforts: forming disciples through instruction in faith, molding people's behaviors through classes and directing their desires towards the right ends.



Wayfarers Class, Fredericksburg UMC

The Wayfarers Class of **Fredericksburg UMC, Fredericksburg District**, focuses on personal spiritual growth and small group accountability in the Wesleyan tradition. Meeting for over 43 years, the class began as a new young adult class and over the years has grown in size to include all ages. They have learned to best reach this goal through their approach to the material and to one another.

"We sit in a circle so that there are no barriers between any of us: no tables, chairs, lecterns or anything else to prevent us from seeing and interacting with everyone else in the class," says attendee John Mann.

The class has even found ways to break out of the four walls of its meeting space. For the past nine years, the class has written and published a devotional book called "The Wayfarer Mosaic." Inside is a devotion for each week of the year and Scripture verses/passages for each day of the week that relate to the theme of that week's devotion. The writing of "Mosaic" started as the class wanted to lead through their personal journeys. Each year, copies are given to church staff and homebound members. The rest are sold so proceeds can benefit church ministries. The devotional booklet is also a way for new members to connect with the class.

This class is tied closely to the church's ministries, collecting an offering each week. Much of their support goes to children participating on mission trips and summer youth camps. They also support a local homeless shelter with lunches on a quarterly basis.



Francis Asbury Class, Asbury UMC

At **Asbury UMC, Harrisonburg District**, the Francis Asbury Sunday school class has a long history, beginning at the end of World War II to welcome back service men and women to the community and the church. James “Jerry” McCulloch, class leader, says that prior to this the group had been disbanded for lack of attendance. The class is now a strong one with 40 members, averaging 28 in attendance.

The class implements technology not only to reach a larger audience but also to enrich the class. On Sunday mornings, the class is streamed on the Internet so others in the community, especially the homebound, may participate.

The class has also used Skype to enhance their lessons. Two years ago, the class sponsored a 20-week Bible study with a United Methodist church in Stavropol, Russia. Both classes in America and Russia used the same study guides, and the Russian pastor served as a translator for class sessions.

Parenting classes

“Parents” is a new topic for adult Sunday school classes at **Woodlake UMC, Richmond District**, and at **Del Ray UMC, Alexandria District**.

As Kathy Frazier, director of Adult Ministries at Woodlake UMC, says, the classes make sense because “they are a natural complement to children and youth programming that occurs during the same time period.”

“A Spiritual Parenting Class” at Del Ray UMC is led by Janie Mitchell, graduate of Wesley Theological Seminary with a doctorate of ministry in Spirituality and Story. With a growing number of young families in the church, Mitchell started leading the class in 2011. Initially it was a five-week course introducing spiritual parenting. Interest grew, and so the class continued. This fall, this five-week class will again

“We decided that one of our goals would be to make sure we weren’t just a class that learned but a class that acted.”

ANNIE SEAGO, CLASS FACILITATOR

be offered to new families who have joined the church.

This class centers around the idea of spiritual parenting which, according to Mitchell, is “seeking to be centered in God, to be open more and more to the divine work of the Spirit deep within ourselves as we become the person we were created to be.” Spiritual parenting allows parents to understand that their children have an innate connection to God and, within the class, personal stories show this glimpse of reality.

The class uses a number of resources to supplement learning, including the Word. Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son has been used as well as Psalms and Philippians.

The class delves into discussions of navigating pop culture and the challenges of electronics.

This class has allowed the church to also realize classes of benefit for the children which has created both a drama club and a sports ministry.



“The Sensational Groupinaires,” from Memorial UMC, York River District

Back to Basics

For some, growth came from going back to basics whether in the format of the class or the material.

At **Epworth UMC, Lynchburg District**, the Bible Study class started in 2005 with a focus on studying the texts. In September 2014, the class started over with Genesis and has now moved to Leviticus. Each week, class members cover a couple of chapters and discuss the content of the text as well as the social context. This course has resulted in a doubling of attendance.

At **Mount Vernon UMC, York River District**, Bob Dishman, one of the teachers, found that having enough people to share responsibility for leading guarded against burnout and provided variety.

“The more teachers we can share the responsibility with, the better off the class is,” he said. And sometimes all this takes is to realize the talent waiting quietly in the

(Continued on next page: “Sunday school.”)

("Sunday school," Continued from previous page.)

room. "I am constantly looking for teaching gifts in others who may simply want to be asked to teach Sunday school," Dishman said. "Sometimes we just need to ask."

A youth mission trip in 2000 was the idea behind the Sojourners' Sunday school class at **Newport-Mt. Olivet UMC, Roanoke District**. Adults who accompanied youths on the trip had a desire for materials that were challenging and social justice-oriented.

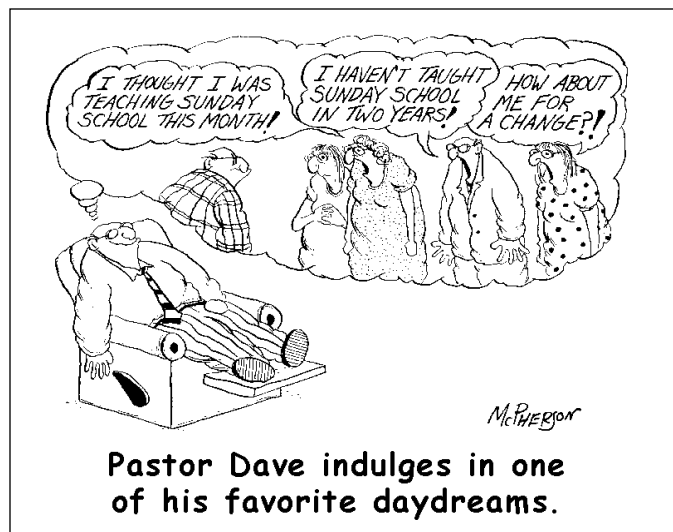
"We decided that one of our goals would be to make sure we weren't just a class that learned but a class that acted," said Annie Seago, class facilitator.

Their first project at acting was to encourage recycling at the church, especially at church dinners. They purchased a recycling bin and made signs encouraging recycling. Since beginning, they have sponsored two "Taking a Stand" weekends at the church where speakers talked about specific topics related to the United Methodist Social Principles. Still today, even though the class has seen members move and others come in, the group is among the most active in outreach activities of the church.

Mark Daniel, **Memorial UMC, York River District**, is leader of The Singing Sunday School class. What has now become a multicultural ministry all started because of a love for old Methodist hymns. It meets every Sunday, and those arriving early for the service can hear the group singing.

The class started after a men's "Breakfast Sunday" when Daniel brought in a mandolin to sing hymns. Time for Sunday school came and went as a large crowd gathered to sing the hymns and suggest the next song. This continued for several weeks at the entrance of the fellowship hall. The pastor dubbed them the "Singing Sunday School." New members, who had wanted to find a place to participate and be active in ministry, joined the class. The group began to travel to other churches and participated in a regional Gospel Bluegrass event.

From this group, another has also formed—The Sensational Groupinaires. The Groupinaires were an existing trio, but after a traveling performance by the Singing Sunday School, Mark Daniel joined to make a quartet.

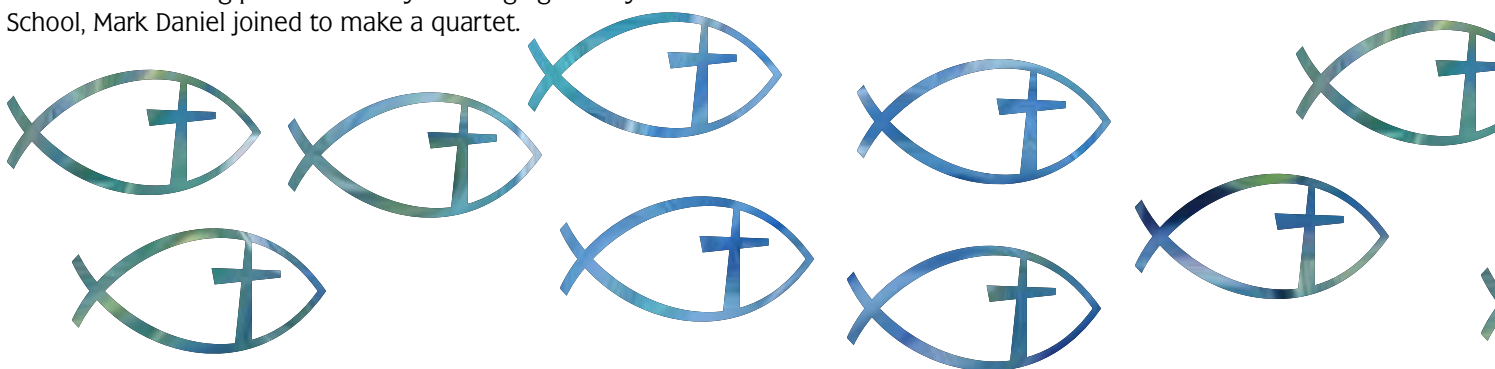


Moving from Members to Disciples

For many of these churches, new ideas have been tried and old ways have been brought back into practice. Members have left and new members have joined. The most effective classes teach discipleship by focusing on strengths and not seeking a cookie-cutter fix. The key is keeping up with the changing times.

As Kathy Frazier, director of Adult Ministries at **Woodlake UMC, Richmond District**, says, "Woodlake has experienced both seasons—times where we have had no Sunday morning programming available and other times when programming was offered. We continue to evaluate Sunday mornings against many factors including time restrictions, attendance, correlation to worship attendance, topical matters and others."

And when you're like these churches, identifying strengths and offering classes that enrich the church and surrounding community, you might be able to agree with Mark Daniel's statement, "We're just getting good." 🍷





What's going on in your church parking lot?

By Becky Downey

In January of 2013, a young couple went to the senior pastor and asked if he had seen what was going on in the church parking lot between 9:30 and 10:45 every Sunday morning. He glanced out the window and didn't see anything unusual. But on closer inspection, he saw many people leaving after the 8:30 worship service and sitting in cars waiting for their children to be dismissed from Sunday school. As the 11 a.m. service time neared, people would sit in their cars before going into the sanctuary.

The pastor asked me to meet with him. After discussing the situation, we decided, as per the couple's suggestion, that a new adult Sunday school class should be offered. After many prayers and getting the go-ahead from the Educate and Equip Committee and approval from the church council, plans were made to start a new multigenerational adult Sunday school class to begin in September 2013. One hundred fifteen persons not currently in a Sunday school classes were contacted. Letters were sent and personal contacts made. Literature was perused and selected based on what potential class members were saying they were interested in studying. The most requested curriculum was a Bible study starting with the New Testament.

As the start date got closer, more than 50 people signed up for the class orientation meeting. Prospective class members told us two main reasons they were not already in a Sunday School class.

First, they felt it was too difficult to go into an established class because friendships had already formed, and they feared they wouldn't fit in. Secondly, people feared being called on in class for an answer to a question, an opinion or to read. I heard this over and over. Even after almost two years of being together, people still express appreciation that they are never called on. Volunteers are asked to read, and students are encouraged to share and to add to discussions, but no one is ever put on the spot.

At that first meeting, introductions were made, the study book shared and questions were answered. But most

importantly, people were told how this class had come about and how each of them had been prayed for during the months leading up to the first class meeting. Then they were asked to be in prayer for our class and its members as we moved forward.

I also shared my belief that I expected God to be in our midst, for Jesus to show up in our thoughts and words and the Holy Spirit to be present in our hearts, especially during this hour together. For this reason, I believed the Sunday school time was sacred. This is a time of study and prayer and listening to what the Scriptures say to us. This 45-minute time of study is critical for growing in knowledge of Scripture. More importantly, it is about growing our relationship with Christ, and we get to do this in the company of other Christians. Our theme verses as we began this journey and as we continue together are Ephesians 4:12-16: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

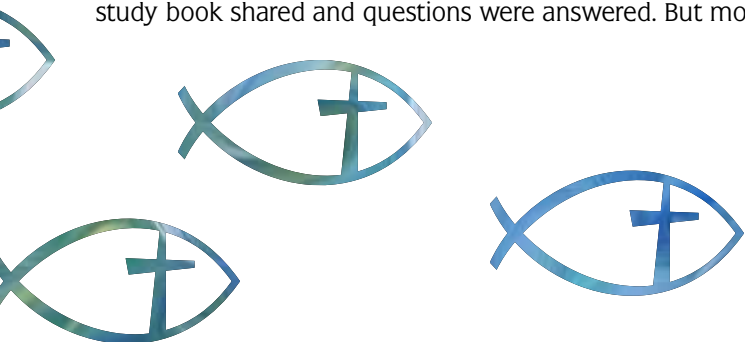
After a few weeks of meeting together and finding our identity as a class, we became the "Generations In Faith Together" Sunday school class because we were made up of several generations. The G.I.F.T. class is still going strong today. After two years we have settled into a rhythm, but are definitely open to new people who may want to explore joining us for study and prayer. We currently have about 30 members on roll.

The class has been active in participating in fundraisers to support missions of the church. And, of course, there have been fun social events as well.

Yes, there are still people that leave after early worship. There are a few sitting in their cars waiting for their children to be dismissed from Sunday school, and there are a few early birds that wait for the 11 a.m. service to start. But we continue to encourage anyone without a class to come join us and grow in faith, knowledge and friendships.

So I pose this question to you: What is going on in your church parking lot? 🐟

— Becky Downey is part of the Faith Development Ministry Team of Bridgewater UMC in the Harrisonburg District.



DISCIPLES HELPING TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD



▲ A variety of “Random Acts of Kindness” happened in Danville on Monday, June 29. The 21 children and youths, plus adult chaperones, from **Fairview UMC, Danville District**, participated in their first “Get RAK’ed” day and spent time traveling the streets of Danville doing Random Acts of Kindness that included baking and delivering chocolate chip cookies to fire stations; volunteering at the hospital; making, packaging and delivering laundry soap and quarters as gifts to local laundromats and E.R. vending machine; hand delivering bottled water; buying meals; and giving gift cards in stores.

Seeking to improve the overall worship experience, the **Edinburg Parish, St. John’s and Wesley Chapel of the Harrisonburg District**, decided to go back to basics. A six-week class was offered on the basics of music such as harmony, rhythm, theory, notation and chords. For some, it was a refresher class in basics from elementary school, and for some it was the first music instruction they had ever received. The class was open to all. ▼

The VBS children of **Trinity UMC, Richmond District**, collected canned goods for **Sherbourne UMC’s** food pantry in late July. These volunteers were key in distributing and filling bags for the crowd of recipients. The 4th and 5th graders, pictured here, also visited Shalom Farms where they delivered a new chicken coop they had made. ▼



► For the fourth year, the Neighbor Helping Neighbor mission, started by **Kenbridge UMC, Farmville District**, completed construction and landscaping projects on seven homes in the local community. This year, nine other local churches supported this project by providing volunteers and food for the workers. These churches included other United Methodist churches: Antioch and Williams, Victoria and Crenshaw. Other denominations also contributed. Projects included landscaping, building ramps, exterior repairs and painting.





On Sunday, July 19, the worship service at **Wesley UMC in Alexandria** was a rousing and joyous occasion. Bishop Young Jin Cho led the service, assisted by the Rev. Lydia E. Rodríguez Colón of Wesley UMC and the Rev. Emmanuel Nkrumah of **Ghana Wesley UMC**. Music was provided by the Ghana Wesley Choir under the direction of Ebenezer Allotey and a combination group known as "The Friends of Wesley" led by Pastor Lydia. Pastor Lydia honored the ministry of Mrs. Dale Swartz, a long-time member of the church whose unwavering faith sets an example for us all. In his message, Bishop Cho stressed the importance of prayer in our lives. The Bishop was presented with two presents: a handmade prayer shawl and a framed print of "George Washington at Valley Forge." ▼



Karen Waddell, Vacation Bible School director at **Main Street UMC, Suffolk, James River District**, took almost 100 pies in the face on the last day of VBS. She had issued a challenge to the kids to raise enough money to buy one goat for Heifer International. If they did, she would get pies in the face. The kids exceeded their goal and bought more than one goat, forcing the director to make good on her promise. ▼



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EVENTS



September

School for Children's Ministries

Sept. 12, Timberlake UMC, Lynchburg

The School for Children's Ministries is on the road again featuring the same school at four different locations on four different dates. The second will be 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 12, at Timberlake UMC, 21649 Timberlake Rd., Lynchburg. Learn "Extraordinary Lessons from Ordinary Objects" plus three more workshops. A .5 CEU offered. Only \$20 per person. For more information and to register online, go to the conference website, www.vaumc.org, click on "Conference Calendar" and the date.

"Parson of the Islands"

Sept. 12, Main St. UMC, Emporia

The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation will hold its annual meeting Saturday, Sept. 12, at Main St. UMC in Emporia. Dr. Gary Ziegler will do a portrayal of Joshua Thomas, itinerant minister on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay who was known as "The Parson of the Islands." The meeting will be followed by lunch. Guests are welcome. Cost of lunch is \$10. For more information, call Jim Mott at (804) 301-0734. To register for lunch, go to the conference website, www.vaumc.org, click on "Conference Calendar" and the date.

Discipleship Circles facilitator training

Sept. 18, Virginia United Methodist Center, Glen Allen

Discipleship Circles facilitator training will be 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday, Sept. 18, at the Virginia United Methodist Center in Glen Allen. Church leaders (clergy and laity) willing to lead Discipleship Circles in order to help increase church vitality are invited to this training session. There is no charge for training. Lunch and a training manual will be provided.

Registration deadline is Tuesday, Sept. 15. To register and for more details, go to the conference website, www.vaumc.org, click on "Conference Calendar" and the date, or contact Cheryl Edley-Worford, conference director of Inclusivity and Lay Leadership Excellence, at cheryledley-worford@vaumc.org or (804) 521-1154.

Goodson Preaching Academy

Sept. 21-24, Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center, Blackstone

The Bishops' Foundation will sponsor the 2015 Goodson Preaching Academy, "Craft and Creativity: Preaching in the Context of a Rapidly Evolving World," Sept. 21-24 at the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone. Presenter will be Dr. Paul Scott Wilson, professor of Homiletics at Emmanuel College, Toronto, author of many books on preaching and past president of the Academy of Homiletics.

The event is designed to energize your preaching and help you find creative ways to build disciples in your church. 1 CEU will be awarded. For more information and to register, go to the conference website, www.vaumc.org, click on "Conference Calendar" and the date.

RE3 intercollegiate conference

Sept. 25-26, Shenandoah University

RE3 (Rethink, Reclaim, Renew), overnight retreat open to students from colleges and universities across Virginia, will be held at Shenandoah University Sept. 25-26. What do you need to rethink? What does the Church need to rethink? What ancient spiritual practices can be reclaimed for renewing the church today? Worship and TED-style talks led by students will explore ancient prayer practices. Guest speaker is Sarah Bessey, author of "Jesus Feminist," "Out of Sorts" and "My Practices of Mothering." Bessey is also an award-winning blogger at sarahbessey.com. Cost is \$10 per student. All money goes to Imagine No Malaria. For more information, go to re3va.org or follow RE3 on Twitter at [@rethreeva](https://twitter.com/rethreeva).

October

Mid-Size Church Training Day

Oct. 3, Providence UMC, Richmond

Teams of clergy and laity from mid-size congregations with an average worship attendance between 150-349 are invited to a training event Saturday, Oct. 3, at Providence UMC in Richmond. Theme is "Shift: From Membership to Discipleship." Keynote speaker will be Phil Maynard, author of "Shift: Helping Congregations Back into the Game of Effective Ministry." The event will also be live-streamed to five other locations across the conference. Cost is \$25 and .5 CEU will be offered. Group discounts are available. More information and registration can be found online at www.vaumc.org/mid-size-training.

Annual ARMS Retreat

Oct. 7-8, Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center, Blackstone

"Journey of a Lifetime" will be the theme of the Association of Retired Ministers and Spouses (ARMS) annual retreat Oct. 7-8 at Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center in Blackstone. Dr. Joseph Eldridge, chaplain at American University, will speak on "Looking Back/Looking Forward: Viewing Justice Inter-Generationally." Dr. Kenneth Patrick, chaplain at Blue Ridge Hospice, will speak on "Journeying through the Winter of Life with the Lord." Fee is \$50 per person (\$25 if this is your first ARMS retreat.) Register now to get the early bird special rate. For more information, e-mail Harry Kennon at RevHarry@aol.com.

Tearing Down the Walls: Ways of Doing Justice

Oct. 24, First UMC, Salem

The Roanoke, Danville, Lynchburg and Staunton districts are co-sponsoring "Tearing Down the Walls: Ways of Doing Justice" 9 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, at First UMC, 125 W. Main St., Salem. Leader will be Shane Clariborne, nationally-known speaker and founder of The Simple Way Christian community in Philadelphia that has helped birth and connect radical faith communities around the world. This event will focus on the meaning of Christian social justice; how we can break down contemporary walls of injustice and how we can build hope and empower persons to overcome walls of separation and engage others on social justice issues. Youths, young adults and older adults are invited to attend this intergenerational event. Early bird registration fee of \$25 for adults is available until Sept. 17, after which adult registration will be \$30. Student registration is \$10. **Registration deadline is Oct. 17.** Approved for 0.5 CEU. For more information and to register, go to the conference website, www.vaumc.org, click on "Conference Calendar" and the date.

Small Congregation Training Day

Oct. 31, Belmont UMC, Richmond

Teams of clergy and laity from small congregations with an average worship attendance between 1-149 are invited to a training event 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at Belmont UMC, Richmond. The Rev. Dr. Lewis Parks, Wesley Theological Seminary professor who has specific interest in the small congregation, will be featured speaker focusing on practical tools needed to bring new vitality to small churches. The event will be live-streamed to five other locations around the conference. Cost is \$25, and .5 CEU will be offered. Group discounts are available. More information and registration can be found online at www.vaumc.org/small-church-training.

November

5 Talent Academy

Nov. 10, Ebenezer UMC, Stafford

This faith development event focused on small group ministry will be hosted live, Tuesday, Nov. 10, at Ebenezer UMC in Stafford and will be live-streamed to nine other conference locations. The Rev. Dr. Jim Harnish will be keynote speaker. Theme is "Stir up the Fire: Wesley's Way of Making Disciples." Cost is \$25 and .5 CEU will be offered. Group discounts are available. More information and registration can be found online at www.vaumc.org/5Talent.

Bishop Cho calls on all churches to join Sept. 6 'Day to End Racism'

Bishop Young Jin Cho has issued a call for all churches and pastors of the Virginia Conference to join our brothers and sisters in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in observing Sunday, Sept. 6, as a "Day of Confession, Repentance, Prayer and Commitment to End Racism."

In the wake of the murders of The Emanuel Nine (the senior pastor and eight members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C.), the Council of Bishops of the A.M.E. Church has asked every church, temple, synagogue, mosque and place of worship to designate Sept. 6 as a Sunday "to focus on race ... and be reminded that out of one blood, God created all of us to dwell together in unity."

"The Emanuel Nine and so many others who have died or been discriminated against and suffered because of race cannot have their lives taken, simply to be a footnote in history," the A.M.E. bishops said in their statement.

"Many over the last two weeks have spoken about how extraordinary the Emanuel Nine were and their families who in their loss and pain proclaimed forgiveness," the A.M.E. bishops said, "but they represent the majority of African Methodists, and in fact Black Christians. We seek to live God's Word. We will go forward from here with forgiving, but also leading and demanding that the nation act on race."

You can read the entire A.M.E. Council of Bishops' statement by going to the World Methodist Council website at <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org>.

"Your participation in this special call will be greatly appreciated," Bishop Cho said. 🇺🇸



Devotions from International Lesson Series

LIVING THE WORD



The Rev. Kendra Grimes is chaplain and director of Church Relations at Randolph-Macon College. She holds a B.A. in Religion and Psychology from Berry College in Rome, Ga., and a Master of Divinity from Candler School of Theology, Emory University. She transferred from the North Georgia Conference in 2006. She is the mother to Ella (11) and Lucas (8) Swager. Her charge conference membership is at Duncan Memorial UMC in Ashland. She enjoys writing, cooking and gardening.

Sept. 6, 2015

Praying for One Another
Acts 4:23-31

Do you notice how this scene echoes the Pentecost story? Peter and John have been released from prison and gather with their friends for prayer in a difficult and dangerous time. There is active persecution of the Church; yet they gather, share Hebrew Scriptures and pray. Their prayer is not for deliverance nor vengeance, but rather for boldness to speak God's word. Verse 31 (NRSV) says, "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." Turn back to Acts 2 and read the Pentecost story. Too often we think of Pentecost as a single event in history, something interesting (or even bizarre) that happened long ago. But today's passage shows that the reverberations of Pentecost continued in the Book of Acts. It is a reminder that Pentecost is an ongoing reality, not an event in history. When we pray for boldness to speak God's word to the dangerous, the difficult and the unjust realities around us, the wind still blows, the ground still shakes! Though you may think of Pentecost as a liturgical event in the spring, the Spirit is always at hand (even as autumn creeps into our Virginia climate) for those who are seeking to follow the risen Christ. In what ways can you and your congregation pray for more boldness to know and speak God's word in the world?

Sept. 13, 2015

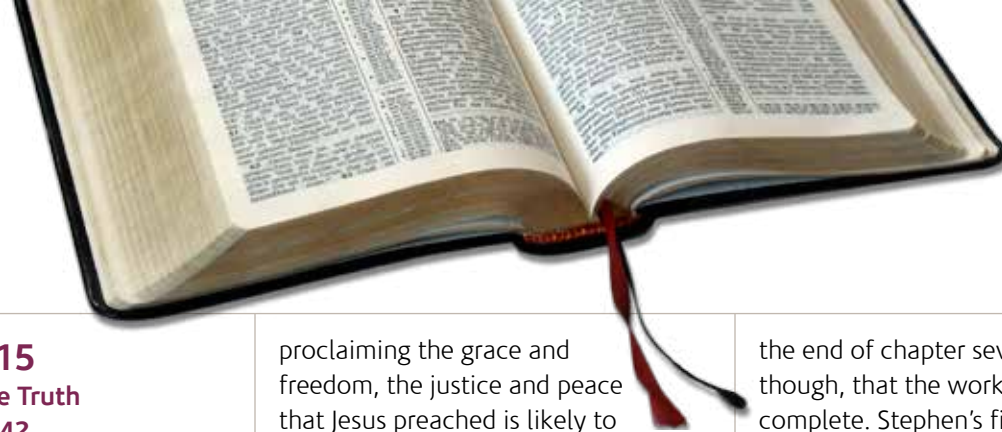
Sharing All Things
Acts 4:34-5:10

This text comes to us with interesting timing. This is a season we know as "Stewardship Season." My guess is that no church in the Virginia Conference is using a resource that lifts up this story as part of its stewardship plans. We fear that the message is, "Give everything to God... or die!" Church growth experts are not recommending this approach, and we shy away from this text. But maybe the story is more

pertinent than we realize.

Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of property and bring a portion of the proceeds to meet the needs of those in the church community. That no one was in need was an essential aspect of the Church from the beginning (Acts 2:44-45). Generosity was essential to Christian identity. Barnabas is introduced as an example of generosity, and his story takes only one sentence to tell (Acts 4:37). He gives all that he has, although only a tithe would have been required by tradition. Ananias and Sapphira are introduced as an example of the lack of generosity. They gave the public appearance of "giving all" to the Apostles when, in reality, they kept back some for themselves. It is their deception that the author is highlighting. We wonder if they had brought a tithe of 10 percent, or if they had given a third or a half of the value of the land, would they have been celebrated as generous also? My guess is "yes!" The author is contrasting Barnabas' open heart and transparent action with Ananias and Sapphira's deception.

Where do we fall on this spectrum of generosity when we consider how we share our resources? Do we deceive ourselves about how generous we are? Do we deceive our neighbors, being sure they are aware when we give but never aware of what we keep? Despite the affluence of our culture, most of us shy away from talking about our assets in direct terms. This stewardship season we can all be in prayer honestly asking God to work in us to save us from the temptation of deception. We can ask God to make us more like Barnabas and save us from our tendencies to embody Ananias and Sapphira. It's not fear that God will strike us dead in an instant as we place our pledge card in the offering plate that motivates us. It's the awareness that deception will strangle our souls, killing us and our churches spiritually, and we may not even recognize it as it happens. This stewardship season, let us pray for ourselves and for all our brothers and sisters in faith that we may be children of Barnabas led by generous and genuine hearts.



Sept. 20, 2015

Witnessing to the Truth

Acts 5:27-29, 33-42

This passage captures an interesting moment in the development of the early Church. The apostles have again been arrested for preaching in Jesus' name in the Temple. Council members are reaching their limit in tolerating the blatant disregard the apostles have for the Council's authority. Some were ready to put the apostles to death, but Gamaliel makes a rational argument that martyrdom might only inflame the situation. He suggests that if the Christian movement is of human design, it will go away on its own, given time. Likely, with sarcasm, he noted that if the movement is of God then they (the Council) can't stop it anyway. The apostles are flogged and set free, rejoicing that they suffered for the sake of Christ.

We must be careful not to read this passage through an anti-Semitic lens. The point here is not to vilify the Jews as a group. Even the apostles in the text still thought of themselves as Jews, Jews who had experienced Jesus in a way that those in Jewish leadership positions had not. What the apostles were up against was not "the Jews" but rather "the status quo." As Christians today, we should not be misled into thinking we are in struggles against other groups and other religions. Instead, like the early apostles, following Christ is more likely to put us in conflict with the status quo than with any other particular religion or group. We must expect our experience to be more like Jesus' experience. Preaching and living His word are not likely to draw a huge crowd of support nor are they likely to get us ignored. Instead,

proclaiming the grace and freedom, the justice and peace that Jesus preached is likely to unsettle the settled, to shake up those who are comfortable and to get us into the spotlight in ways that may make us uncomfortable. As we consider the witness of the early church in these first chapters of Acts, we must pray that we, too, will have the boldness to preach the Word of God (Acts 4:29) and the strength to celebrate even the difficulties we will encounter as we seek to live lives of faithful discipleship (Acts 5:41).


Sept. 27, 2015

Remembering God's Faithfulness

Acts 7:2-4, 8-10, 17, 33-34, 44-47, 53

This text is Stephen's speech to the Council when he was brought up on charges of blasphemy against God and against Moses. Stephen recounts key figures in the story of God's activity in history through Israel. He begins with Abraham and also speaks of Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon. Notice that rather than defending himself against specific charges or arguing about what he had said or done himself, Stephen testified to what God had done in history. By doing so, he takes the spotlight off of his actions and puts it on the actions of God. Then, he turns to his accusers, accusing them of being unfaithful to this God who has worked wonders, their God who has been faithful to them through the ages. The effect of Stephen's account of God's faithfulness and the question he raises about the Council members' faithfulness leads to their anger and decision to put Stephen to death: They drag him out of the city and stone him to death. The verses at

the end of chapter seven remind us, though, that the work of God is not complete. Stephen's final moments are reminiscent of Jesus on the cross, and his vision lit with the promise of resurrection. Acts chapter 7 tells of us Stephen's death, but it is written to illustrate the promise of God that Stephen's death is not the end of the story of God's work in the church and in the world.

We are inspired by Stephen, the first Christian martyr. What courage it must have taken to not argue the minute, legal points of whether or not he had broken the law. Instead, he gave testimony to the work of God in history because he understood that his own actions were a part of the work of God and the story of God in his own day. We, too, must seek to live in such a way that our words and our actions are congruent with the Word of God. Our mission must be God's mission. Our story must be God's story. What an exciting prayer to make, that we, like Stephen, may understand our lives as centered in the life of God. 

CLERGY & DIACONAL



DEATHS



Rev. Gene Cary Gee, 81, of Lady-smith, died July 21, 2015. Prior to his 23 years of service as a minister in the Virginia Conference, he served

in the United States Navy as a pilot, and operated the family business, Cary Gee Music. He is survived by his wife of 59 years, Mary Helen Gee; son, Bryan Gee (Maureen); daughters, Amy Tillapaugh (Charles) and Molly Gee; and eight grandchildren.



Rev. James D. White, 84, died on Aug. 8, 2015, at the home of his son, Mark, in Newburg, W.Va. His wife, Rev. Virginia Mae Richards Con-

drey White, preceded him in death on March 23, 2014. Surviving are three sons and three daughters: Rev. John D. White and wife, Beverly, of Richmond, Mark D. White and wife, Yolanda, and Rev. James H. Condrey and wife, Cyndi, of Belpri, Ohio, Elizabeth Ann White Woodward of Swoope, Brenda Condrey Shurm Pinti and husband, Mario, of Clarksburg, W.Va., and Donna Condrey Shane Kraus of Delaware.

Born to missionary parents, he attended Woodstock School, in the Himalayan Mountains of North India, graduating in 1947. He completed his M. Div. from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond in 1958. Rev. White pastored churches in Alabama and Virginia through June 1972. After 46 years in the ministry, Rev. White retired from the United Methodist Church on June 17, 1998. He attended West Milford UMC and the Bridgeport UMC.

Mrs. Patsy Ann Goupie, mother of the Rev. Elizabeth Lutz, died July 7, 2015, at St. Joseph Hospital in Michigan at the age of 74. She is survived by her husband, daughters and four grandchildren. A memorial service was held July 11 in Plymouth, Mich. Rev. Lutz is the pastor of the Cape Charles-Capeville Charge in Northampton County on the Eastern Shore District.

Jane Margaret Enright Teates, mother of the Rev. Tim Teates, died July 21, 2015. She was a member of Bethel UMC, Alexandria District. Services were held July 25 in Warrenton. Rev. Teates is a retired minister in the Winchester District.

Mrs. Mary Glenn Stone Copenhaver, mother of retired minister, Rev. John D. Copenhaver Jr., died July 23, 2015. She is survived by her sister, two daughters, son, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. She was a member of Trinity UMC, Roanoke District, where she was active in women's

circles and her husband taught Sunday school for many years.

Betty I. Biler, mother of the Rev. Dr. Brenda Biler, died Aug. 8, 2015. The service took place Aug. 12. Biler is senior pastor of Fredericksburg UMC, Fredericksburg District.

BIRTHS

The Rev. Dr. Justin S. White and his wife, **Katy**, announce the birth of a daughter, **Elizabeth Stewart White**, July 15. Mother, Katy and "Ellie" are doing well. Justin is lead pastor of Pleasant Valley UMC, Arlington District.

The Rev. Jung Pyo (JP) Hong and his wife, Aimee, and son, **Oliver**, announce the birth of a daughter, **Thea Sunghyun Hong**, born July 30. All are doing well. JP is pastor at Culmore UMC, Arlington District.

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FROM THE BISHOP



From Head to Hands and Feet

Dear Friends,

May the grace and peace from our risen Lord be with you.

It is already September. Summer vacations are over, and a new school year has started. Children are going back to their schools, and we are in a new life rhythm. Choirs start singing again, and new sermon series have begun. Again, charge conference season has come, and churches have started preparing for a new year. It is an exciting month!

The theme for our charge conferences this year is "From Members to Disciples." We will continue to wrestle with our 2015 Annual Conference theme. Churches will be invited to review and reflect upon our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This month our Advocate will focus on Sunday school, especially adult Sunday school classes.

Adult Sunday school classes have been playing an important role in our

faith education. They are providing places to grow in our faith and to share fellowship. Some Sunday school classes are proud of their long history and strong support networks and intimate human relationships. Sunday school classes have been the backbone in building up churches and strengthening their ministries.

However, facing the challenges of today, we need to ask the question if Sunday school classes are sufficient to fulfill our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Is Sunday school effective in enabling us to grow together as disciples of Jesus Christ? Do Sunday school classes provide us with a fruitful system for making disciples? If not, what other alternatives do we have?

Lately, I started reading a book "The Class Meeting" written by Dr. Kevin M. Watson. Dr. Watson is a promising young scholar of Wesleyan studies, teaching at Candler School of Theology. In this book, Dr. Watson talks about the history of the class meeting and emphasizes the need to reclaim this essential small group experience. As many of us know, the class meeting was key as one of the pillars in the Methodist movement. The people called Methodists met weekly and examined and shared their spiritual lives and encouraged each other to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the class meeting began to decline in the middle of 19th century. There were many reasons for this decline. Dr. Watson says that one of the reasons was the rise of the Sunday school movement. Another important reason was that Methodists became more affluent and less and less comfortable talking to each other about the details of their lives as followers of Jesus Christ (p. 54). According to Dr. Watson, these changes shifted our attention away from the focus on Christian experience and becoming deeply committed Christians.

Here I would like to share with you a question about Sunday school. Sunday school classes have many strengths and positive aspects for our growth, espe-

cially increasing our knowledge about our faith and Christian life. But are these classes effective and fruitful in helping people experience God's transforming grace and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ? Are these classes helping our faith move from head to hands and feet?

Dr. Watson shared his own experience. Recently he took part in a Sunday school class that read a book on global poverty. Each week the leader prepared and led the session well, and all the participants had a great time watching video clips and participating in lively discussions on the subject. All of them were challenged and learned many things about global poverty. But Dr. Watson wondered if anyone's life actually changed as a result of this study. The people might have gained some new ideas through this study, but their lives may not have experienced God's transforming grace, although they may have had some guilty feelings.

So, Dr. Watson strongly emphasizes the need to rediscover the class meeting for renewal of our churches. I was moved by his argument and agree with the need to go deeper in our discipleship. I recommend that you read this book. In closing, I want to share this question again: Do our churches have an effective system for helping us to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ? Does Sunday school produce sufficient signs of transformation of our lives by God's grace? Do our churches effectively help our faith move from head to hands and feet?

May our Lord continue to challenge us and raise questions on our discipling ministry today. 🍷

In Christ,

Young Jin Cho

ONE LAST WORD

Camp Rainbow was life-changing experience

The summer of 2015 has for me, most certainly, been one for the books. The Connections 21 internship broadened my horizons and allowed me to step foot into unexplored territories that irreversibly opened my eyes and heart to the whole of God's kingdom.

One of those life-changing experiences was the Camp Rainbow Connection summer camp for individuals with intellectual disabilities. My fellow interns and I were assigned to go to the retreat center in Blackstone to help with the July week-long camp. Initially, feelings of uncertainty and nervousness were at the forefront of my mind along with a few negative images and preconceived, uneducated notions and thoughts about adults who were intellectually impaired.

In conversation with the other interns, I discussed how I almost always felt "sympathy" for those who have mental disabilities along with those who care for and are related to them. I never truly saw them as they are, but saw them solely as someone to feel sorry for, always assuming they were constantly in misery, discomfort and unhappiness.


As I walked in, I remember feeling anxious and prepared to "make" these individuals happy. I believed there was

no way they could experience happiness on their own, but could only be made happy by the hands of another. When I entered the various rooms the campers were in, it was not the scenario I had played in my head. It wasn't a room full of people weighed down by their disabilities. It also wasn't a room of fully-functioning individuals overseeing the campers and distancing themselves at the same time. What I saw was a family.

I met the campers one-on-one. I was able to speak, eat, sing, play, watch movies, dance, listen and learn from them.

My soul ignited with joy as I witnessed the presence and kingdom of God before my eyes. I saw that, like myself, they were people, CHILDREN OF GOD, family members, lovers of life, lovers of all kinds of people. I had never before seen such community. It was amazing!

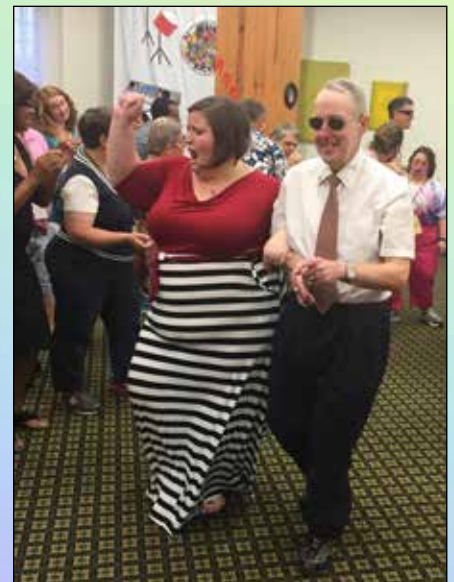
I am still in awe at what I witnessed at Camp Rainbow. Even as I type this I cannot fully express the joy I experienced from being in the presence of the campers. People I originally thought were in "misery" and a constant state of sadness, were in fact people of joy, dancing, teaching and helping prepare donation boxes of food.

This experience was an incredible teacher. I thank God and Camp Rainbow for opening my eyes and helping me grow in love as I continue to explore the various hues and colors of the rainbow that is God's kingdom. 

— Elijah S. Ferebee
2015 Connections 21 intern



One of the most memorable parts of Camp Rainbow is the dance night. Everyone got dolled up to dance and be introduced in style with a catwalk to start the night (below.)



(right) 2015 Connections 21 interns: Sara Nichols, Michelle Hettman and Elijah Ferebee.



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