

Advocate

Keeping Christ in

Christmas



Connecting with the



Virginia Advocate

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

FROM THE EDITOR



Neill Caldwell
Editor

Linus was
right



It was depressing. I walked into a store in early October, expecting to be overwhelmed by Halloween decorations, and I was. But all that stuff was behind the Christmas stuff!

Christmas in October? “Ye gods!” as my stepfather liked to say when he saw something astonishing.

Eventually, I believe, the big stores will just leave their Christmas notions out all year, like the friend who throws a sheet over their Christmas tree each year rather than take it all apart. (By the way, a pre-lit tree can save your marriage, in case anybody wondered.)


Yes, Virginia, Christmas is big business – always has been, I guess – but seemingly bigger business every year. I heard a TV report the other night that this Christmas season is forecast to further support our national economic recovery, with families ready to spend more than they did last year on presents, decorations, food, etc. That’s great, I guess.

Like most of you, I grew up with certain Christmas traditions. Most of mine, fortunately, involved going to church. On Christmas Eve the town’s Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches got together for a “Community Service” that was held early, just after suppertime, allowing my best friend and me to attend Midnight Mass at the Catholic Church. I went for the music and the “magic” of being among the first to celebrate Christmas. (And, as my buddy liked to say, just in case we got to the Pearly Gates and St. Peter said something like, “OK, anyone who’s ever been to Mass can use the Express Lane...”)

But there were years in my childhood when the “magic” in Christmas had more to do with how many presents you received and whether or not that special gift that you really wanted was visible. For that I am truly repentant.

Over the past few years, my Christmas has been less about presents and more about spending time with family, or with a good book and a hot cup of Russian tea. We don’t really decorate much because we will be on the road again, traveling to a favorite aunt’s to help her trim her tree. (We’ve also added a tradition of baking cookies with our three precious great-nieces, which is less about cookies than it is about spending a few hours with them.)

Since celebrating Christmas is not biblically mandated, people can come up with their own traditions. I don’t begrudge anyone their presents. And if more spending helps our economy, it’s hard to argue with that.

But to me, marking the birth of our Savior should be about remembering the shepherds and the angels and about living our lives as he instructed us: Love God. Love neighbor. Repeat. 

Neill Caldwell

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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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Correction:

In the November Advocate, page 22, the Events page, the 2015 Ministers' Convocation will be held at Blackstone, not Blacksburg.

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COMMENTARY

Why care about Ebola? Hint: Not because you will catch it

By Kathy Gilbert

In the photo (below), the little body barely makes a bump under the white sheet.

Strangers, dressed in head-to-toe protective clothing, are taking the girl's body away. Was her last memory of those same strangers attending to her after her mother died of a disease she could not understand?

Ebola killed her too.

The photo caption said, "The girl, who watched her mother grow sick and die, died alone and terrified."

That is just one snapshot of what daily life is like in West Africa now that Ebola has killed almost 5,000 and affected 10,000 as reported by the World Health Organization.

The Center for Disease Control and WHO, as well as many medical experts, have said that Ebola is only transmitted from human to human by bodily fluids and that it is harder to catch than the common cold.

With little danger of

catching the disease, why should the Ebola outbreak in West Africa matter to the rest of the world?

Look again, there is a little girl in that photo.

Ebola is not a threat in the U.S., but it is devastating to countries that had little health care infrastructure before the virus came and have far less now, said Dr. Tim Jones, state epidemiologist for the Tennessee Department of Health and a lifelong United Methodist.

Even though the U.S. has just experienced the first case and death of someone infected with Ebola in West Africa but diagnosed after coming to the U.S., Jones is certain the disease will never spread here as it has in countries that have few resources to fight the outbreak or treat patients.

What weighs heavier on his mind is the awful price Ebola is extracting on our neighbors in West Africa.

"From a Christian perspective of caring about and taking care of our neighbors, it is easy for us not to appreciate how much this is affecting the general society there," he said.

People are losing family members and then being shunned by their communities. There are food shortages, schools are closed and people are being told to stop many of their cultural norms, such as hugging or kissing the dead.

"When you have people deeply entrenched in social customs and suddenly someone is saying you can't go to your mother's funeral ... we need to be remembering that in our prayers," Jones said.

"I think there are going to be a lot of long-term devastating consequences to this even when the medical aspect comes under control," he said. "For every case there is a family, a community, a church ... all of whom are going to experience deep needs."

A humanitarian response is desperately required. "It is really important for everyone, including the safe community, to do everything we can to support and respond to the need," Jones said.

He said several of his colleagues who work with the Center for Disease Control have been deployed to West Africa.

President Obama has sent the military to build 17 hospitals. Jones said he could be needed if the frontline medical people are so overburdened that they start asking for other experienced health care volunteers.

"This is really a situation where volunteers are great and resources of various groups and agencies is great, but we absolutely ... need to avoid any situation where people are going over there independently and not coordinating with



LETTERS

other agencies (like the CDC)," he said.

Volunteers also must consider how fragile the health care systems are in these countries.

"Liberia started with a fragile medical situation in the first place, but right now there is one hospital in the entire country that is still open for anything other than Ebola," Jones said.

People are probably at more risk of getting into a car accident or having a medical emergency such as appendicitis because there is nowhere to go in Liberia for medical care.

Jones warns that people shouldn't think they can easily get back to the U.S. if there is a medical emergency. "I don't want to scare people, but it is not a situation where you can say 'I have insurance and I can be medevaced out' because that is not the case for these three countries now."

This health crisis is not like a typhoon or earthquake. After the earthquake in Haiti, thousands of people flocked to the country to help – and they could. People know how to clean up and rebuild.

The bright media lights are turned on West Africa now, but those lights will dim. "We see lots of sad pictures, we put a check in the mail and then we forget quickly," Jones said. "I think anytime there is a situation like this our prayers and response is really important." 

-Kathy Gilbert is a reporter for United Methodist News Service.

Church has ceased to be relevant

The November Advocate's article about Jim Griffith's "Reaching New People" workshop seems to show him missing significant implications of the fact that, as Griffith puts it, "The bad news is that it is no longer 1955." I was 12 years old in 1955 and remember the time when, as Griffith notes, church membership was considered a prerequisite for any form of leadership standing in the community. But what Griffith does not point out was that for nearly everyone, not just leaders, it was the church that gave them their sense of community and belonging, and that for many people today the church has lost that function and is not likely to ever regain it.

"Reaching New People" cannot change this, because increasingly those who are approached now find their most meaningful sense of community and belonging through daily interaction with Facebook and other social media.

This means that for the church to grow it needs to be seen as truly meaningful at a deeper level than just community, and here too the news is bad. Increasingly people, especially young adults, are finding the church's literal insistence on such things as a virgin birth and the physical resurrection of a three-day-old corpse to be affronts

to reason. And then there is the matter of presenting God as someone who offers forgiveness only through having his own son tortured to death. Saying it is because "God loves you" only adds to the disconnect with people who know that they themselves are capable of unconditional mercy and see the Christian view of God as setting a poor moral example that they cannot follow and do not wish to instill in their children.

Many will say that the church cannot move away from eternal truths in order to make itself more relevant. However, those "truths" are creedal statements that were once highly debated, based largely on the theology of Paul and the Gospel of John. In many ways they contradict the Jesus of the first three gospels, who proclaimed in the Lord's Prayer a God of such great love and mercy that all he requires to forgive is that people sincerely first seek reconciliation with one another. Combined with his emphasis on outreach to those who are needy in body and spirit, this is a Jesus who offers great appeal, if the church can break free from ancient creedal restrictions to proclaim him. Perhaps a motivation to do this can be found in the fact that Paul himself said the apostles of Jesus insisted that he was wrong about the gospel. For he sarcastically refers to his harshest critics as "super-apostles"

(2 Corinthians 11:5), a term that in his time could have referred only to the original apostles who walked with and were taught by Jesus himself.

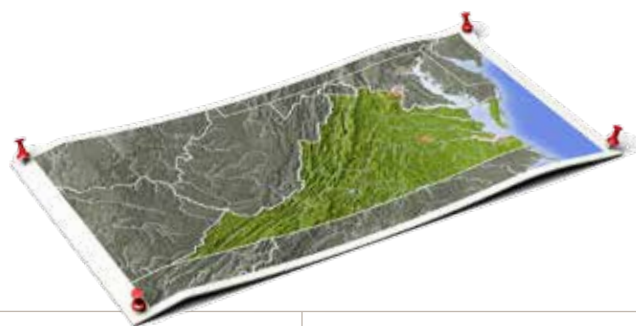
The willingness or lack of willingness to explore greater relevance through biblical options that some may find challenging will help determine whether The United Methodist Church is a church of the future or just a dead church walking.

Rev. Richard Hagenston
Roanoke

[Editor's note: Hagenston is a United Methodist elder and graduate of Wesley Theological Seminary. Several years ago he left the pastorate on honorable location status with the Baltimore-Washington Conference and now lives in Roanoke. His Charge Conference is with South Roanoke UMC. He's the author of the book *Fabricating Faith: How Christianity Became a Religion Jesus Would Have Rejected*, published recently by Polebridge Press and available from Cokesbury.]

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



UVA Wesley Foundation in midst of capital campaign

By Neill Caldwell

CHARLOTTESVILLE - As the University of Virginia Wesley Foundation approaches its 50th birthday, its leaders are planning a unique celebration: a facelift for the building that the ministry has occupied for half a century.

The Wesley Foundation is in the midst of a capital campaign with a goal of \$1.5 million. It's been in silent phase, but "went public" about the time that students returned to campus for the start of a new semester.

It's an innovative approach for a campus ministry, at least in the Virginia Conference. Without

a model to follow, director the Rev. Deborah Lewis, alumni and students have plunged ahead with plans.

"As with a lot of churches," Lewis said, "we did not have a long-range plan for what our facility needs would be 10 years out. We have not looked ahead like that until very recently."

"We're at a turning point," adds Lewis. "Almost everything in our structure is original to the building and in need of repair or replacement – boiler, lighting, non-efficient windows and doors, flooring, and lack of air conditioning. At the same time, students use our space more than ever before. Every room is in use multiple times a week, and students are on site from the time we open up in the morning until lock-up at midnight."

Lewis believes the build-

ing is crucial to the ministry being offered.

"It's that crucial 'third place' for students, offering something between dorm/roommates and classroom/libraries. The 60-plus students we see each week deserve an inspiring environment where they can study, share meals, worship, engage together in small groups, confront the faith and justice issues of our time, and organize to reach out to the broader community in love."

Over the past 50 years, the Wesley Foundation has been involved in the lives of more than a thousand college students. More than 50 of those have gone on to become ordained clergy.

Plans started with the normal conversation about repairs to the aging building. But the realization of the long list of needs and the smaller amount of dedicated conference funds available for property maintenance led to the idea of the campaign.

As the capital campaign shifts from silent to public phases, leaders are happy to announce that more than \$600,000 has already been pledged.

Plans include:

- ❖ Refurbish the main building – built in 1965 – including a remodeled entry/lobby and office area, replacing the HVAC system, hazardous materials abatement, improve handicap accessibility, add bathrooms and a new

The Rev. Deborah Lewis (center) is the latest in a long line of UVA campus ministers who have touched the lives of more than a thousand students.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



An architectural drawing shows the new outdoor terrace that will be a part of the planned renovation to the home of the Wesley Foundation at the University of Virginia.

outdoor terrace facing Alumni Hall;

- ❖ Complete renovation of the small cottage beside the main building. The cottage was built in 1940 and houses four students each year in a residential community;
- ❖ Create a new apartment upstairs in the main building that will house three additional students, almost doubling the ministry's residential community. The three-bedroom apartment will include a kitchen and laundry space.

"The addition of residential space will provide increased revenue, enabling us to be proactive about funding and sustaining our ministry as we move forward," Lewis said. "We're committed to completing this project without debt."

"A building is like a

person," says plan architect Andy Thomas, also an alum, "it needs a little bit of maintenance now and again."

"I came to the Wesley Foundation for the first time in 1986 when I was a First Year at UVA," said Lewis, "and I'm pretty sure we have some of the same couches we had then."

Lewis said that other campus ministries in the conference, that have similarly aging buildings like at UVA, are watching to see how this all works out. "If our experience can help other campus ministries think about their space, or about fundraising, then I'm glad we can help. The only thing that would be a failure for me is for someone to say, 'Why bother? Campus ministry is dying.' And that has not happened. People believe in our mission and that's been encouraging and

exciting."

"Never in a million years would I put capital campaign on my bucket list for ministry," she adds, "but for me, as a pastor, I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't where I believe God is calling us."

The campus ministry's next door neighbor, Wesley Memorial UMC, made a significant gift to the campaign in September.

There are still several naming opportunities available.

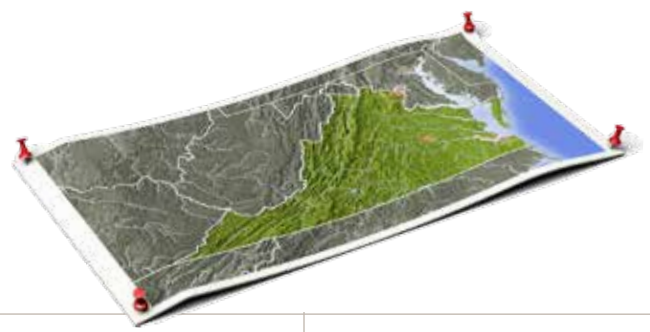
To make a pledge online, visit The UVA Fund or the Network for Good. You can mail a check to the UVA Wesley Foundation at 1908 Lewis Mountain Road, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

For more information, you can watch a 10-minute video at wesleyatuva.org/ccvideo, or you can contact Lewis at deborah@wesleyatuva.org or (434) 977-6500. 📞

-Neill Caldwell is editor of the Virginia Advocate.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Verona UMC bees create honey that's sold for mission

By Neill Caldwell

You can't really say that the Rev. Bob Weeks' bees are pets. But sometimes he talks about them like they are.

After years as a beekeeper, Weeks moves around the two hives set up near Verona United Methodist Church with a relaxed and comfortable presence. As he gave this reporter an up-close-and-personal tour, I can't say I was comfortable, but Weeks explained enough tips and tricks in how to treat the bees to make it doable.

"Bees have certain behaviors and work within a system," Weeks said, "and once you learn that system you can work with them safely."

He's been keeping bees since the 1980s, as many as a dozen hives on his farm. He's also helped Virginia Wesleyan College Chaplain Greg West set up a hive in Chesapeake.

When Weeks was appointed to Verona a few years ago, he saw five acres of property behind the church that would be a perfect habitat for honey

bees. It didn't take much convincing of his congregation. In fact, there were beekeepers in the church and one person who had taught the subject at the community college. There's even a store dedicated to beekeeper supplies in nearby Fishersville, within a 15-minute drive.

Weeks did talk to folks at the bank that borders the property and other church neighbors just to make sure it was OK. He brought a glass "observation hive" into worship one week and did a sermon series on caring for God's creation.

"There's been a lot of positive response," from the congregation, he says. "I think bees can show us an important message about going out and being caretakers of God's creation."

Honey bees have been dying off across the U.S., due to something called "Colony Collapse Disorder." Weeks said the blame seems to be chemicals in the atmosphere that damage the bees' ability to navigate the way back to the hive. Both state and federal officials have been pleading for more people to take up beekeeping. Fear of attack from those Africanized "killer" bees keep most people from starting the hobby, but working with bees in the proper manner can be a totally safe experience. And the bees, of course, are incredibly crucial to our agricultural systems.

Each of these man-made hives, explained Weeks, contains about 60,000 bees. He hopes to add two or three hives next year. A normal, healthy hive produces about 50-60 pounds of honey each year, although Verona's hives have each produced closer to 70 pounds.

Weeks has worked around bees enough to sometimes work on the hives without the usual protective gear, although he said he is taking more precautions as he gets older (and after a bee stung him squarely on the tip of his nose). For benefit of today's visitor, he will gear both of us up. It takes several minutes to pull on the thick jacket and gloves, the netted hood and the rubber cinches around the pants legs that will prevent an unwanted bee in your britches. It feels a little like walking around in a space suit, but I'm glad to have it when the bees start buzzing.

The first trick is to approach the hives from the rear. Getting in front of the single entrance/exit point of a hive can be a dangerous move, as the bees will attack to defend themselves. (There's a "Danger!" sign in front of the hive explaining just that.) Approaching from the back and pulling the top of their house off means the bees get a bit annoyed, as if we interrupted important work, but not into attack mode.

Weeks pulls the frames,



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



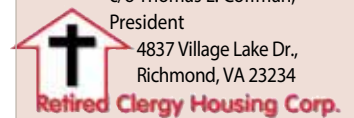
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where the bees build their honeycombs, brushes the bees away and puts them into a collector. The honey is then put in bottles by volunteers from the church and then sold for various mission projects that the congregation supports.

Because the surrounding fields are mostly full of clover, the honey produced by the Verona UMC bees is very light in color. Bees have a range of about two miles from their hive.

The bees each have a role, including the queen and the drones, who are all about reproduction. The

hive produces honey, wax, a kind of glue or cement, and a "jelly" that's sold as a "super food" in health stores.

Most insects that sting you, Weeks said, aren't honey bees but are hornets or wasps. Bees are totally focused on the mission – pollinating plants and returning the pollen to the hive – and don't worry about people. But as mentioned, they will attack when their access to their home is threatened.

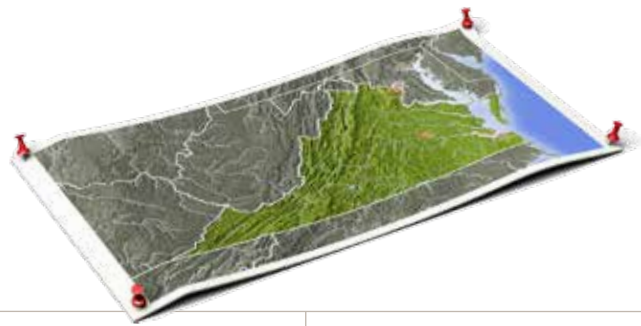
Any expansion of the project may depend on several individual "inves-

tors" from within the congregation who would put up the \$250 that it costs to establish a new hive, then get a portion of the honey produced. "Plus that would give people in the church more ownership" of the project, Weeks says.

The mission honey has been very popular, selling out quickly when it becomes available. It's funded several adult mission trips to Haiti and youth work teams as well. 🐝

-Neill Caldwell is editor of the Virginia Advocate.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



30 Virginia pastors travel with Bishop Cho to Korea 'Light to become children of God'

By Teresa K. McRoberts

On Easter Sunday morning, April 5, 1885, Henry Appenzeller, a Methodist minister from America, arrived in Incheon, Korea, with his wife, Ella, and Presbyterian missionary Horace Underwood. Upon his arrival, Appenzeller prayed: "May the Lord who broke the power of death on the day of His resurrection break the bondage that binds this people and grant them freedom and light to become children of God."

The 21st century Korean Church is the fruit of this prayer and many subsequent prayers. In fact, by 1905, the Korean Methodist Church had begun early-morning prayer in

church as a core spiritual discipline that continues today. Virginia clergy have recently returned from a trip to South Korea, where we went to experience first-hand the work of God in the Korean Methodist Church.

Thirty pastors from Virginia joined Bishop Young Jin Cho on the third Pilgrimage for Spiritual Renewal to Korea Oct. 15-23. For the third year, Bupyeong Methodist Church in Incheon, about an hour outside of Seoul, hosted the pilgrims. When Bishop Cho invited the clergy to join him on this pilgrimage, he said that there are things we can learn from the Korean Methodist Church – things he would like for us to know as we lead the churches in Virginia – but that he could not tell us... we had to experience them for ourselves. One of the most moving experiences was that each day in Korea we joined more than

1,500 people at Bupyeong for an early-morning prayer service at 5 a.m. Words are inadequate to describe the experience of praying with and among so many others, who prayed aloud, often rocking back and forth, for as much as 30 minutes after the formal service.


We also experienced unrivaled hospitality with the Korean Methodist Church. The host church provided us magnificent accommodations, delicious food in abundance and transportation and access to multiple sites of God at work among the Korean people both in and out of the church. Even if we had experienced nothing else, the welcome and attentiveness to our comfort was an inspiration and a model for Virginia churches to emulate. The volunteers who cooked our meals and cleaned our rooms and the church members who gave generously to treat us to meals and cultural

Bishop Cho and district superintendent Wayne Snead share an observation as the pilgrims walk through the Methodist Theological Seminary.



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



church and the world. You are invited to join the pilgrims in praying about how The United Methodist Church in Virginia will be renewed as a result of our experience with the Korean Methodist Church. And as we pray, we give thanks for the witness and example of the Korean Methodists who embody faith in action through their commitment to prayer, hospitality, reliance on God, gratitude and concern for the outsider. 

*-The Rev. Teresa McRoberts
is pastor at Skipwith UMC,
Richmond District.*

(Upper left) The huge sanctuary at Bupyeong Methodist Church.
(Below, top) Virginia clergy share a traditional Korean meal.
(Bottom) Pastors try to understand the 'big picture' of the challenge and prayer for unification of North and South Korea.

experiences embodied the church's mission to welcome people from around the world to hear and see fruits of Christian mission and prayer in Korea. Even the design of the church – with a retreat center to accommodate pilgrims, multiple dining rooms, and numerous meeting rooms for small groups – supports the mission of the church, bearing witness to others about the Korean Methodist story.

It was clear that gratitude pervades the Korean Methodist experience. They openly expressed thankfulness to God for establishing and sustaining the church. As we visited Chung Dong First Methodist Church, the "100th Anniversary Memorial Church" by the cemetery where many mothers and fathers of Korean Methodism are buried, Ewha Womans University, now the world's largest university for women that started out with one missionary and one student,

and Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, we heard from pastors, professors and docents how thankful today's Korean Methodists are for the witness and work of American missionaries.

Each pilgrim is now praying about how the time with the Korean Methodists will shape his or her personal faith and leadership in the church. Some will follow the example of our Korean brothers and sisters and add early-morning prayer to their personal practices or to their worship schedule. Others are considering how to have prayer be a central focus of their administrative, financial and program meetings and ministries. As we looked over the 38th parallel at North Korea in the distance and prayed together for unification of North and South Korea, others heard God urging them to be persistent in praying and working for transformation in the



DISCIPLES HELPING TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD



▲ On Oct. 4, **St. Mark's United Methodist Church, York River District**, along with Scout Troop 99 and members from **Phoebus and St. James UMCs**, came together in Hampton to conduct a meal packaging for Stop Hunger Now. Over the previous two months, St. Mark's UMC raised over \$3,000 to cover the cost of putting together 12,321 meal packets for malnourished children throughout the world. The event was overseen by the Rev. Gay Hall and sponsored by the St. Mark's UMMen and Mission Committee.

▼ Recently seven churches – **Mount Horeb, Trinity, Wesleyan, Remington, Morrisville, Liberty and Midland** – gathered at the Heartwood Center site for a cluster Charge Conference and worship. Fredericksburg District Superintendent the Rev. Ted Smith preached and presided at the Lord's Supper. District Lay Leader Dan Dietz recognized the churches with certificates of appreciation for their

support of district and conference ministries through apportionments and gave an update on the Heartwood summer ministries. The praise band from Remington UMC led the singing. Although the churches have gathered for Charge Conference in the past, this is the first time for worship in an outdoor setting, and is the first worship service held at the Heartwood Center site.



▲ On Oct. 2, three South African women and their host walked down the center aisle at **Wesley Memorial UMC in Richmond** to join in worship: Esther Mahlangu, her granddaughter Mariam Mahlangu, along with interpreter Grace Masango and host Sandra Taylor of Global Outreach for Human-

ity. Artist Mahlangu (pictured) was commissioned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) to create two large-scale paintings that will serve as a permanent gateway to the African gallery. She is the most renowned artist of South Africa's Ndebele people. She was featured in a program on Oct. 9 at VMFA. Of all the churches they could have visited they chose Wesley, because Taylor said that so many outreach programs and forums occur in the basement of Wesley, she wanted to visit to see what was happening upstairs in worship (the sanctuary). At the end of service, the South Africans began to do their victory dance.



▲ The Care Givers of **Heritage UMC, Elizabeth River District**, is a prayer/support group for primary care providers of a spouse, other family members, or a friend. The Care Givers meet monthly to share (confidentially) the pain and struggle of caring for a sick and/or dying loved one. Care Givers come together to pray, cry or vent; all while encouraging and supporting one another. This ministry is open to the community.

The United Methodist Women of **Highland United Methodist Church in Callaway** had a wonderful year, reports President Barbara Guilliams.



"Our mission for this year was giving to others. We made 84 pillow case dresses for Africa and did numerous other things for others. We were a "6" star unit, and received certificates for all our mission work. Each year we host a Thanksgiving dinner for the senior citizens in our area that is attended by about 85-90 people. We also provide bluegrass gospel music for them to enjoy after their meal. Our unit has 26 members and are always looking for more."

▼ A Community Garden has been planted in partnership with **Main Street UMC (James River District)**, Main Street Day Care Center and Suffolk Partnership for a Healthy Community. This is a cooperative project to help children understand the connection between actions as good citizens of the earth and God's abundant love. Jimmy Holland and Tom Argust assisted the children and helped to set up the raised bed. Pastor Myrtle Frances Hatcher planted beets to honor the recent baptism of Jack Webb.



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.

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EVENTS



DECEMBER

High School Retreat

Dec. 5-7, Eagle Eyrie, Lynchburg

The theme will be "Identity." The speaker will be Dugan Sherbondy, and music will be led by Keith Elgin. For more information, go to www.vaumc.org/youth or contact Becky Tate in the office of Ministries with Young People, BeckyTate@vaumc.org, or call 1-800-768-6040, ext. 139, or (804) 521-1139.

'Wounded Hearts, Healing Love' Retreat

Dec. 5-7, Camp Overlook, Keezletown

"Wounded Hearts, Healing Love" retreat is for those who have found themselves single again due to separation, divorce or death of a spouse. Participants will explore the trials, hurts, loneliness of being single again, and search for the road leading to healing and wholeness. Register at www.campoverlook.org.

Nutzy's Rotary FUNN Run to benefit UMFS

Dec. 6, Richmond

The annual Nutzy's Rotary FUNN Run 5k will benefit United Methodist Family Services for the second year in a row. The Rotary Club of West Richmond, in partnership with the Dominion Christmas Parade and the Richmond Flying Squirrels, created this event to offer a festive, family-friendly competition while fulfilling the club's philanthropic mission to improve the lives of local children. Students from UMFS will participate again this year. Visit www.nutzyrotaryfunrun.com to register.

'Walk to the Manger'

Dec. 19-20, Camp Overlook, Keezletown

"Walk to the Manger" is a free, live, interactive nativity experience. Meet the shepherds, hear the angels announce the good news, visit a young couple and their holy child, and help point a few kings toward the treasure they seek. Tours will begin continuously from 6 to 8 p.m. The experience will last about 30 minutes. Dress warmly, wear sturdy shoes, and keep children with a responsible adult at all times. Children and youths (grades 4-10) can extend their "Walk to the Manger" experience and attend Winter Camp. Register at www.campoverlook.org.

JANUARY

Ministers' Convocation

Jan. 13-15, Blackstone

The theme for the 2015 convocation will be "The Future of Christianity in America" with presenters Dr. Asa Lee of Wes-

ley Theological Seminary and Dr. David Evans of Eastern Mennonite University. The preacher will be the Rev. D.J. del Rosario, senior pastor of Bothell UMC in Washington State. Bishop Cho will preach for the opening service and lead Holy Communion. Details and registration at www.vaumc.org/MinistersConvocation.

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. 4, 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

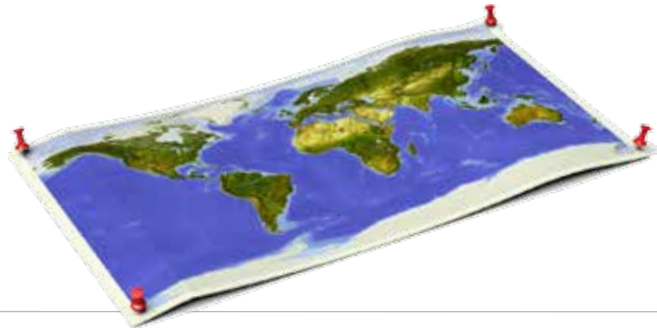
Feb. 21, locations around the conference

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.



Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD

Health expert says United Methodists saving millions of lives

By Heather Hahn

United Methodist generosity and creativity in the fight against malaria are saving millions of people's lives, a world-known expert on tropical diseases told the denomination's bishops.

"I have heard about the work that your congregations, particularly your young people, have been doing – the level of creativity, energy and commitment – to save the lives of millions of children and women in Africa," said Dr. Christoph Benn.

He is the director of external relations and a founding board member of the Geneva-based Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. He addressed the Council of Bishops during an update on the denomination's Imagine No Malaria initiative.

"You have the sincere thanks of not only the Global Fund, your partner, but also all the people whose lives have been changed by these activities," he said.

So far, the global United Methodist Church has raised an estimated \$64.5 million in gifts and pledges in its campaign to eliminate needless death and suffering from malaria in Africa, announced Pittsburgh Area Bishop Thomas Bickerton. He leads the Western Pennsylvania

Conference and chairs the denomination's Global Health Initiative.

"I've seen the connection come alive," Bickerton told fellow bishops. He noted that 42 conferences have made a commitment to participate in the initiative. The average individual gift is \$96 and the average pledge is \$800.



The United Methodist Church has helped save millions of lives in the fight against malaria, says Dr. Christoph Benn, director of external relations for The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Benn spoke Nov. 4 to the United Methodist Council of Bishops in Oklahoma City. Photo by Tim Tanton, United Methodist Communications

The United Methodist Church aims to raise \$75 million by the end of 2015 for Imagine No Malaria. Of those funds, the denomination has committed that \$28 million will go to the Global Fund.

The United Methodist Church is the first faith-based group to work closely with the Global Fund.

The Global Fund, a public-private partnership, is

the world's largest funding source for health programs that fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. People who have bought products with the (RED) label have helped support its work.

The United Methodist Church is both a donor and recipient of grants from the Global Fund, which uses its funds in part for prevention measures such as insecticide-treated bed nets as well as treatment of the disease.

The Global Fund receives support from governments and foundations worldwide. Its immense purchasing power means it can get bed nets and other supplies cheaper than most health agencies can on their own, Benn said.

Imagine No Malaria also is funding a number of other strategies. The campaign supports United Methodist hospitals, clinics and health boards across Africa that work to prevent and treat the disease.

The various efforts are working. Since 2000, malaria deaths have decreased by 42 percent worldwide, Benn said. Deaths are down by 49 percent in Africa, where the disease has been most virulent.


Benn talked of recently visiting a hospital in eastern Africa. He asked to see its younger malaria patients and learned the hospital had not admitted a child with malaria in two weeks.

A physician, Benn has more than 25 years of experience in global health and advocacy. He has worked as a clinician and public health official in Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as on the staff of a rural hospital in Tanzania.

He told the bishops that since the current devastating outbreak of Ebola in the West Africa countries Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, the Global Fund has freed up funds to fight this virus as well.

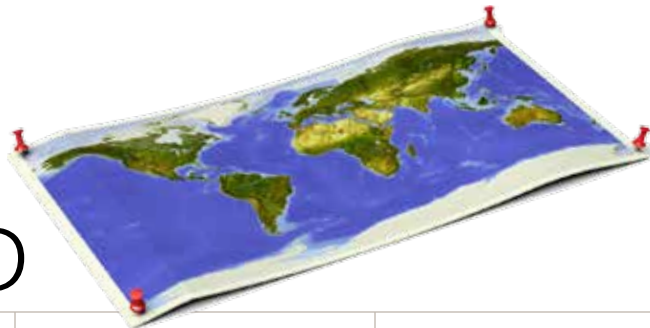
"We need to do everything we can to contain Ebola. I would not for a second underestimate the challenges in these countries," Benn said. "But we also have to keep Ebola in perspective compared to the many other health challenges the world faces."

He said about 1,800 children still die every day from malaria, while the total mortality of Ebola at this point is estimated to be around 5,000.

Nevertheless, Benn expressed hope that malaria deaths can be eliminated. He even suggested a vaccine may be available in a few years. 

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

Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD



Church ratifies four constitutional amendments

General Conference need not be just a springtime occurrence in coming years.

That is one of the biggest changes United Methodists approved in ratifying four amendments to the denomination's constitution.

One amendment removes the requirement that General Conference – the denomination's top lawmaking assembly and the only body that can speak for the church – meet in April or May. The body still will meet every four years.

The Council of Bishops on Nov. 4 officially certified that the amendments had won approval.

To be ratified, a constitutional amendment first requires a two-thirds majority vote at General Conference, which happened in 2012. Then, it must win a two-thirds

majority of the total voters at annual conferences, which happened in 2013 and early 2014.

San Francisco Area Bishop Warner Brown Jr., the president of the council, announced that the amendments had surpassed the needed votes.

The changes to the constitution will be included when the next *Book of Discipline*, the denomination's law book, is printed in 2016. But most of the amendments take effect immediately.

The increased flexibility for General Conference dates will take effect after the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

As a practical matter, the assembly will remain in the spring at least until 2024, since the 2020 General Conference is scheduled for May 5-15 in Minneapolis.

Great Plains Area Bishop Scott Jones said he thinks the change will make it easier for countries outside the United States to host General Conference. Jones' area includes United Methodists in Kansas and Nebraska.

"I believe The United Methodist Church is on a journey to living more fully into its worldwide nature," he said, "and the amendment that frees up the time of General Conference is a great step forward in becoming a global church."

Bishop David Kekumba Yemba, who leads the Central Congo Area in the Democratic Republic of

Congo, agreed. "I think it is a step ahead."

The Rev. Gere Reist, secretary of General Conference, added that the change also has the potential to save the denomination money in holding the lawmaking assemblies, which cost millions to convene.

For example, a United Methodist-related university might be able to hold a future General Conference if the gathering occurs when the university is out of session and space is available. The change also will make it easier for United Methodist college and seminary students to serve as General Conference delegates, instead of risking missing exam time.

The other three amendments do the following:

- ❖ Adds the word "pray" to Division One, Paragraph 6, Article VI, which now says: "The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity; and therefore it will pray, seek, and work for unity at all levels of church life..."
- ❖ Changes the term "director of Lay Speaking Ministries" to "director of Lay Servant Ministries" in Division Two, Section VI, Paragraph 32, Article I. This change establishes that a director of Lay Servant

(Continued on pg. 32:
"Amendments")



Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD

Bishops told holy conferencing key to revival

Reclaiming an accurate understanding of holy conferencing is the most important thing United Methodists can do to revitalize the denomination, a Methodism scholar told the denomination's bishops.

"I believe that if we were to reclaim this practice, that God would bless our efforts and we would see profound renewal in communities where this took place," said the Rev. Kevin Watson, assistant professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

However, he quickly added, everything depends on "getting right what holy conferencing is."

Watson, who is also an ordained elder, returned to his home Oklahoma Conference to address the Council of Bishops at the invitation of the council's Committee on Faith and Order. He is the author of *The Class Meeting: Recovering a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*.

He addressed a group eager to cultivate the Wesleyan practice of Christian conferencing, especially as United Methodists head toward what many expect to be a particularly contentious General Conference in 2016. General Conference is the denomination's top lawmaking assembly.

"One of the means of

grace according to John Wesley was Christian conference or Christian conferencing," said Nordic and Baltic Area Bishop Christian Alsted in introducing Watson.

Methodism's founder saw such conferencing "not as a technique or a set of rules and values that enables us talk nice to each other, but as a way we as United Methodists live together in Christian community," Alsted said.

Watson described how to conference together in the Wesleyan way and tried to clear up some misconceptions.

He pointed out that John Wesley never used the phrase "holy conferencing" that United Methodists so often use today.

"That's kind of a bummer," Watson admitted. "But he did use the phrase Christian conferencing. Yes, he only used that phrase once. But his use of it was very significant – so much so that I think it completely justifies our use of it today."


Watson also emphasized that Christian conferencing should not simply be seen as a way to have polite disagreement. Instead, he said, it should be seen as "the distinctive way that Methodists gather together to talk about their relationship with God in order to grow in love for God and neighbor."

Wesley referred to

Christian conferencing in his 1763 "Large Minutes" as one of five channels through which God makes grace available to humanity – practices grounded in commandments from Christ. Wesley listed it alongside such disciplines as prayer, the study of Scripture, fasting and Holy Communion.

Under Wesley's leadership, Christian conferencing was practiced mostly in class and band meetings. These weren't small groups devoted to Bible studies such as many churches have today, Watson said. Instead, the meetings primarily focused on Christian fellowship and accountability.

In class meetings – co-ed groups of seven to a dozen people – the primary focus was the question: "How is it with your soul?" or "How does your soul prosper?" Membership in the Methodist movement required faithful attendance at class meetings, Watson said.

The class meeting, Watson said, "was at the heartbeat of the vitality of the early Methodist movement." Between 1776 and 1850, American Methodism grew from one of the smallest Christian groups to the largest, by far, at nearly a third of the population. 

-Heather Hahn for United Methodist News Service



"I believe that if we were to reclaim this practice, that God would bless our efforts and we would see profound renewal in communities where this took place."

Rev. Kevin Watson, assistant professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

Keeping Christ cen



Central in Christmas



By Sarah R. Wastella

All the years I was a single adult, and even part of a young married couple, I never really thought much about how I celebrate Christmas. It was mostly a synchronization of sacred and secular. I went to Christmas Eve worship, and I bought a gaggle of gifts to give to others. I touted Santa Claus, and sang “Silver Bells.” I may have stashed a Nativity in the dining room, but mostly I had a giant Christmas tree covered in a random assortment of ornaments that said more about my eclectic personality than the birth of Jesus.

Then I had a child, and my whole world changed. It had to, because there are a lot of things competing for our attention, but God gives us priorities and Christ is at the top.

Suddenly, I had someone living within my domicile to whom I had to convey the meaning of Christmas, teach about the birth of Jesus Christ. The more I tried to tell the story of the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem, the more I looked around my home and the lifestyle of the Christmas season, and the more I just saw clutter and distraction. I started digging through my traditions and trying to simplify the season so my son could understand. I remember telling my mother that I had made the decision not to introduce my son to Santa Claus, so there would be no distracting him from Jesus. It did not go over well. It was like I was doing something bizarre, and I was. I was suddenly clearing the way for Christ, and making Christ not just the center of my season, but the sole focus.

(Continued on next page, “Christ”)



("Christ," continued from previous page)

As the years have gone on, I have added more and more to my Christ-only Christmas season and celebration. I acquired more Nativities, many of other culturally diverse portrayals from all around the world, and have one in every room, so we are always seeing the visual representation of the space into which Jesus was born, the lowly circumstances of the King of kings' birth. I even have one that is super kid-friendly, which my son plays with like any other toy set. Storm troopers, ninjas and super heroes have all made an appearance in the stable to see Baby Jesus. We save Baby Jesus figurine for all the other Nativities for Christmas day, and spend the morning putting the right Christ-child in the corresponding manger. It can take a while, and cause confusion, but it is like a reverse egg hunt. The Wise Men are far off on the other side of the room, and don't arrive on site until Epiphany on Jan. 6.

I've pared down the non-Jesus stuff, and even adopted the liturgical color theme. Losing the secular red and green, I embraced a world of blue, the Advent color of hope, and white, the color of Christmas, a high Holy Day in the life of the Church. People would come over and ask if I was Jewish. No, but my Savior is. I stopped playing so much secular Christmas music too. Now my house favors sacred music in a variety of instrumental presentations. I even have a Christmas fife and drum album from Williamsburg with Colonial hymns.

I find that I don't miss songs about rushing around buying presents, and running people over with fictional flying caribou. I hear them when I am out and about, and even sing along, but my home is focused on the coming of Emmanuel, not petitioning Santa Baby for a convertible car in light blue.

What I did during Advent changed as well. I started taking my son with me to visit my church's homebound members

on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to deliver cards I had the children of the church make, because even a two-year old can color. We go to see the sick, and those imprisoned in the homes they once had the liberty to leave at will. This year I'm taking my son to serve a Christmas meal in the local soup kitchen, instead of the tradition of leaving out cookies for Santa Claus. We clean out our closets and his playroom, making room, because there was no room at the inn for Jesus and his family. We take what we no longer use and probably never really needed, and find new homes for it. Sometimes through donation sites, and sometimes by giving them to others who I know could use the items, like a struggling single mother whose son is a couple of years behind mine in clothing sizes. I stopped buying my own son a plethora of presents, and instead buy him three things, the number modeled after the three gifts of the Wise Men, that will be useful for our next family vacation. I am trying to teach my son about expectation and hope, the core of the Christmas season. In a world of instant gratification, I want him to learn patience, so he can wait for the Lord (Psalm 130:5), and I am learning right alongside him. I even changed how I shop for others.

This year I'm making a large donation to Heifer International, and giving a token small animal figurine to those for whom the gift is dedicated. If I am going to teach my son that Christmas is not about getting things, but receiving Christ, then I realize that I have to change how I give things. I have to make every action intentional. Last year, we took a huge jar of change we had been filling over the course of the months preceding Christmas, and went around looking for Salvation Army buckets to make donations. Then my son, who was only four at the time, said that it was cold and the bell ringers needed something warm to drink. So we added hot cocoa to our stops. We were trying to be a blessing, and the smiles and words of thanks that greeted us blessed us right back.

Last year my son turned to me on Christmas Day and said, "Some people do Santa Claus at their house, but you do Jesus." In that moment, all my transition and my counter-cultural work was worth it, because there was Christ at the center of our Christmas. Like I said, when I had my son, my whole world changed, and now I can say with assurance that it was for the better, just as the birth of God's Son changed the world. When the way we approach Christmas keeps that always in sight, we are better able to change the world around us too. 🍷

-The Rev. Sarah Wastella serves at Larchmont UMC, Elizabeth River District.

The true meaning of Christmas

By Tim Richards

I was surprised recently when I read the most common things children were asking for at Christmas 100 years ago. Here are children's top five Christmas requests: 1) candy, 2) nuts, 3) a rocking horse, 4) a doll and 5) mittens.

What struck me about the list is that only one of the five, the doll, would likely be on children's lists today.

Christmas in America has certainly changed in the last 100 years. However, not all change is bad as the story of Greg Parady illustrates. Last Saturday, this real life Santa stopped by The Villages Wal-Mart in central Florida to pick up some bikes for a Toys-for-Tots campaign being held by his financial planning firm. While there he overheard a woman say she didn't know if she could afford her layaway and might have to cancel her order.



Greg Parady smiles as he pays off 76 strangers layaways at a central Florida Wal-Mart on Saturday, December 7, 2013. Photo courtesy of nbcnews.com.

Parady asked the manager for the total of all the store's layaways. He didn't think it would amount to much, but was surprised to learn the total was \$89,000. He couldn't provide that much, but decided to give \$21,000 to help those he could.

He paid off the order for the lady he overheard. He paid off half of all the store layaway orders that totaled over \$200. Then he helped several customers who walked up to the counter to cancel their layaways. Parady's managing partner, Cindy Nazzaro, observed, he would swipe his credit card and say, "Merry Christmas."

One woman who appeared to be in her twenties was

particularly touched. She approached the layaway counter asking what she owed and was told by the Wal-Mart associate, "That gentleman right there just paid for you." The woman was so overwhelmed she began crying and had to sit down. Parady said, "Every time I looked over at her she would mouth the words, 'Thank you,'" Even the four Wal-Mart employees working the layaway desk were moved to tears.

Others have been inspired by Parady. Wal-Mart reports over 1,000 instances this season where strangers have paid down someone else's layaway.

Layaway "Santas" at a K-mart in Shillington, Pa., were also generous. One mom who had \$450 in toys paid for by strangers decided to spent the same amount on toys for needy children.

Greg Parady said he didn't want to attract attention, but he hopes what he did will motivate others. He said, "I hope everyone will use it as a tool to give in their own way. It doesn't have to be money; it can be time, or just something kind."

Christmas began when God sent Jesus to earth as the greatest gift ever. Christmas isn't primarily a time of getting; it is ultimately a time for generous giving. We're following not just Parady's example of giving, but as Charles Swindoll once said, "We are never more like God than when we give." When we're generous we are truly celebrating the meaning of Christmas. 🍅

-Tim Richards is a pastor who also writes a newspaper column.



"AND THERE WERE IN THE SAME COUNTRY SHEPHERDS ABIDING IN THE FIELD, KEEPING WATCH AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHONE ROUND ABOUT THEM, AND THEY WERE SORE AFRAID OF GREAT JOY, WHICH SHALL BE TO ALL PEOPLE. FOR UNTO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF YOU: YE SHALL FIND THE BABE WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES, LYING IN A MANGER. AND GOD, AND SAYING, GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL TOWARD

HAVE YOURSELF A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

By Jason C. Stanley

On Dec. 9, 1965, the animated Christmas special, A Charlie Brown Christmas, first aired on CBS. Some network executives had already made the commitment to air it, but they only planned to air it that one time. Little did they know that the simple story of Charlie Brown searching for the meaning of Christmas would be the second most watched show that week (second only to Bonanza), much less a Christmas tradition. Truthfully, the executives did not think it was very good.

There are so many things that make Charles Schultz' story so brilliant. One is that he was willing to talk about that which no one else was willing to do at the time: consumerism. In fact, the tension between consumerism and the true meaning of Christmas is still so evident. Mike Slaughter, in his book "Christmas Is Not Your Birthday," plainly states that "false promises of secular consumerism ... feed our children's materialistic self-focused addictions."

I remember running to the store to grab some things for yard work I was about to undertake. It was a Friday, my day off, and it was Halloween. As I maneuvered the aisles to get to the lawn and garden section, I passed a number of people dressed up in Halloween costumes. The lawn and garden

section, however, had been transformed into a Christmas wonderland. As I watched an older woman dressed in a purple witches' costume shop, I was listening to Bing Crosby sing "White Christmas."

I channeled Charlie Brown as I thought, "Good grief!"

Is it possible that we are so consumed by consumerism that we miss the message that Charles Schultz delivers in his timeless classic cartoon? We strive for the Christmas holiday to be perfect in every way. The perfect presents, wrapped to perfection under the perfectly decorated tree, illuminating perfection into the darkness of our neighborhood.

In the animated story, Charlie Brown and his faithful friend Linus stand at a brick wall, as they do so many times in the comic strip, to ponder the meaning of life. "Something is wrong with me," he tells Linus, "Christmastime is here, but I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel." The feeling that Charlie Brown thinks he is supposed to feel is that artificial happiness of a consumer-focused marketing of Christmas. It is the kind of happiness that cannot be bought, no matter how hard we try.

This artificial spirit of Christmas is sweeping through town. When Charlie Brown goes to get advice from Lucy's 5-cent psychiatry booth, he drops a nickel into the jar and Lucy picks it up filled with joy. She shakes the jar, listening to the nickel rattle, and exclaims, "I love the sound of cold, hard cash." As Charlie Brown walks past Snoopy's doghouse, he is surprised to find his beagle decorating the doghouse for the chance to win a huge money prize. "My own dog has gone commercial," Charlie Brown says, "I can't stand it!"

And he really can't stand it. Charlie Brown knows that there is more to this favored holiday than just money and decorating and presents! He is just not sure how to articulate it.

Then, he is sent to get a Christmas tree for the play. Charlie Brown and Linus are told to get a nice, big, shiny, aluminum Christmas tree. We all know what happens. Charlie Brown chooses the wimpiest, littlest tree in the whole lot. But it is a real tree. It is not artificial. It is not a fake. It is not a tree in disguise. It is the real deal.

When Charlie Brown returns with the tree, he is laughed at and called names. It causes him to cry out, "Is there anyone who knows what Christmas is about?" Linus humbly steps up on the stage and quotes the birth narrative from Luke 2:8-14 as found in the Kings James Bible.

This was another risky move by Schultz. Not all of his



CH OVER THEIR FLOCK BY NIGHT. AND, LO, THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME UPON THEM, . AND THE ANGEL SAID UNTO THEM, FEAR NOT! FOR, BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOUR, WHICH IS CHRIST THE LORD. AND THIS SHALL BE A SIGN UNTO SUDDENLY THERE WAS WITH THE ANGEL A MULTITUDE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST PRAISING RD MEN." Luke 2: 8-14 (KJV)

team thought it was a good idea to use the Bible on prime-time television. Some were certain that it would not go over well with audiences. Schultz' wife recalls him thinking that scripture was not just for the church, but for everyone. It was fitting that Linus, the little philosopher and theologian that he is, makes the connection between the message of the Gospel and Charlie Brown's actions.

There is nothing artificial about Christmas or the meaning of Christmas. Charlie Brown's decision to choose the tiniest and the weakest of the trees symbolizes how Christ chose each of us; the tiniest and the weakest. The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich wrote about religion as ultimate concern: that which concerns us ultimately is our religion. If we claim Jesus as Lord in our lives and our ultimate concern, we are claiming that God is with us and we are claiming that Christmas is about the tiniest and the weakest.

Jesus did not come so we could have perfectly wrapped presents under a perfectly decorated tree. Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Isaiah 61, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19)

If Jesus is our ultimate concern and is truly going to be the "reason for the season," then we need to be about the work Jesus was about. It is servant work that enhances the kingdom of God. It is grounded in love for God and love for others. It is shaped by transforming justice as we serve the poor, the homeless, HIV patients, orphaned children and aging grandparents.

Instead of being concerned with consumerism, Santa and cookies, Black Friday and buying, buying, buying, we should follow Charlie Brown's lead and care for the tiniest, loneliest and weakest.

So this Christmas season, go and love as Charlie Brown loved, never giving up, and loving on the tiniest and the weakest. Go and love as Jesus has loved you. 🍷

-The Rev. Jason C. Stanley is an ordained deacon serving as the Associate Minister of Youth and Education at Peakland UMC in Lynchburg. He blogs at jasoncstanley.com.

"...AND THAT'S WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT, CHARLIE BROWN."

Maybe it's time to kill the Christmas pageant

By Darrell Vesterfelt

I still remember the Sunday my pastor told us we were canceling the Christmas play. It was 2008 and you could almost feel the tension in the room when he said it. No one understood why he would take something so nostalgic, such a traditional part of our Christmas celebration, and change it.

After all, if it isn't broken, we don't need to fix it right? The church loved the Christmas celebration.

The congregation listened to him because we respected him, and we trusted the direction he was taking us, even if we didn't understand it. If we wouldn't have done that, we would have missed out on something really amazing. That year, Christmas for the City was born. I want to tell you a little bit about it.

At first, he had a hard time convincing people it was OK to call it a "party." After all, this was a church, in the South, and the word "party" had all kinds of negative connotations to go along with it – but that's exactly what it was.

Instead of pouring all of the resources into a Christmas production that meant a lot to our congregation and (frankly) wore out the staff, the church was going to throw a giant celebration for our community.

Everyone was invited. Our entire city.

In fact, the vision of Christmas for the City was just as its name describes. It was a Christmas party designed to connect and engage our community. In order to make it a reality, some of our traditional understanding of what a Christmas celebration looked like, because it wasn't about us. It was about the city.



(Continued on pg 24: "Pageant")

("Pageant," continued from pg 23)

The first thing the church had to give up was the idea that Christmas celebrations had to be extravagant.

I'm not sure where we all got this idea, but it seems like every year we felt like we had to outdo ourselves from the year before, and we had to outdo everyone around us. This competitive atmosphere, rather than adding value to our Advent season, was stealing our time, energy and resources. And our celebrations weren't necessarily better for it.

Making the transition to simplicity was really difficult to embrace at first, but once we got over the "need" to outdo each other with decorations or technology, it was actually really freeing.

We also had to make the celebration more inclusive than it had been in the past.

Most Christmas celebrations look the same. And they aren't the kind of place you want to come if you're not already part of the church community. And since Christmas for the City was a celebration for the city, not for our congregation, the church had to begin to think outside the box about what its new celebration would look like. At first, people weren't really sure, but as they started to connect with other local churches and nonprofits, they gathered an understanding.

On the first year, there were more than 6,000 people in attendance. This crazy idea actually worked. It was actually a party for the city.

Now there are activities for kids, a poetry slam, a story gallery, a "party" room and a live painting area. There is even an area where the nonprofit partners can set up tables and engage with those in the community. They tell their stories, gather volunteers and distribute resources.

The church had to make the decision that the celebration was going to be about Jesus, not about the church.

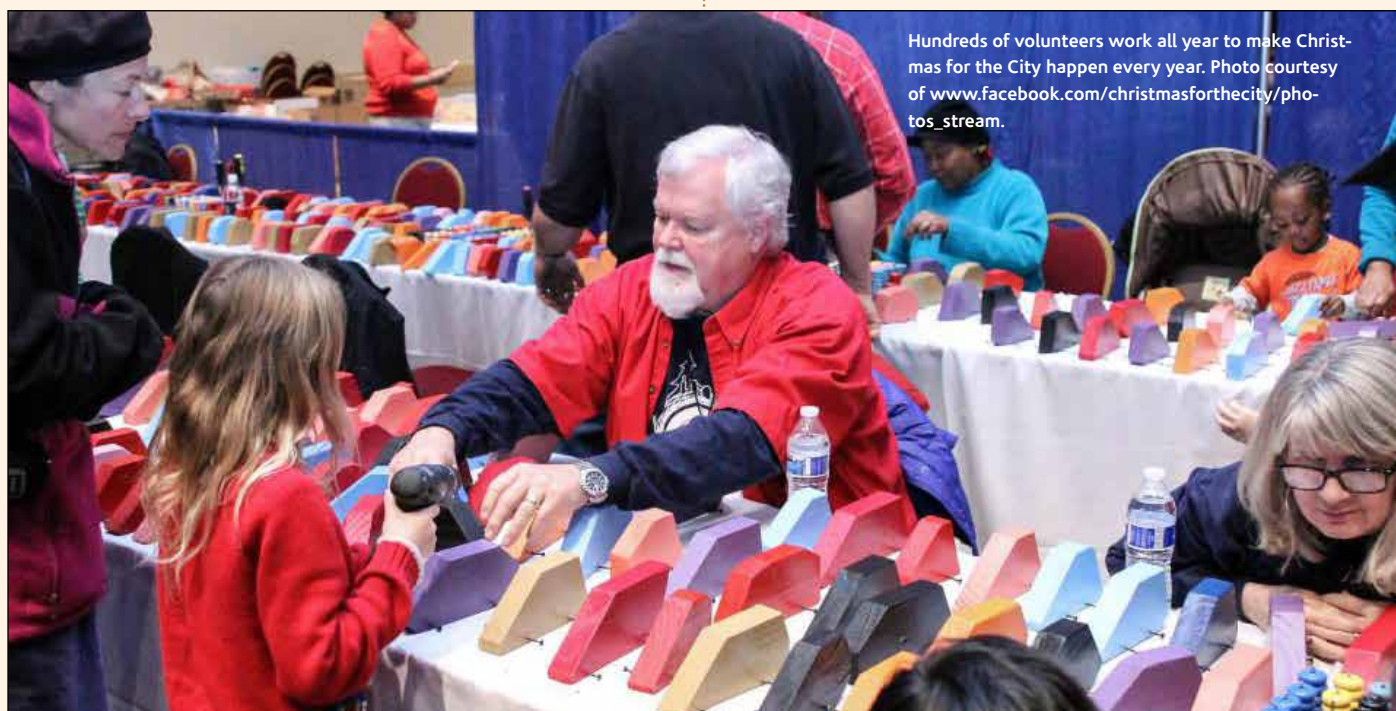
People agreed to get as many other people involved as possible. They asked the local Youth Choir and Symphony if they would like to celebrate with them, and they agreed. They invited other churches to bring their choirs, and their congregations. Some were reluctant at first, but after a few years church and community involvement has grown.

Now 35 sponsoring churches, 14 nonprofits and people from more than 50 churches participate to put on Christmas for the City in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The church's name doesn't appear anywhere on the event. Christmas for the City is not an event hosted by "our church" – it is a nameless, faceless event designed to gather together the capital-C Church from all over the community to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the Christmas season. It's a great story.

Sometimes traditions keep us stuck. Sometimes they are preventing us from experiencing the kingdom of God right here and right now. I'm so glad my pastor had the vision he did, and that the church was flexible enough to follow him. I pray you'll do the same this holiday season. 📖

-Darrell Vesterfelt is an author and director of marketing in Nashville.



Hundreds of volunteers work all year to make Christmas for the City happen every year. Photo courtesy of www.facebook.com/christmasforthe-city/photos_stream.

10 ways to put Christ back in Christmas

By Mary Fairchild

The number one way to keep Jesus Christ in your Christmas celebrations is to have him present in your daily life. If you've already accepted Jesus as your Savior and made him the center of your life, keeping Christ in Christmas is more about the way you live your life than the things you say – such as “Merry Christmas” versus “Happy Holidays.”

Keeping Christ in Christmas means daily revealing the character, love and spirit of Christ that dwells in you, by allowing these traits to shine through your actions. Here are simple ways to keep Christ the central focus of your life this Christmas season

1. **Give God one very special gift just from you: Let this gift be something personal that no one else needs to know about, and let it be a sacrifice.** David said in 2 Samuel 24 that he would not offer a sacrifice to God that cost him nothing.

Maybe your gift to God will be to forgive someone you've needed to forgive for a long time. You may discover that you've given a gift back to yourself.

Perhaps your gift will be to commit to spending time with God daily. Or maybe there is something God has asked you to give up. Make this your most important gift of the season.

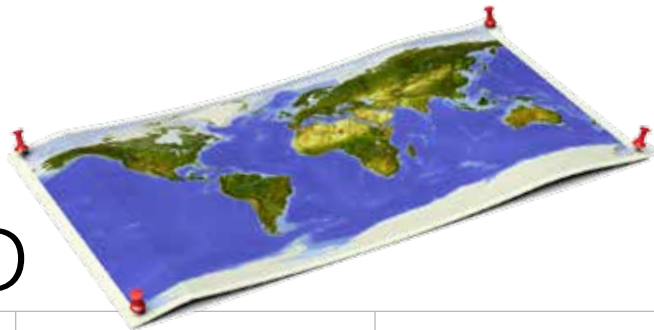
2. **Set aside a special time to read the Christmas story in Luke.**
3. **Set up a Nativity scene in your home.**
4. **Plan a project of good will this Christmas:** A few years ago we “adopted” a single mom. My friend was barely making ends meet and didn't have money to buy gifts for her small child. Together with my husband's family we bought gifts for both of them and replaced her broken down washing machine the week of Christmas. Do you have an elderly neighbor in need of home repairs or yard work? Find someone with a genuine need, involve your whole family and see how happy you can make someone this Christmas.
5. **Take a group Christmas caroling in a nursing home or a children's hospital:** One year the staff at the office where I worked decided to incorporate Christmas caroling at a nearby nursing home into our yearly staff Christmas party plans. We all met first at the nursing

home and toured the facility while singing Christmas carols. Afterwards, we headed back to our party with our hearts full of tenderness. It was the best staff Christmas party we'd ever had.

6. **Give a surprise gift of service to each member of your family:** Jesus taught us to serve by washing the disciples feet. He also taught us that it is “more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35 (NIV) The idea of giving an unexpected gift of service to members of your family is to demonstrate Christ-like love and service. You might consider giving a back rub to your spouse, running an errand for your brother, or cleaning out a closet for your mother. Make it personal and meaningful and watch the blessings multiply.
7. **Set aside a time of family devotions on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning:** Before opening the gifts, take a few minutes to gather together as a family in prayer and devotions. Read a few Bible verses and discuss as a family the true meaning of Christmas.
8. **Attend a Christmas church service together with your family:** If you are alone this Christmas or don't have family living near you, invite a friend or a neighbor to join you.
9. **Send Christmas cards that convey a spiritual message:** This is an easy way to share your faith at Christmas-time. If you've already bought the reindeer cards — no problem! Just write a Bible verse and include a personal message with each card.
10. **Write a Christmas letter to a missionary:** This idea is dear to my heart because I spent four years on the mission field. Receiving a letter always felt like opening a priceless gift on Christmas morning, no matter what day it was. Many missionaries are unable to travel home for the holidays, so it can be a very lonely time for them. Write a special Christmas letter to a missionary of your choice, thanking them for giving their life in service to the Lord. Trust me — it will mean more than you can imagine. 📧

-Mary Fairchild writes about Christianity for about.com.

Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD



Church's domestic violence response predates recent NFL news

By Heather Hahn

What does the face of domestic violence look like?

It could belong to the person sitting next to you in church each Sunday, says Ginger Grissom.

She knows from experience. For eight years, as executive director of the United Methodist-supported Wesley House Community Center in Meridian, Miss., she has helped abuse survivors rebuild their lives. She is also a survivor, she says.

United Methodists, like Grissom, have been confronting family violence long before the NFL's response to players' assault charges was making headlines.

United Methodists for decades have helped support shelters for women and children. They also have worked with policy-makers and law enforcement to treat domestic violence not simply as a private matter but as a crime.

In the past five years, United Methodist Women (UMW) and United Methodist Men (UMM) have collaborated to provide training and advocacy on the issue. Other United Methodist agencies, including the Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the Board of Church and Society, also are involved in advocacy.

Still, Grissom and other advocates – including UMW and UMM executives – say church leaders can do more to address a problem seldom mentioned from the pulpit.

A May survey by LifeWay Research, which

included United Methodists, found about four in 10 – 42 percent – of Protestant senior pastors “rarely” or “never” speak about domestic violence. Nearly three in 10 – 29 percent – said they believe domestic violence is not a problem in their church.

Those pastors are wrong, Grissom pointed out.

“The church needs to be open (to the fact) that domestic violence happens,” she said. “It’s happening to people in every church in the United States. The only way that we can fight it is to know that ... and to be open to bringing in professionals who deal with it every day.”

Daunting statistics

The numbers bear her out. About three in 10 women and one in 10 men have experienced violence or stalking by a partner, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Domestic violence crosses all racial, cultural and socioeconomic lines. Perpetrators can include plumbers, business professionals and even clergy.

The people affected include not just abuse victims themselves but also their loved ones, especially their children.

Mississippi Bishop James Swanson, like Grissom, has personal experience with the costs of domestic violence. When he was 18 in 1968, his mother was killed by his stepfather because she refused to give him

In this May 23, 2014, file photo, Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, right, speaks alongside his wife, Janay, during a news conference at the team's practice facility in Owings Mills, Md.



Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD

money for alcohol.

His loss has shaped his ministry and has given him better understanding of why people stay in abusive relationships, he said.

"A lot of times, they are trying to be a savior of that man that they love," he said.

About three in 10 women and one in 10 men have experienced violence or stalking by a partner, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

"Pastors have to know that when they first offer assistance, they are probably going to be turned down. But if you remain a non-anxious presence, sooner or later that person will turn to you and you can offer resources to her."

No matter the victim's educational or financial background, leaving an abusive relationship is tough.

"Why do people stay? Most of the time it's because of fear," Grissom said. "And absolutely that fear is substantiated by statistics. The most dangerous time for any victim of domestic violence is when she chooses to leave. People die."

Grissom said it took her 15 years to leave. Her story is similar to many other abuse survivors' firsthand accounts. She found herself isolated from family, banned from eating fattening food and under financial and spiritual control.

"The fact is that I am a survivor, but I am a survivor by the grace of God," she said.

Harriett Jane Olson, the top executive of United Methodist Women, urges pastors to discuss domestic violence with their congregations. But she warns that if they do, they should be prepared for people who feel trapped in abusive relationships to come forward.


Swanson also advises pastors "not to try to be Superman" and save the day. For one thing, he said, doing so could put that pastor at risk.

But he urges clergy to get to know local law enforcement and make resources available to congregants. He suggests putting resources in restrooms where women can look at them privately.

Swanson, who is president of United Methodist Men, said he sees God at work in the attention the NFL's troubles have brought to the problem of domestic violence.

"I realize that the church has to do so much," Swanson said. "If there is anything I have learned as bishop, it's that there are so many forms of evil out there that we are called to

address every day.

"But this is one I think that can unite as a church across so many different lines. If nothing else, we can create a groundswell of awareness." 

-Hahn is a multimedia news reporter for United Methodist News Service. Contact her at (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org

RESOURCES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

United Methodist Women – www.united-methodistwomen.org/domestic-violence

General Board of Church & Society – <http://umc-gbcs.org/issues/domestic-violence>

General Commission on Status and Role of Women – www.umsexualethics.org/

National Network to End Domestic Violence – <http://nnedv.org/>

United Methodist Women's Facebook page on domestic violence – www.facebook.com/UMWDVI

FaithTrust Institute – www.faithtrustinstitute.org/

U.S. Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233/ 1-800-787-3224 (for deaf). www.thehotline.org/

Working with men

Gil Hanke, a Virginia native who serves as the top executive of United Methodist Men, told a recent meeting of his commission that only men can stop domestic violence.

Women historically have done a great job of drawing attention to the issue and protecting those escaping abuse, he told United Methodist News Service. Now, men must step up.

"It has to do with how they view women, how they talk about women, how they tolerate the demeaning of women in the media and in their everyday conversations," Hanke said. "Principled Christian leaders who are men don't talk like that and don't listen to things like that, and they do not assert their position at the cost of someone else."

People have the misconception that domestic violence results because the man is angry and has lost control, Hanke said. "In fact, it's all about control."

He now leads workshops that help men to think about how they treat and talk about women and help to raise awareness about domestic violence. United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women also work to connect churches with resources in addressing the problem.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY



10 tips for Christmas and New Year's planning

Christmas and New Year's may be holidays, but the worship planning team doesn't take time off. Remember that unchurched people are very receptive to coming to church during this time. Embrace the opportunity for them to come to yours.

Plan for these important, but sometimes overlooked, elements of welcoming on Christmas Eve:

1. Remind the congregation to greet old friends, who may be home for the holidays, after they practice something called the "Rule of Three." (The "Rule of Three" covers the first three minutes after the service ends – the prime time for newcomers to dash for the door. Talk only to people you don't know during those three minutes, so you can welcome a new-

comer before he or she leaves.) In the welcoming congregation, old friends will understand the importance of making new friends and will wait to be addressed.

2. Enlist parking attendants to serve that night and help manage the traffic. Newcomers will be especially unsure of where to park and how to get inside.
3. Remember to schedule ushers and greeters to serve on Christmas Eve.
4. Schedule childcare helpers! Remember to mention childcare in your publicity and your evening worship program.
5. If your church office closes early for the holiday, ask some loyal volunteers to answer the phones that afternoon and evening. People without a church home may decide at the last minute to get out to worship that night.


Think about the New Year

What will your congregation have to offer in the new year? People commonly make New Year's resolutions. Why can't a church? Resolve to be a more open congregation in the new year by considering these options:

1. Offer free exercise classes

to help people work off holiday pounds.

2. Teach a money management class that helps people learn biblical principles for handling their finances.
3. Run a refresher course of welcoming and/or inviting for your adult education classes or small groups to remind everyone of the need to reach out.
4. Begin a new class or small group for newcomers interested in learning more about the church, Christianity and each other.
5. Pull your youth together to provide free childcare for a "parents' night out" service to the congregation and the community.
6. Think about your mission giving. Jump-start your church's Imagine No Malaria campaign with free resources – including fly swatters, donation boxes, temporary tattoos and thank you cards – from <http://imagineenomalaria.org>.

Remember to publicize your outwardly focused events through your local media and in your Christmas Eve worship program (take advantage of the big crowds that night to get the message out). People need to know what you have to offer before they can get involved. 

-United Methodist Communications



Roll out the welcome mat this Christmas



Hi! I'm Mariah. I'm new here." That's how my 8-year-old niece boldly introduced herself to the pastor of a church we visited one Christmas Eve.

Most of us don't feel that brave, especially when worshipping during the holidays with an unfamiliar congregation. Some church members seem so engrossed in catching up with their family and friends that visitors end up feeling like part of the décor.

For some people, Christmas and Easter are the only times they go to church. Visitors seeking a church to call home — even a temporary home — want to feel welcomed. They want to feel needed and gain a sense of belonging to the community. That is why it is critical for congregations to have a strategic plan for welcoming visitors, especially during holiday services.

Truly welcoming visitors and future congregants requires more than a sign or mat with the word "welcome." People feel most comfortable when they see themselves reflected in the congregation. Philadelphia's Arch Street United Methodist Church greets its prospects online.



"Our welcome knows no boundaries, whether of age, racial or ethnic

background, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, economic or marital status, or physical or mental ability. We welcome all to share in the ministry, fellowship and blessings of full participation as members of Christ's body."


Those all-inclusive words open a world of possibilities. After all, who would not feel included after reading that? Your church may be welcoming, but if it does not say so and does not walk the talk, prospective congregants may perceive the church as unwelcoming.


In his "7 Laws of Member Retention," author Allen Ratta notes that perception is reality. In the first law, he encourages church leaders to praise and celebrate the congregation for their positive work and to outline how the church meets members' needs. If people know a particular church will meet their needs, they can stop searching.

Here are a few welcoming activities and tips:

-  **1.** Circle of 10. Greet anyone who comes within 10 feet of you. Make a special effort to greet people you do not already know.
-  **2.** Rule of three. During the first three minutes after the service, talk to people whom


you do not know or who are guests. Why three minutes? That is the average time it takes guests to exit after worship, so it is important to connect before they depart.

-  **3.** Audit guests. Ask a newcomer to share his or her experience from parking lot to door to departure.

-  **4.** Host an open house. Although visitors are welcome at any time in the year, set a specific time and day to host an open house. Encourage people to attend the service, and ask members to reach out to visitors personally and guide them through the church. United Methodist Communications offers how-to details here. (September is the official United Methodist Church Open House month.)

-  **5.** Host membership night. Weddington United Methodist Church in North Carolina hosts "Meet Weddington Church" the fourth Sunday evening of the month. It posts the meeting information in its membership section on its website. The evening includes informal time for fellowship, opportunity

to meet pastoral and ministry staff and to learn about church ministries and missions and a Q&A session for participants. Even if your church is not ready to host such an evening, it may consider including a section on its website clearly identified as "membership" or "how to join." If prospects cannot find the information, they will not feel welcomed.

-  **6.** Some final words: Have adhesive-back name-tags for everyone to put on before worship. After the Christmas Eve or Day service, host a simple reception with coffee/hot apple cider and cookies for everyone, especially visitors. Encourage members to invite visitors sitting near them to accompany them to the reception, actually walk them there and introduce them to other members. If visitors have children, find church families with children of similar ages. Get visitors' names, street addresses and e-mail addresses. Follow up with a personal note, thanking them for visiting and asking them to come back. 📧

-United Methodist Communications

Devotions from International Lesson Series

LIVING THE WORD



Pat Inge has worked on the staff of churches in Georgia, Florida and Virginia, mainly at Crenshaw UMC in Blackstone, where she was a member for 64 years and served as director of Christian Education three different times. Most recently she served on the launch team for the new Journey UMC in Jettersville, where she is now a member. She has a B.S. from the School of Social Work at Richmond Professional Institute (now VCU) and Masters degrees from Longwood University and The Candler School of Theology at Emory University. She and her husband of 63 years live in Blackstone. They have three children, six grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

Dec. 7, 2014

**Glory and majesty
Hebrews 1:1-9**

What exciting descriptions of Christ are given to us as phrases in Hebrews 1:1-3: "the reflection of God's glory" and "the exact imprint of God's very being." (NRSV) May these phrases guide our thinking as we go through this Advent season, again reliving the joy of Christ's birth in Bethlehem so long ago.

Recently I attended a Sunday morning worship service that was so Spirit-filled, so resplendent in its depiction of our majestic Lord and Savior, so presented with excellence, humility and love, that I left the experience filled with joy and a compelling desire to share that experience with others. After excitedly relating the aspects of this deeply moving time with another, I asked, "And how was worship at the service you attended?"

The answer, "the usual," was like having a pin puncture my balloon of excitement and left me with a tremendous sense of grief and disappointment – for that particular church and for all churches that too often experience "the usual" in worship. We do not serve a "usual" God, but a God of all majesty, perfection and power – a God who waits to pour out on us, God's children, and on the church, the myriad miracles God has planned and is holding in wait for our acceptance! We too often put our God of all excellence and power into a tiny box of our own making, a box called "usual God."

As Christ-followers and parts of His body, the church, let us determine that this season of Advent will be a time of burying all our little boxes called "usual God," replacing them with a box larger than our finite minds can ever comprehend, and joyfully receive the resurrection of our majestic God sent to us in the form of a tiny baby born in a stable in Bethlehem! The beautifully-expressed and much-loved words of a hymn written by Pastor Jack Hayford in 1981 give deep understanding to the meaning of the Scripture for today's lesson:

*Majesty, worship His majesty,
Unto Him be all glory, honor and praise ...*

Throughout these days of joyful anticipation for the celebration of our Savior's birth, may we spend our time in praise for God's great majesty

and glory!

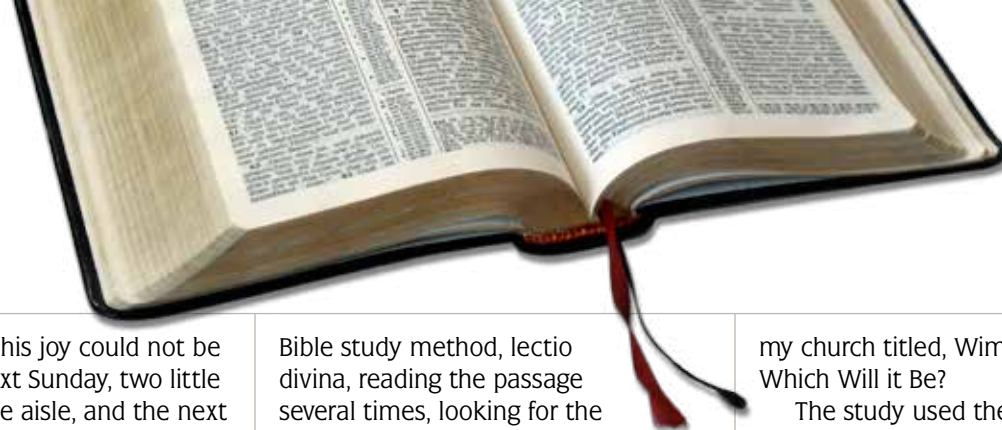
Dec. 14, 2014

**Joyful praise
Psalm 95:1-7a**

As I write in my journal this morning, my husband and I are on a much-anticipated bus trip through the beautiful, historic Hudson River valley of New York State. The journey today to the U.S. Military Academy in West Point carries us through beautiful mountain areas where, just below our highway, the rising sun glistens on the calm waters of the Hudson River. Breathtaking beauty surrounds us and we can only marvel at the grandeur of God's wondrous act of creation! It must have been times such as this when David, the king of Israel, spoke many of the words of praise found scattered throughout the Book of Psalms. The verses emphasized in today's Scripture lesson are just a few among many that call us to joyful praise of our Creator.

I have recently been reminded of King David's expression of joy in worship as I read in 2 Samuel 6:14 of his dance of praise when the ark of God was again brought into Jerusalem: "David danced before the Lord with all his might" (NRSV). During most of my church experiences I have attended worship services that have been of a quiet, less expressive nature than that demonstrated by David's dance to the Lord. I remember only one instance of such open praise in a formal church that I once attended. It was several years ago, probably soon after the beloved former dance instructor in our small town had retired. In an apparent deep feeling of praise, she left her pew during a time of praise and danced in the aisle of our church. It was a moment of worship that must have blessed each person in attendance that day because it is still remembered in conversation between members. This former dancing teacher now is confined to her bed in a nursing home, but I can imagine her joy when she is again able to "dance to the Lord" in God's eternal Kingdom!

In the church I now attend, I am blessed by the more informal spirit of worship, shown by recent examples of dancing to the Lord. It started with one small boy who slipped from his seat as the praise band began to play for our morning worship and showed his joy by his dance. His mother tried to bring him back to her side to



stand quietly, but his joy could not be contained. The next Sunday, two little ones danced in the aisle, and the next Sunday, a tiny little one, barely 3 years old, joined in praise. What a blessing it is to behold the sheer exuberance of uninhibited joy as shown by these smallest of worshipers in the church. I can only imagine the tremendous excitement in Heaven as the whole world begins to join in the dance of praise for our awesome, omnipotent God! May we respond to God's all-encompassing love in praise as we journey this Advent to an ever-deepening relationship with the baby of Bethlehem.

Dec. 21, 2014

Glory to God Luke 2:8-29

Ordinary shepherds were on an ordinary hillside just outside the ordinary little town of Bethlehem on an ordinary evening. Can we even imagine the extraordinary events that were about to take place in this setting – events that would change our world and its people forever and ever?

Our God is an awesome God who delights in surprising God's children with wonderful gifts presented in exciting ways and places, and in our excitement over these gifts. A Christmas morning, like no Christmas morning that ever follows, is about to unfold. I can almost hear the sounds of the angel chorus in the background, preparing for excellence in their joyous choral announcement to the shepherds on that hillside. I can feel the excitement in the heavenly realm as all await the most exciting event ever experienced since the creation of the world – the opening of the greatest gift ever given to mankind – the birth of the One who would be the Savior of the world!

In reflecting on the Scripture passages for this study, I used the ancient

Bible study method, *lectio divina*, reading the passage several times, looking for the word or phrase that seemed to call for further thought. Nestled in the midst of this glorious story of the heavenly angel appearing unexpectedly to the shepherds on the hillside of Judea to announce the exciting news of the Savior's birth, almost like an inserted oversight came the words telling us that Mary "pondered these things in her heart." I remember my own "ponderings" as my first-born son was laid in my arms. I can only imagine those of Mary who had just given birth to the Messiah, the Son of God, Savior of the world! What a privilege, what an awesome responsibility, what a tremendous call from our loving God!

Lexio divina, as a final step, asks that we consider ways our own lives can and should change because of this teaching of Scripture. I find the answer for each of us during this Advent season, and throughout our lives as Christ-followers, in the final verse in our lesson (Luke 2:20): "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." We can do no less. May our lives, throughout Advent, and throughout all of life, glorify and praise God for all God has done for us.

Dec. 28, 2014

Christ's awesome power Matthew 14:22-36

I cannot remember when, why, or how I first became so intrigued with the Scripture story told in today's lesson. I only know that, for the past several years, the story of Christ's walking on water, the invitation to Peter to get out of the boat to come to him, and Peter's ability to also walk on water as long as his eyes were on Jesus, has held a tremendous fascination for me.


Several years ago I led a study in

my church titled, *Wimpy or WOW: Which Will it Be?*

The study used the acronym WOW (Walking On Water) to describe the power that comes through the Holy Spirit to persons and churches who so closely follow the path of Christ that they become WOW disciples and WOW churches, so opposed to the wimpish results of taking our eyes off of Christ and his power.

Think of how the story would have ended differently had Peter kept his eyes on Jesus rather than seeing the strong wind-tossed waves surrounding the disciples' boat. Think of how we would have reacted in a similar situation. Think of Jesus' words to Peter in verse 21 (NRSV): "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Could he be asking that same question of us in our churches today, calling us, as he had earlier called Peter, "Come."?

The next verses (32-33) speak of the disciples' recognition of Christ's tremendous power in the events they had just witnessed. We, too, can witness that power of Christ, and receive that power in our own lives as we keep our eyes focused on him.

Many years ago, J. B. Phillips, world-famous translator of the New Testament in Modern English, wrote a little book which was so appropriate to his day, but possibly even more appropriate for the day in which we live, *Your God is Too Small*. Is this not our problem today? We must see the awesome power of Christ as his first disciples did, and worship him as present-day WOW disciples in present-day WOW churches. As we go into a new year, may we determine to give our all to the task before us: fulfilling the dream that God's "Kingdom would come and God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven." May these no longer be simply words spoken in prayer, but lives lived in WOW awe of Christ's power! 

CLERGY & DIACONAL

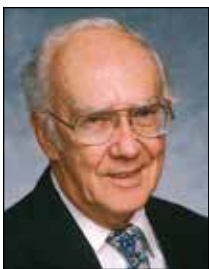


DEATHS



The Rev. Dr. Ernest Richard Babel, 73, died in Ashland on Oct. 18, 2014. He was born in Batavia, N.Y. Babel began his formal education at Elim

Bible Institute, earned his undergraduate degree from Roberts Wesleyan College, his Master of Theology and Master of Divinity from Asbury Theological Seminary and his Doctorate of Ministry from Emory University. He began his ministry in 1969, first as the pastor of Allegany Free Methodist Church, followed by Gerry Free Methodist Church, in his home state of New York. Moving to Virginia in 1976, he served Enon in Mechanicsville, Smith's Grove UMC in Petersburg, New Hope UMC in Fredericksburg and St. Peter's UMC in Montpelier. In retirement, he served for seven years as minister with seniors and homebound for Shady Grove UMC (Mechanicsville), where he continued to serve until his recent diagnosis of cancer. He is survived by his wife of 46 years, Roberta Ann; four children, Beth (James), Gregory, Philip, Sara (Dave); his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He is also survived by his brothers, Charles, Gary and Timothy; and sisters, Margery, Judith and Sharon.



The Rev. Floyd Albert Murphy, 88, of Winchester, died Oct. 11, 2014. He was a retired elder in the Virginia Conference. Murphy was

born in High Point, N.C., but grew up in Brentwood, Md. In 1944 he was drafted into the Army and served in the Philippines and Japan during the

occupation. After arriving home and attending electronics school in Kansas City, he received his FCC license. Murphy was called to the ministry, and while serving Fowlerton Methodist Church in Indiana, he enrolled at Taylor University and graduated with a degree in Biblical Literature. He served the Methodist Church and The United Methodist Church for 46 years in Indiana, Georgia and Virginia since 1960. He is survived by his wife of 66 years, Betty Smith Murphy, five children, six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. A funeral service was held at Stephens City UMC.

Bonnie Brentlinger Bridgers, 90, of South Hill, died Oct. 17, 2014. She was the widow of the **Rev. Dr. Robert L. Bridgers**.

Magdalene D. Davis, 87, died Nov. 4, 2014. She was the mother of the **Rev. Marilyn Heckstall**, pastor at Asbury UMC, Richmond District.

(“Amendments” continued from pg. 16)

Ministries is part of conference membership. It supports other changes the 2012 General Conference made to recognize that a layperson's certified ministry can involve more than filling the pulpit when the pastor is on vacation.

- ❖ Changes Division Two, Section VII, Paragraph 40, Article I to read: “The number, names, and boundaries of the annual conferences and episcopal areas shall be determined by the jurisdictional conferences in the United States of America and by the central conferences outside the United States of America according to the provisions under the respective powers and pursuant to the respective structures of the jurisdictional and the central conferences. The authority of jurisdictional and central conferences provided herein is not circumscribed or limited by the authority provided to the College of Bishops to arrange a plan of episcopal supervision.”

—Heather Hahn for United Methodist News service.

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FROM THE BISHOP



Let us open ourselves to Christ

May the grace and peace of our Lord be with you.

In this last month of 2014, I give thanks and praises to God! By the grace of God, I have been able to serve my beloved Virginia Conference for another year. I am grateful to all of you for your prayers and support. When I meet people and hear that they are praying for me every day, my heart is overwhelmed by their love, and I feel deep gratitude for them. I know it is because of their prayers that I can do my ministry.

On Nov. 5 I had the opportunity to preach at the Council of Bishops' morning worship service. It is a tradition that newly elected bishops preach at the worship services during the Bishops' meetings. Basically, I shared the message that I preach in the churches in our conference:

The United Methodist Church is at a crossroads. We have been working hard to turn around the decline of our churches – a decline that has lasted for 40 years. But so far, our efforts have not borne much fruit.

I think the time has come for us to see our issue from a different perspective. The issue we face today is more than a lack of programs or skills. The fundamental issue we face today is a spiritual issue. It is a faith issue. It is a lordship issue. Today many churches are not truly open to God. Dr. Graham Standish points out this situation in his book, *Becoming a Blessed Church*: "I have been frustrated over the years that a vast majority of the congregations in the mainstream denominations, and the denominations themselves, have adopted a functional style of church that cuts off their spiritual cores. What I mean is that too many churches focus only on function, on doing activities of church..."

The problem in many of these churches is not so much what they do, but the spirit in which they do it. They worship, but not necessarily with an eye toward leading people to an encounter with God. They meet to do God's work, but not necessarily in ways that include prayerfully seeking God's will and way in their work. They offer prayers, but not with the expectation that prayer will do much more than offer comfort and consolation.... Many churches simply are not open to God."

But opening our churches to God is not easy because that means giving up our agendas. That means giving up our ministry for Christ's ministry. That means dying in Christ that the Lord may be risen, indeed, in our churches and reign in our life and ministry. That means we take a risk of uncertainty in our future. That means truly giving up our lordship and surrendering ourselves to God.

For a new future we need to open

ourselves widely to God. Jesus Christ should be born anew in us and in our churches.

We are now in the Advent season. Jesus Christ who was born in Bethlehem is coming to us through the Holy Spirit. And in the end, He will come again for the consummation of his story. Are we ready to open ourselves to God? Are we going to radically welcome Jesus anew in this Advent season?

I would like to close my article with John Wesley's "Prayer of Submission," a prayer that has deeply touched my heart. In this prayer John Wesley gives to God his understanding, his will, his affection, his body, all his worldly goods, his credit, his reputation, himself and his all. Let me share with you the part in which Wesley gives his will:

"... I give you my will. May I have no will of my own. Whatsoever you will, may I will, and that only. May I will your glory in all things, as you do, and make that my end in every thing. May I ever say with the Psalmist, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you...'

May I delight to do your will, O God, and rejoice to accept it. Whatever threatens me, let me say, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.' And whatever befalls me, let me give thanks, since it is your will concerning me..."

In this busy month of December, can we pray this prayer? Can we live out this prayer of submission?

May the peace of Christmas and the hope of the New Year be with you all. 🍷

In our Lord,

Young Jin Cho

ONE LAST WORD



Players for Gang Green: Will Russell, captain (from Hallwood UMC), Shaun O'Shea, Dorian Johnson and George Flody. For Team Arcadia (from St. John's UMC): Treva Handy, William Scarbrough, Travis Miller, Eddie Miller and Brandon Press.

Basketball, dancing break out at Eastern Shore District Conference

ATLANTIC — What began with the singing of the traditional hymn, "God of Grace and God of Glory" ended with a high-energy basketball game and dancers (including the cardboard cut-out of Bishop Young Jin Cho) flooding the court to the music of Pharrell Williams's "Happy."

The Nov. 2 District Conference on the Eastern Shore was a celebration of ministry and of the Imagine No Malaria initiative of the Virginia Conference. More than \$4,600 has been raised so far by district churches to combat malaria in sub-Saharan Africa.

"I'm angry at Ebola," Virginia Conference missionary Kip Robinson told the crowd in the gym of St. John's UMC. One person has died from Ebola in the United States so far and thousands have died in the same time period from malaria, "but what do you read in the headlines?" Robinson asked. Robinson and his wife, Nancy, serve in Sierra Leone, where they have seen first-hand the effects of malaria, which disproportionately kills children and pregnant women.

The Ebola crisis in West Africa has prevented them from returning to their duties in Sierra Leone, in fact.

The Robinsons took up cheerleading duties as two local 3-on-3 teams took the floor for the finals of the first Eastern Shore District Basketball Tournament. Gang Green and Team Arcadia worked their way through the initial rounds of the double-elimination tournament, which raised money for Imagine No Malaria through team sponsorships and fees. After 12 hard-fought minutes, Team Arcadia emerged with an 11-8 victory.

The Rev. Gary Miller, pastor of St. John's, organized the tournament which attracted players from middle school to middle aged, including the Eastern Shore DS Alex Joyner. "We called ourselves Team Trust in the Lord," Joyner said, "because every shot was a prayer."

Talks are underway for a conference-wide tournament. 🍷



Tweets heard 'round the conference

Lindsey Baynham @LMBaynham

Worshipping in Fairfax with the Greatest Generation [On Veterans' Day]

Steve Jennings @SteveJennings7

Pray for homeless veterans. Their scars may not be visible, but the pain is real.

Ebenezer UMC @EbenezerUMC

God doesn't care what you would do with what you don't have. He cares what you are doing with what you do have.

Alan Combs @thricemantis

I dozed off before the #Bears game last night, and as I read the stories and see videos from the game, I'm so glad I did.

Lauren Lobenhofer @Chafinhofer

Awesome things I never imagined happening: Sitting by the fire, watching football in the company of my fantastic in-laws #awesomeinlaws #NFL

Hannah Lambert @hannahbana004 I want a caramel apple 🍏

Lauren Lobenhofer @Chafinhofer

Impressed by the Mormons' response to @BookofMormon musical (distributing BOM on theater sidewalk). Example of healthy evangelism.

Andrew Hudgins @andrew_hudgins

No idea what's going on in the football game because the camera guys are so HORRIBLE. Ball isn't in the picture most of time #JMU #CAA4Life

Merry Christmas From the Kids at UMFS

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you have given a child happiness and hope
throughout the new year.*

With prayers and best wishes from all of us here,
we wish you and your family a Merry Christmas
and a most Happy New Year!



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