

Advocate

The Virginia United Methodist

February 2013

Under Construction:

**All Things New -
Equipping Vital
Congregations**

FROM THE EDITOR



Neill Caldwell
Editor

Vital
work
in
progress



Larry Davies jokes that he's the Virginia Conference's point person on Vital Congregations because he's the former used car salesman on the Cabinet. Hopefully that's more about being good with numbers ...

You'll keep hearing a lot about Vital Congregations this year. After sitting through a session at our United Methodist Center updating the work being done, I thought it was information we should share.

"We all know our denomination is declining (in the U.S.)," Rev. Davies says, "but we hesitate when we look at the numbers. We make excuses that the numbers are off because the culture has changed. But churches need to have an epiphany, a reality check, that 'we can do better.'"

Davies says that under the current system, numbers come in once a year and are filed away in a metal cabinet in the superintendent's offices. When we get down to it, we have no idea how accurate those numbers are. "People guess and fudge and all sorts of things... (The question is) How do we get numbers where we can share them in real time, where we can share and celebrate what churches are doing right?" Davies asks.

"Vital Congregations introduces a way to visibly measure the effectiveness of our accomplishing our mission to 'make disciples for the transformation of the world,'" says Kathy Merry, a lay person who is acting as a consultant to the conference's efforts. "We're creating a 'transformational change,' a systematic approach for spiritual development, collaboration and fact-based improvement."

Still, conference leaders are quick to point out that Vital Congregations is not just about numbers, but about people. "It's about sharing a dedication that we're doing what God has called us to do," said Davies. "And that's different for every church."

"The idea is to build a culture that focuses on spiritual development and prayer, of collaboration and trust," said Merry.

"And move away from a programmatic approach," echoed the conference Director of Connectional Ministries the Rev. Marc Brown.

So the idea is creating a *non-judgmental* system of measuring achievement. The basis of that must be grounded on a foundation of our own spirituality.

"You've got to believe God had a hand in Bishop Cho's appointment (to Virginia)," Merry told the conference staff. "He is encouraging us to establish our own prayer, scripture and spiritual formation (first). Otherwise the fertile seed is falling on fallow ground."

And with several years of "All Things New" under our belts, Virginia is actually taking a leadership role in this initiative. "We're ahead of the denomination," Brown says with a smile, "preparing the way."

So the Bishop's Task Force on Vital Congregations is working to come up with a way to exchange not only numbers, but also ideas and suggestions for how to do things better. Merry says that there is a "real hunger" for that in the Virginia Conference.

"We talk about how important our connection is," she concludes. "We just need a little more of it."

Neill Caldwell

Connecting with the



VirginiaAdvocate

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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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COMMENTARY

No, everything doesn't happen for a reason

“Everything happens for a reason,” he said as he reflected upon the terrible events that had occurred in Newtown, Connecticut. I suppose these words were meant to be comforting. Implicit in them is the idea that there is a grand plan, this horrible tragedy is a part of that plan, and that with time we’ll see and understand the good that was the result of this horrible evil.

But, is the shooting of 20 children and their teachers really a part of a grand plan – an essential means to a greater end? This implies that there is a script that has already been written

by which the events of our world unfold, one leading to another, until the happy ending is finally reached. In this picture of reality, we’re all characters in the novel that God is writing. We merely do or experience what the Author intends.

Here’s why I think this is wrong: If everything happens for a reason, according to God’s plan, then the plot to kill 20 children and six teachers and administrators did not originate in the mind of Adam Lanza, but in the mind of God. God intended this, and put it in the mind of Adam Lanza, because it was a part of God’s plan. What kind of “god” intends children to be killed? What greater good could possibly justify the horrible pain their parents must endure? If



By ADAM HAMILTON

intended this, and put it in the mind of Adam Lanza, because it was a part of God’s plan. What kind of “god” intends children to be killed? What greater good could possibly justify the horrible pain their parents must endure? If

“everything happens for a reason,” then every act of evil is ultimately God’s doing. Rape, abuse of children, terrorism, the cruelty human beings perpetrate on one another – are all of these really the will of God?

This line of reasoning does two things: It removes human responsibility for evil acts, and it makes God culpable for all evil, having intended it to happen. What kind of monster wills all the horrible events in this world, even if for some greater good? Can the ends really justify the means when the means are the murder of a child or the many other forms evil takes in our world?

A more accurate assessment is that the evil that happens in this world is not God’s will and is, in fact, a thwarting of his plan. The Bible calls us to love our neighbors, and to do justice and love kindness, not to indiscriminately kill one another. So how do we explain the kind of evil we saw in Connecticut last week? I suspect that here theists and atheists would agree: Human beings have within them the ability to choose evil or good. We wake up each day facing the age-old struggle of good and evil. In some situations mental illness clouds our judgment.

Our struggle with good and evil is manifest in a hundred small decisions each day: Will I text and drive, or leave my phone alone until I get where I’m

going? Will I gossip about my co-worker or choose to speak about them the way I hope they would speak about me? Will I act upon my worst impulses or my best? Will I show mercy or seek revenge? Will I bless or curse? Will I live only for myself, or will I love my neighbor as myself?

The senseless killing of 20 children and their teachers and principal at Sandy Hook Elementary School was not part of God’s grand plan. It was a thwarting of God’s plan. It

was the misuse of human freedom. Why then did God not stop it? For the same reason he does not stop you from texting and driving, or living selfish and self-absorbed lives; the same reason he allows us to ignore the poor, or to cheat on our spouses or to abuse power: Because the freedom to make choices is an essential part of what it means to be human.

Yet God has not left us entirely to our own devices. God seeks to influence humanity. This is at the heart

of the Christmas story. It is the story of light coming into the darkness, of a Savior to show us the way, of light overcoming the darkness, of God’s work to save the world.

Evil will not prevail. Every act of evil produces a thousand acts of goodness. We’ve seen this in the stories coming out of Connecticut. We’ve felt it in our own hearts. This terrible tragedy touched a nation, and aroused kindness and compassion in our hearts. While some misuse

their freedom to perpetrate evil, millions respond by feeling compelled to use their freedom to do good. Everything doesn’t happen for a reason, if by this we mean evil is a part of God’s plan. But God does ensure that evil will not prevail and that light will always, ultimately, overcome the darkness. If we follow God’s lead, our work is to push back the darkness.

-The Rev. Adam Hamilton is senior pastor at The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas



The moral question of gun collecting

By MORGAN GUYTON

The 2005 film “Thank You for Smoking” is about a tobacco public relations executive who wins a public debate about smoking by sidestepping the health questions and reframing the debate as an issue of consumer choice and individual rights. I wonder what would happen if the gun debate were reframed in the opposite way. Instead of asking whether people should have the right to own semiautomatic rifles with unlimited capacity ammo clips, my question as a pastor is whether it is morally compatible with Christian values to collect guns. Not to have a gun to defend yourself and even carry around the shopping mall with you if you live in Arizona. Not to have a gun to use for hunting (I love it when guys from my church give me venison). But to collect guns? Lots of them. Not ancient muskets to be displayed in cases, but powerful guns that you take to some out of the way place to show off to your friends. Is that morally compatible with Christian values?

Whenever a mentally ill, socially isolated middle-upper class white guy



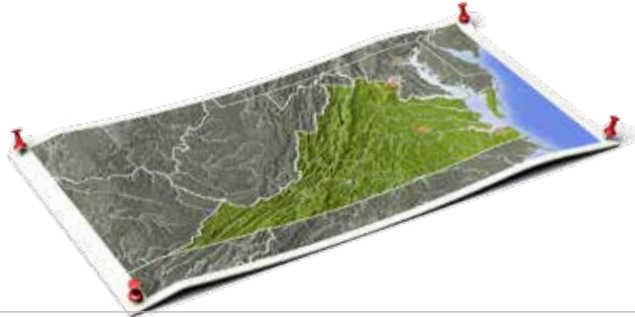
shoots up a theater or a school, I think back to my own middle school experience. I was a loner. I got bullied a lot. When Pearl Jam’s first album came out, there was a song called “Jeremy” that I would play over and over in my Walkman: “At home drawing pictures of mountaintops/flaming yellow sun/arms raised in a V/ the dead lay in pools of maroon below ...” I drew some pretty disturbing pictures in middle school. My other favorite song was “Straight Outta Compton” by NWA: “When I’m cornered/I got a sawed off/squeeze the trigger/and bodies grow harder/You, too, boy, if you **** with me...”

Gangsta rap was how I coped with being bullied. I wonder if the reason it took off was because of all the scrawny white suburban kids who bought those albums for the same reason.

My dad didn’t own a gun. If he had owned one, I almost definitely would have been too chicken to do anything with it (if I were somehow able to get hold of it). Not because I didn’t fantasize about doing very evil things to the

(Continued on page 28: “Gun collecting”)

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Spiritual formation expert to speak at next 5 Talent Academy



Mindy Caliguire is interviewed by the Rev. Bill Hybels as part of a Willow Creek presentation.

Mindy Caliguire started “SoulCare” more than a dozen years ago, so the idea of taking care of your spiritual health is anything but a new idea.

What is new is the practice of incorporating personal spiritual formation into small group studies.

Caliguire, a leading author and expert in spiritual formation, will be the speaker at the next training session of the 5 Talent Academy, to be held Saturday, Feb. 23. In addition to “SoulCare,” she works with Willow Creek Association as the ministry’s Transformation Director.

Caliguire will speak live at Floris UMC in Herndon, but her talk and the other activities of the day will again be live-streamed to satellite sites around the conference.

“SoulCare” was begun by Caliguire as a ministry resource dedicated to

“helping people restore health to their souls,” according to the www.soulcare.com website.

“Spiritual Formation was a foreign concept, occasionally held in deep suspect,” Caliguire said. “But more and more we are admitting that our effectiveness in creating disciples hasn’t been as strong as it could and should be – and formation speaks to the developing interior life of a disciple. As a result of this widened interest and urgency around transformation, two primary areas have shifted for me in my work: I’m particularly focused on the soul health of leaders. Some of the deepest change needed in the church in our day centers around the spiritual vitality of our leaders. This, of course, impacts small group structures and leadership communities as well. Secondly, more communities are focused on helping the people in their congregation grasp the concept of a spiritual journey and learn ways to take next steps on that journey.

“Over the years, though,” she added, “I have been more and more interested in serving churches that are orienting themselves more explicitly around the priority of transformation and discipleship.”

That idea of creating transformation through

one’s personal faith development fits nicely with the Virginia Conference’s “All Things New” approach of leadership development.

“I believe the relationships between believers were intended to be a primary means by which the Spirit would move among His people, producing life and growth,” Caliguire adds. “Thus, they are, or can be, an enormous means by which we connect with God and experience transformation.”

This 5 Talent Academy will also feature worship led by Bishop Young Jin Cho. The event will be live-streamed from Floris UMC in Herndon to five other locations around the conference: Danville area: First UMC, 146 E. Main St., Martinsville; Eastern Shore: Franktown UMC, 7551 Bay-side Rd., Franktown; Richmond area: Good Shepherd UMC, 9155 Hungary Rd., Henrico; Shenandoah Valley: Bridgewater UMC, 219 N. Main St., Bridgewater; and Tidewater: Francis Asbury UMC, 871 N. Great Neck Rd., Virginia Beach.

The cost is \$25 per person, and lunch will be provided. Register at www.vaumc.org/5talent. One-half CEU is available.

For more information contact Pat Hickman at PatHickman@vaumc.org or call 1-800-768-6040, ext. 155 or (804) 521-1155.

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

Capital campaign update



In 2008, the Virginia Annual Conference approved “All Things New: Fruitful and Multiplying.” A vision for changing the culture of the Virginia Conference to fruitfulness through a focus on leadership development, “All Things New” includes two invitations: an Invitation to Plant 250 new faith communities over 30 years, and an Invitation to Harvest by strengthening our existing churches.

Also included was a recommendation that a capital campaign feasibility study be conducted and reported to the 2009 Annual Conference. This study, conducted by Klote and Associates, resulted in a recommendation for a \$14 million campaign that would assist with the formation of new faith communities, strengthening existing congregations, and pension support for Central Conference clergy in third world countries. The Annual Conference approved Klote and Associates as the consulting company to work with the first phase of the campaign that focused on identified givers from July 2009 through June 2010 as well

as district training sessions for financial stewardship campaigns. A second phase, that did not include Klote and Associates, offered a general invitation to churches and individual givers and was conducted from July 2010 through June 2011.

Approved in June 2009, the campaign was conducted in the midst of a recession that affected churches and persons throughout the Virginia Conference. At the end of the campaign in November 2012, gifts pledged over a five-year period and non-pledged gifts totaled \$2,474,576.42.

While the results of the campaign did not achieve the stated goal, the focus on new faith communities has resulted in 11 full-time appointments of church planters and 12 part-time new faith communities (among them Hispanic/Latino and Korean [many started by congregations and not requiring conference funding]) that reflect the growing diversity of Virginia.

In addition, conference ministries have been aligned toward the goal of leadership development

during the past four years under the direction of the conference’s Common Table for Church Vitality.

Persons or churches wishing to inquire about how they may contribute to “All Things New” may contact the Rev. Mark Ogren, conference director of Congregational Excellence, at MarkOgren@vaumc.org.

A copy of the “All Things New: Fruitful and Multiplying” report may be accessed via the “All Things New” link on the conference home page at www.vaumc.org.

As “All Things New” moves into its fifth year of implementation, it is good to remember that it is defined in this report as:

- ❖ A proclamation of faith in the abundance of God’s grace through Jesus Christ;
- ❖ A reclaiming of our United Methodist heritage as a missionary movement of God’s Holy Spirit;
- ❖ A vision for spiritual renewal through an invitation for all churches to be fruitful and to multiply.

It is this definition that undergirds a continued emphasis on changing the culture of the Virginia Conference to fruitfulness so disciples of Jesus Christ may be made for the transformation of the world.

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The Retired Clergy Housing Corporation of the Virginia Conference maintains a program to provide retirement homes for eligible United Methodist pastors who need them.

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If you would like to consider willing your home to the Retired Clergy Housing Corporation of the Virginia Conference or if you would like to share through the Covenant of Gratitude, please mail in the coupon below with your name and address.

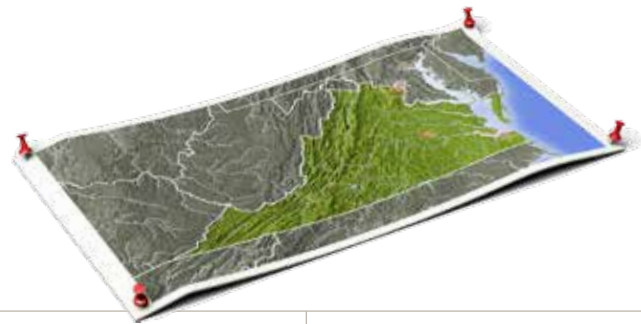
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The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Woodlake gives Christmas away this year

By Paul Baker

In December, the Woodlake congregation worshipped differently, guided by the words of Jesus who said he “came not to be served but to serve” [Matthew 20:28].

Instead of gathering for our customary services, we reached out in service to our neighbors in Woodlake, Chesterfield County and the greater Richmond area. Some 600 members gave of their time and talents in multiple ways, ultimately serving in 30 church-assigned projects and nearly 300 others identified by members.

Some decorated and provided favors for senior citizens at their annual tea. Some took Christmas treats to nursing home residents. Others offered 25 random acts of kindness to those they met. The adult choir

performed a cantata for residents at three nursing homes. One family took their dogs to visit with residents at Brandermill Woods. Several members raked leaves for elderly or sick neighbors. Fifteen youths and adults gathered to cut down a dead tree and clean up a yard for a home-bound senior citizen.

Several served a meal to the homeless at Monroe Park and spent time in devotion with them. Others filled stockings for children at the Elijah House, and baked cookies for teachers at school. Still others helped residents at Sunrise Senior Living make Christmas cards to send to family. One family baked and delivered goodies to young persons in a juvenile delinquent correctional center, while another visited with children stricken with cancer in the hospital.

Another group sorted donated items at a thrift store for the needy. Two couples helped a single mother get organized for a move. Several gathered to cut, pin and sew caps for infants. Yet another group served breakfast to residents at Freedom House, while others volunteered at the SPCA, United Methodist Family Services and the YMCA.

All told, these and other efforts added up to the equivalent of 30 40-hour weeks of work. Throughout, it was our prayer that our service would fulfill the injunction

to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” [Matthew 5:16].

The concept of a weekend of “Giving Christmas Away” had to overcome a couple of significant obstacles. First and foremost, organizing to engage several hundred people in service required a number of dedicated individuals. And second, the church’s Finance Committee needed to sign off, understanding that foregoing an entire weekend of services might diminish financial giving.

The first obstacle was overcome when the church staff volunteered to adopt the project “above and beyond” their ordinary duties. Several staff members contacted potential work sites to line up projects. Others worked on a number of additional tasks including publicity, setting up a website, and coordinating the assignment of volunteers.

We publicized the weekend throughout the fall, encouraging members to see the world with fresh eyes, noting that opportunities to serve as Christ served confront us daily.

As the weekend approached, members signed up online, indicating projects they had identified on their own or volunteering to be assigned to a task. We also ordered Christmas-red



The Rev. Peter Moon, senior pastor at Woodlake

“Give It Away” t-shirts to be worn as people went about their labors.

Finally, we invited members to return to the church following their service for self-directed worship at four stations: one for communion, another for prayer, a third to give an offering, and one for volunteers to write about their experiences. These mini-journals of mission then were taped to the back wall of the sanctuary as a testimony of a weekend when members met Christ in a very real way, as Jesus invited us when he said: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” [Matthew 25:35-36].

A sage once observed that “happiness doesn’t result from what we get, but from what we give.” This certainly proved true for those who stepped out in mission over this weekend.

One member who, with her three children, helped out at a thrift store said that “the best part was watching the change in the kids. When we first arrived, everyone was nervous... but by the end of our shift, they were talkative and interested and exploring all of the amazing trinkets you find at thrift stores. On the way home, we all chatted about how much fun we’d had.”

She went on to say that “it’s reassuring to know we can each do our little part to make the world a better place.”

Her remarks were echoed by many others who returned from their work with smiles on their faces and with thankful hearts for the many ways that God has blessed our lives, including the gift of serving as Christ served.

Finally, the faith of the members of the Finance Committee was justified by the offering that came in that weekend and the next. Giving exceeded our expectations... as God’s gifts always do! 🍀

-The Rev. Paul Baker is associate pastor at Woodlake UMC

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

Initiative takes Woodlake UMC into the community

By Jeremy Slayton, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

The smiles that filled Freedom House’s Community Shelter on Sunday morning likely didn’t fade for some time despite the dreary weather outside the South Richmond facility. That joy was the lasting impression made by the congregation of Woodlake United Methodist Church, which brought breakfast and fellowship to the shelter’s residents. It was part of the church’s “Give This Christmas Away” initiative — to leave the sanctuary for a few hours and go out into the community.

“We believe serving the community is part of our worship,” said the Rev. Peter Moon, senior pastor of Woodlake.

Benjamin Staley, a native of Houston, Texas, has lived in The Community Shelter for nearly a year and has no family in the area. But with the Christmas holiday just more than a week away, the visiting church members were like many Santas. “They brought me some cheer,” he said. “It’s difficult enough to have to go through what we go through, but to have them come through and share their time and heart and effort and smiles — it means everything to us,” he said.

Moon said this is the first time Woodlake has canceled its traditional worship services to conduct such an extensive community outreach effort. The congregation — over the course of Saturday and Sunday — took the spirit of giving to the community.

About 600 church members participated in a variety of projects. In addition to providing breakfast at The Community Shelter, some staffed the Amelia Thrift Shop, while others created Christmas cards for veterans. Food was bought to restock the shelves at area food pantries, and the choir sang songs at local nursing and retirement homes.

Richmond-area faith groups canceling traditional services to extend their ministries is becoming a trend. In April,

First Presbyterian Church in the West End held its first Serve Day program to offer a helping hand across the region. A month later, Christians, Jews and Muslims joined forces to take part in 75 community-service projects in an effort called I.O.U. Richmond.

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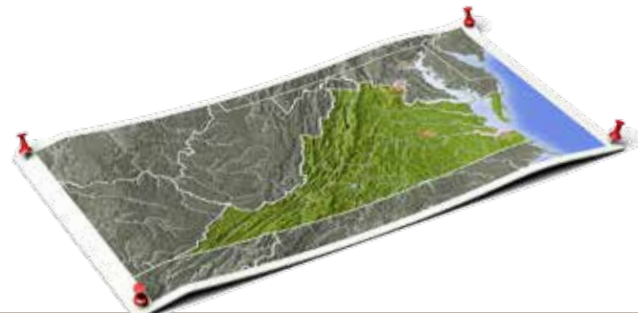


Benjamin Staley has lived in The Community Shelter for nearly a year.

Houston native Benjamin Staley, left, a resident of Freedom House’s Community Shelter, talks with Caroline Brindle, 18, Rachael Moon, 16, and Kerri Adkins, 15, all of Woodlake United Methodist Church, during a breakfast at the facility in South Richmond. Photos by Mark Gormus, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



'A Church Without Walls' is serving the homeless community in Norfolk

By R. Shaun Smith

A Church Without Walls (ACWOW) started earlier this year on the streets of Norfolk ministering to the homeless. I have been fortunate to participate in this ministry and the work they are doing.

On Saturday afternoons, a meal, clothing and ministry are offered to anyone who will come. About 100 people are participating.

This is a powerful ministry where men and women are giving their lives to Christ, giving up drugs and alcohol and coming back with their testimonies of how God has worked wonders for them.

In November, we held a fundraiser for one of the team members, Ezekiel. "Zeke" is an amputee and has a prosthetic that was supposed to be temporary

and last him less than a year, but that was more than five years ago. Zeke works in a bike shop and helps with one part of ACWOW's ministry, bike repair. Just recently he and others on the team repaired 50 bikes for the homeless.

If you are in the Norfolk area looking for an opportunity to be a true disciple of Christ Jesus, join us at 17th and Granby on Saturdays at 4 p.m.

If you have a source for warm clothing, wool socks, tarps and/or winter headgear, contact us through the website, jimmyfoster-cwow.blogspot.com or e-mail RShaunSmith@gmail.com or (757) 408-5433.

Lastly, but not least, add ACWOW and the people we serve to your prayer list. 📧



Old Testament scholar to lead clergy seminar



Dr. John Oswalt

A scholar of Hebrew language and religion will be the presenter at the annual Continuing Education Seminar for Clergy at Virginia Wesleyan College in March.

Dr. John Oswalt, visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, will present three sessions on the topic "Preaching from the Prophets" March 4-5.

This is the 15th year Virginia Wesleyan College has presented this seminar, which provides one continuing education credit for Virginia Conference clergy.

Oswalt's writings have appeared in Bible encyclopedias, scholarly journals and religious periodicals. He has authored or co-authored eight books. He was the Old Testament editor of the Wesley Bible published by Thomas Nelson Publishers in 1990 and served as consulting editor for the "New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis," Zondervan, 1997.

Oswalt is currently part of the editorial team that is revising the Living Bible (New Living Translation) with Tyndale House Publishers and is the author of the two-volume "New International Commentary on the Book of Isaiah." His most recent book is "Lectures in Old Testament Theology: Yahweh is God Alone" with Dennis Kinlaw, 2010.

An ordained clergy of the Kentucky Conference, Dr. Oswalt has served on the Asbury Seminary faculty on two previous occasions. He has served congregations in Kentucky and in New England. He holds M.A and Ph.D. degrees from Brandeis University.

Registration materials will be sent to clergy. The presentation will involve a full day on March 4 and a half day on March 5.

The cost of registration is \$75. Registration is available online at www.vwc.edu/ces or via mail to Debra Freeman, Virginia Wesleyan College, 1584 Wesleyan Drive, Norfolk, VA 23502.

For more information, contact Freeman at (757) 455-3217 or drfreeman@vwc.edu. 📧



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God Bless America

An Event for Older Adults

May 20-24, 2013

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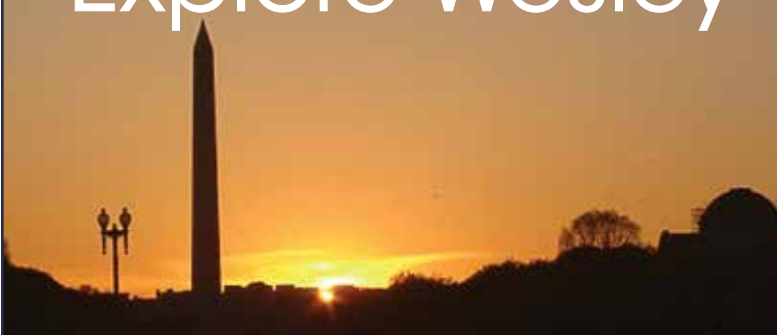

Feature Presentations:

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| "Faith of Our Fathers: Celebrating Our American Heritage" | "A View of the Civil War" | "Muskets and Minie Balls: Two Different Kinds of War" |
| JOY Choir, Perry UMC | Urbanus Dart, Soldier, 26th Georgia Volunteer Infantry | The War of 1812 and the Civil War |
| | Brad Brown, Civil War Re-enactor | Buddy Sullivan, historian and author |

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Urban Ministry

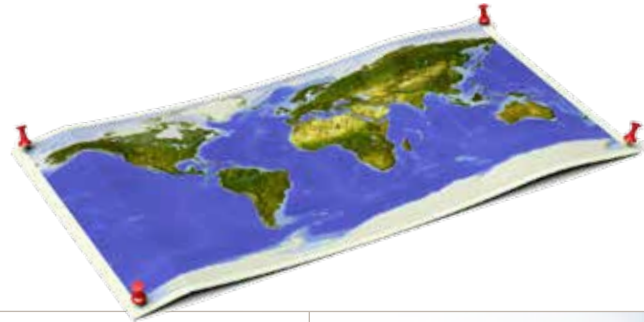
MASTER OF ARTS

MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES
Dual Degree with American University
Peace & Conflict Resolution
International Development

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY 2013 TRACKS
Urban Ministry - January 2013
Spirituality and Story - January 2013
Church Leadership Excellence - May 2013
Military Chaplaincy: Religious Leadership in a Complex, Multi-faith Environment - May 2013
Spiritual Leadership for the Global Church: the Asian Track - June 2013

Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD



Ideas offered for reaching out to military families

By Barbara Dunlap-Berg

If your congregation is seeking ways to reach out to military families, New Providence United Methodist Church, on the Tennessee-Kentucky border, might inspire you.

Just six miles from the Fort Campbell Army base in Kentucky, New Providence is home to many retired soldiers and their families. They know what it is like to have a spouse or parent absent for a year or more. They know how it is to celebrate birthdays with Mom or Dad deployed thousands of miles from home. They resonate with the frustration of a car that won't budge and the pressure of caring for children 24/7.

They understand because they've been there.

Through the Eagle's Wings ministry, New Providence matches military families with "sponsors" – members of the congregation who act as friends, confidants and, often, surrogate grandparents, aunts and uncles.

This ministry is just one example of how United Methodists reach out to troops and their families. Honoring veterans was the focus of "America's Sunday Supper" in January.

Over the past two years, tens of thousands of soldiers have come home from war ... to heal from wounds both visible and invisible, to face unemployment, a lack of housing and other domestic challenges.

"Now is the time to give back," the Rethink Church website says. "Raise awareness in your community, and do something to address the needs of veterans and military families."

Rethink Church, part of United Methodist Communications, is lining up 250 volunteer leaders to coordinate events and 6,500 volunteers to participate in a variety of outreach opportunities. The goal is to equip and offer resources to train additional volunteers to work with members of the military and their families.

Along with New Providence Church, United Methodist congregations in Hawaii, Indiana, Massa-

chusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin have registered events with Rethink Church.

A training event is on the agenda for St. Paul United Methodist Church, Hattiesburg, Miss. The activity will nurture communication skills and encourage respect for all people. In Cameron, N.C., the congregation of Solid Rock United Methodist Church will gather for a Sunday meal to share ways members can make a difference through economic empowerment, support for families of active-duty military, emergency aid and improving community well-being. New Washington United Methodist Church in Ohio held a series of events to affirm and support returning troops and their families and to raise awareness of the challenges they face.

Three congregations – Waverly and Willow Grove in Pennsylvania and Columbus in Wisconsin – plan special meals open to the community. Freewill offerings will assist veterans and military families. Preparing for future service projects with military families is on the docket for St. George's United Methodist Church, Fairfax, Va. 🍷

-Barbara Dunlap-Berg is an editor with United Methodist Communications

Ways to support military families

- ❖ Celebrate birthdays of soldiers and their family members. Have a birthday party for a child whose parent is deployed.
- ❖ Have a churchwide holiday meal. It's a great way to build a sense of family, especially for those whose loved ones are miles away and for newly returned soldiers.
- ❖ Open church activities to military families. Bible studies, Sunday school classes and youth groups acquaint newcomers with longtime members and give military families a safe place to share their stories. "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon — Ministering to Returning Combat Veterans," a Bible study available from Cokesbury, is a great place to start.
- ❖ Provide free babysitting for children in military families, both during and after deployment. Give a sole caregiver a break or a reunited couple a night out.
- ❖ Remember simple things such as a weekly phone call to ask how things are going and to offer a listening ear.
- ❖ Send care packages to active troops. Letters, drawings and photos from the church family are fun and easy to do. It's a wonderful way to involve children.

'Staples Advantage' available for all United Methodist churches

The General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) has recently partnered with Staples to take advantage of negotiated pricing that will be available to all United Methodist churches across the United States. District, annual conference and jurisdictional offices, as well as general agencies, will also be able to participate in this program.

Staples is not only a provider of office supplies, but also cleaning supplies and furniture.

The program extends:

- ❖ Preferred pricing on an established list of office and cleaning supplies across all UM churches
- ❖ Preferred pricing on a custom list of office and cleaning supplies particular to the individual congregation, office, or agency's needs
- ❖ 15% discount on all other catalog items
- ❖ Online ordering with next day delivery

- ❖ 1-3% annual rebate to the individual church, office, or agency volume-based on their purchases
- ❖ 1% annual rebate to UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) on all UM purchases combined.

You can go to the website: www.StaplesAdvantage.com/UnitedMethodists to start the process to set up your account. When you complete the online form with your basic contact information, a sales representative of Staples in your area will contact you to answer your questions about the program and sign up your church.

Disclaimer from GCFA: "GCFA does not endorse any commercial enterprise. We have entered into a purchasing agreement to gain some competitive pricing for our ministry and been able to do that in a way that extends that pricing availability to all of our local churches. We do not guarantee that it will meet all of your needs." 🍷



Children at First United Methodist Church, Lancaster, Pa., write thank-you notes to wounded veterans and active troops in the military. UMNS photo by Gwen Kisker



Religious news from around the NATION & WORLD



Tips to re-energize inactive members

Intentional relational efforts and constant communication can prevent new members from becoming idle and re-engage those people who have become inactive.

It's Sunday. People attending worship at the local United Methodist church can sense the electric atmosphere in the sanctuary! Today the congregation is welcoming seven new members who stand at the altar, pledging to participate faithfully through their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. The pastor charges the existing members to "do all in their power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love." The joy filling the sanctuary overflows into the narthex as each new member is warmly greeted by dozens of people.

The excitement of that day fades all too quickly. New posters soon crowd out the photo. Eventually,

someone takes it down. The demands of everyday life pile on the new members. Of the seven who joined so enthusiastically, only three still attend worship each week. Before long, a few of the seven stop coming altogether. The heartfelt promises made on that membership Sunday are a distant memory.

The scene described above is anecdotal, but typical. The 2010 Statistical Review reports that, on average, only 3 million of 7.6 million church members in the U.S. attend worship each week. Many members eventually become completely inactive. New members' exits can be as swift as their entrances. One study found that 82 percent of the people who drop out of church do so in the first year of their membership, particularly in months 6 and 12.

So, how can we re-engage these once-excited but now disengaged members? Below are some practical ideas and steps to reach out.

Create a "Buddy system."

Unfortunately, many people won't have friends or family members who notice when they don't attend church. To avoid overlooking people in need, assign three households in the church to be aware of each other. If one house-

hold is missing, the others should call to find out if they just took a week off or if they need help. It would have to be an opt-in program because people assigned a task in which they don't believe may not be reliable.

Form a "Connections Team."

Form a "Connections Team" that is charged with overseeing and tracking member involvement. Team members must be persons of high commitment and character who can handle sensitive and confidential information and who will commit to pray regularly for those who have become inactive. Use multiple reporting strategies to track member involvement. People may not sign an attendance pad during worship, but they might sign their child into the nursery. They may register their attendance or give an offering in Sunday school. If a person gives financially, serves in a ministry or attends a Bible study, report this information using church management software.

Develop accurate membership records.

Far too many churches allow their membership rolls to become so outdated that they are virtually useless. Some United Methodist mem-



bership rolls list hundreds of people. However, they include people who have moved away or now have membership in heaven. Information is powerful only if it is reliable. Removal of members is a serious and lengthy process, and the *Book of Discipline* requirements must be followed. (See Paragraph 228, "Care of Members.")

Identify inactive members.

Identify inactive members and begin the work to contact them. The process outlined in the *Book of Discipline* (Paragraph 228) calls for the entire membership to be engaged in trying to make contact with the person.

Reach out.

Once an inactive member is "found," reach out! United Methodist Bishop Ken Carder said, "The first step in re-energizing inactive members is to know who they are and being attentive to their stories. People become inactive for multiple reasons, and the reasons have to be taken seriously. The reasons vary from mere apathy to outright hostility resulting from

conflict and alienation. Behind every person who drops out of church, there is a unique story, or at least a unique twist to a familiar story. Meeting them where they are and taking their experiences seriously opens up possibilities for reconnecting to the community of faith."

In its survey of people who dropped out of church, LifeWay research learned that 62 percent of inactive church members are open to the idea of returning to church; 41 percent said they would return if they were simply invited back.

Engage!

As a relationship with an inactive member is re-established, let what you learn from his or her story help you find ways to engage them in existing (or new) ministries. Bishop Carder told of one congregation that had a team whose sole focus was maintaining contact with inactive members. The team gathered "data and information about their interests, gifts and concerns; and informing the pastor and other leaders of relevant issues, concerns and ideas coming from the inactive members. The goal was to re-engage the inactive (person) in the life of the congregation where possible or to encourage them to be involved in another congregation."

Missional engagement may reignite an inactive member's commitment.

A Barna Research study reports that 22 percent of young people who disconnected from the local church say that the church is "ignoring the problems of the real world."

"From my experience," Bishop Carder says, "nothing energizes people more than meeting God in those who struggle on the margins. I found that I could often enlist persons who had not been active in worship, Sunday school, etc. in providing service, such as working in the soup kitchen, assisting a shut-in ... even visiting the local jail." Through this experience of engaging in ministry with "the least of these," Carder says, once inactive members were "re-energized to participate in worship."

Ask questions!

If all your efforts do not re-engage a member, try to find out if they are willing to share their reasons.

Improve!

Use the data you gather for continual improvement. Bishop Carder encourages leaders to "identify common threads in the stories of inactive members. As a pastor," he said, "I learned a lot about the congregation from those who no longer attended, and the learning often led to changes in the congregation and my own pastoral care." ☞

-United Methodist Communications

Caretakers of God's Creation to start clean water project in northern Ghana

Caretakers of God's Creation, in partnership with the Global Environment and Technology Foundation, is beginning to involve itself in a ministry of providing clean drinking water for people for whom water is scarce and/or contaminated. This new area of ministry is being done through a trial to take place in northern Ghana to provide water filters for individual households.

"The United Methodist Church is involved with hunger ministries and is doing good things in terms of drilling wells and making water available for villages all over the third world, but insuring the cleanliness of the water seems to be a gap that we have not yet completely filled," said the Rev. Pat Watkins, executive director of the Virginia Conference ministry. "So Caretakers is working to provide a ministry in this new arena. United Methodist Women have adopted a goal to insure that clean drinking water is the right of every man, woman and child on the face of the planet, that water should not become a marketable commodity but should be available for all."

The Global Environment and Technology Foundation was created by Bob Herbst, a former assistant secretary of the Interior for the United States and a United Methodist layperson at Annandale UMC in the Virginia Conference.

In Ghana 58 percent of the population live in rural areas. In these communities, 66 percent lack access to safe water. Water-related diseases such as diarrhea are predominant, leading to one-third of reported cases in hospitals and clinics across the country, factors contributing to the country's high infant mortality rate and chronic malnutrition among children under 5 years old. There are also growing cases of cholera reported by Ghana Health Services, with 67 deaths during the summer of 2012.

The purposes of the field trial are to determine how the filtration technology performs under various field conditions, and whether there is a significant reduction in household diarrheal rates.

Caretakers of God's Creation is inviting congregations to participate in this new ministry. For more information, e-mail Rev. Watkins at caretakersof-creation@me.com. ☞



WORK IN PROGRESS

Vital Congregations feeds connection, which can lead to fruitfulness

By Larry Davies

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in Me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in Me and My words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are My true disciples. This brings great glory to My Father. (John 15:5-8)

These words of Jesus, spoken to His disciples just before his crucifixion illustrate two qualities that are necessary in our walk with Christ. 1. “Those who remain in Me, and I in them,” describes our ongoing and deepening relationship with Jesus. 2. “Will produce much fruit,” illustrates that we are put on earth for a purpose and in that purpose we are to bear fruit.

Lose the connection between the vine and the branch; there can be little or no fruit. If there is little or no fruit, we should take a closer look at the connection between the vine and the branch.

There are similarities between this passage and the mission of The United Methodist Church which is to “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

“Make Disciples of Jesus Christ” can describe our connection between the vine and branch.

“For the Transformation of the World.” represents the challenge to bear fruit in the name of Christ.

WORK IN PROGRESS

In other words, the Council of Bishops recognized that the future of our denomination depends upon the vitality and health of our churches. Questions: How do we know if congregations are vital? If they are not vital, what help do they need? What resources could be made available?

Five key indicators were chosen to measure church vitality. The first three reflect our ability to make disciples for Jesus Christ while the final two indicators show how we're doing as we seek to influence and transform the world. Not everything can be measured, and there are other indicators that could have been chosen, but these five help to provide a snapshot of how a church is doing:

- **Disciples worship as measured by worship attendance.**
- **Disciples make new disciples as measured by professions of faith.**
- **Disciples grow their faith as measured by the number of small groups.**
- **Disciples engage in mission as measured by the number of disciples engaged in local and global outreach.**
- **Disciples share resources for mission as measured by the amount of money given to mission outreach.**



Last year, more than 98 percent of our churches across the Virginia Conference set goals for the next four years in each of these five indicators and presented them to the 2012 General Conference. As of January 1, of this year, our churches have been registered through UMVitalCongregations.org and will be reporting progress on those five key indicators each week through a United Methodist website called "Vital Signs."

"Whoa!! Goals? Measurements? What happened to the importance of emphasizing the connection between the vine and the branch? So, far Vital Congregations seems to be all about producing fruit with little concern for the need to connect the vine and the branch."

How can "Vital Congregations" help our conference strengthen our spiritual connection as well as our fruitfulness so that churches continue to focus on our guiding vision: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

In January of 2012, Bishop Charlene Kammerer assembled a steering team made up of the Bishop and Conference Lay Leader, representatives from the Cabinet, conference staff and Common Table and called the group "All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations."

From the beginning, our group faced two choices as to how we could respond to "Vital Congregations."

We could implement "Vital Congregations" as a program which would add another layer of reporting that would either be ignored or used to judge our leaders and churches.

OR

We could step back and create a more systemic approach that would call for spiritual development, collaboration and emphasize a culture of improvement.

Using the knowledge and experience gained from our conference initiative, "All Things New," we set our purpose: To discern, organize, design and resource implementation of a systemic response to "Vital Congregations," resulting in a teaching and learning environment that renews and dramatically increases fruitfulness of churches throughout the Virginia Conference.

Bishop Young Jin Cho brought his own unique leadership to our steering team. Many times he stressed to us and in his sermons that "without spiritual vitality there can be no vital congregations." In addition, Bishop Cho has creatively brought people, committees, boards and agencies from across the conference to collaborate and work together toward a common vision. His repeated question to us all: "How can we pray and work together to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?"

How could the Bishop's Steering Team utilize "Vital Congregations" in a way that would focus less on judgment and more on helping each other improve?

- **Focus on spiritual development and prayer;**
- **Establish an environment of collaboration, trust;**
- **Equip and enable churches to be more fruitful;**
- **Eliminate unnecessary reporting;**
- **Allow accurate and relevant data to flow freely;**
- **Establish clear roles and responsibilities.**



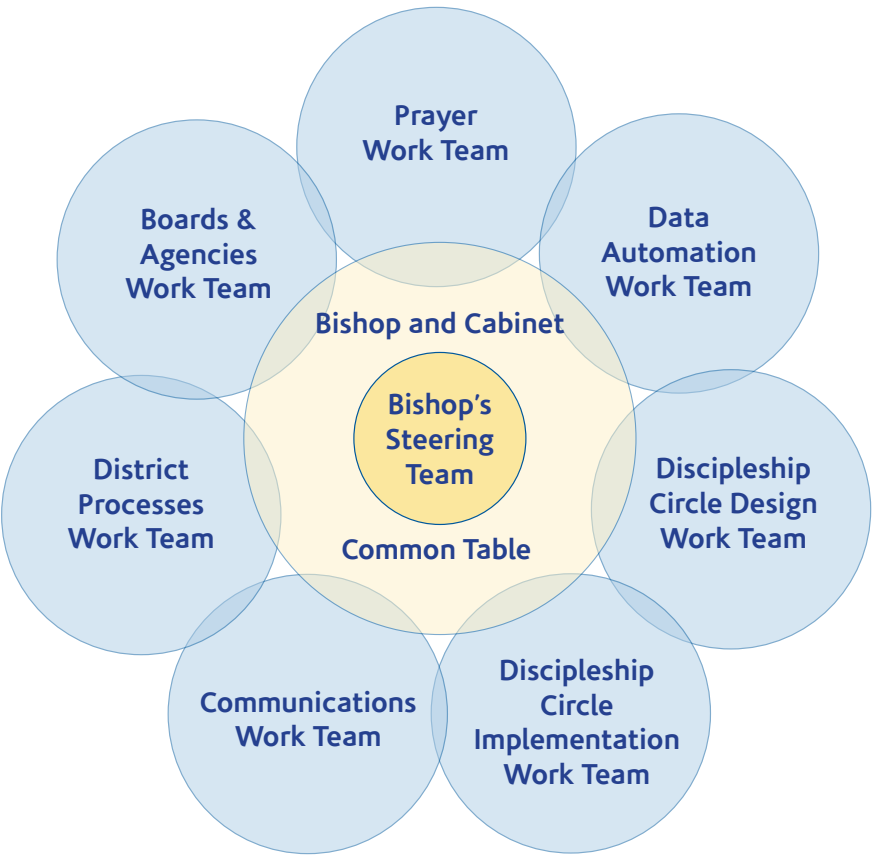
The Bishop's Steering Team formed seven work groups made up of more than 75 clergy and lay leaders from across the conference that are meeting now to help us answer these questions more effectively. Each group is charged with a specific task and is hard at work on developing ideas. These are temporary groups that will make recommendations in their areas and then dissolve. None of them are designed to stay in place.

Prayer

This group was intentionally formed first and started meeting first so that prayer would remain central. Their tasks: To cover all of our groups with prayer; Establish conference-wide intercession for God's guidance, blessing and will to be done; Pray for work teams; Pray for resources to make it happen; Pray for outcomes aligned with God's will; Pray for increased effectiveness at making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The prayer group has already given our groups the challenge to spend the first half hour of each meeting in intentional prayer. They are publishing a prayer guide along with 30 days of prayer-centered devotions for anyone to use.

Data Automation

This group is looking carefully at the many forms and ways church data is used. Their goal: Inventory all local church reporting requirements; Recommend elimination of reports that do not add value; Streamline value-added and Discipline-required reporting by synchronizing, automating and housing in central database; Build capability for reporting to be submitted electronically; Reporting will be simple and automated; Data will be shared in various ways to facilitate increased effectiveness at making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.



Discipleship Circles Design

Discipleship Circles can be made up of small groups already in existence or they may be new. They can be composed of clergy, laity, churches or combinations. They are designed to strengthen relationships and hold each other accountable. An effective Discipleship Circle should provide an atmosphere of collaboration, trust, spiritual development and continuous improvement. This group is studying various models including John Wesley's class meetings. In addition, they are modeling a Discipleship Circle.

Discipleship Circles Implementation

While the Discipleship Circles group is primarily concerned with the design of Discipleship Circles, the Implementing group will be charged with providing continuous resource-

ing to keep the circles spiritually focused and fruitful. This is the only group that has not met yet. They are waiting to see what the Discipleship Circles themselves will look like.

Communications

The Communications work group is asked to continually and creatively communicate the story throughout the conference to explain mission, goals, plans, actions, impacts. People should know how these efforts help build culture that is extremely effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Boards and Agencies

The purpose of this group is to determine how each board and agency can better align its goals and actions with the goals of "All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations,"

(Continued on pg. 28: "Vital")

WORK IN PROGRESS



“Behold, I make all things new.”

(Revelation 21:5)

By Marc Brown

These biblical words of hope and faith in the continuing creative power of God have been the guiding vision of the Virginia Conference since the 2008 Annual Conference’s adoption of “All Things New: Fruitful and Multiplying – The Virginia Conference.” An affirmation of faith in God’s redemptive power through Jesus Christ, this verse was selected by the task force that developed the “All Things New” report as an acknowledgement of God’s creative presence through the connected ministries of the churches of our conference.

Through a two-fold emphasis on new faith communities and strengthening the ministries of existing congregations, “All Things New” laid out a vision for the churches of the Virginia Conference to creatively respond to the changing demographic realities of our Commonwealth. With an emphasis on leadership development for laity and clergy, our conference leadership has been faithfully working on ways to help congregations assess their current reality through faith in the risen Lord who says, “Behold, I make all things new.”

In 2011, the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church discerned that our denomination would place a 10-year focus on congregational vitality. This focus, identified as “Vital Congregations,” noted two of the recurring factors in vital congregations were vital lay and clergy leadership. Across the denomination, this focus was implemented by having congregations set four-year goals which were presented by the bishops of all annual conferences for God’s blessing during a time of worship at General Conference in May.

While these goals reflected the dreams and prayers of faithful disciples of Jesus across the connection of The United Methodist Church, each annual conference was given the task of responding to its own congregations in helping them to live into their goals. Through the formation of a task force that is called The Bishop’s “All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations” Task Force, Bishop Charlene Kammerer and, subsequently, Bishop Young Jin Cho, have actively engaged in helping to develop a systemic response to “Vital Congregations” for the Virginia Conference. Faithful to the focus set forth by the Council of Bishops through “Vital Congregations” and to the focus set forth by the Virginia Conference through “All Things New,” this task force is engaging teams of laity and clergy with different areas of expertise to develop processes that will help congregations to assess their ministries and grow in discipleship.

Having served as chair of the task force that convened in 2007 to craft the “All Things New” report and currently serving as the primary conference staff person for The Bishop’s “All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations” Task Force, I am encouraged by many things I am witnessing as we move into 2013. Among the reasons for my encouragement are:

► The continuing focus of “All Things New” on culture change through leadership development as the Virginia Conference intentionally emphasizes the planting of new faith communities and the renewal of existing congregations. In a denomination that is characterized by a history of shifting areas of emphasis, it is good to see the Virginia Conference committing its resources to these continued areas of focus.

► The episcopal leadership of the Virginia Conference in forming and continuing the Bishop’s Task Force. Rather than dwelling in the uncertainty that exists when metrics are developed without clear understanding of the intent of the numbers that are generated through the metrics, the work of the task force will result in an approach that will help the numbers to be defined by the relationships that will be developed among churches and persons across the Virginia Conference.

► Bishop Cho’s strong advocacy of prayer and the disciplines of spiritual formation. As Bishop Cho says, “No spiritual vitality, no vital congregations.”

► The ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving through the depth of conversations and the faithful work of the sub-teams of the bishop’s task force.

It is good to see how God is crafting a new way forward through “All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations” so the churches of the Virginia Conference may share the good news of our Savior who says, “Behold, I make all things new.”

—The Rev. Marc Brown serves as Virginia Conference Director of Connectional Ministries.

Discipleship Circles: Leading and growing stronger together

By Larry Davies

Before joining the Leadership Group on our district I was frustrated and angry at the Church. I felt helpless to change anything in my ministry or the ministry of my appointment. I had gotten to the place where I wanted to get an eight-year calendar and just mark off the Sundays until I could retire.”

Ron Litten, who wrote the above statement, is a long-time pastor in the Lynchburg District who has served each of his churches well. Yet, as he would admit, something was missing. He went on to write: “In our group, made up of fellow pastors, I became aware of my limitations and weaknesses that negatively affected my ministry and my relationship with the church. But, at the same time, I also became more aware of my strengths as a pastor and as a leader. I discovered that the hardest person I would ever have to lead was myself.”

I became aware of limitations and weaknesses that negatively affected my ministry.

I also became aware of my strengths as a pastor and as a leader.

I discovered that the hardest person I would ever have to lead was myself.

Could the lessons Ron learned also apply for us?

► How can we as Christian leaders become more aware of limitations and weaknesses that may negatively affect our ministry?

► How can we as leaders and churches become more aware of strengths and abilities that positively impact our ministry?

► How can we discover ways to share this information in an environment of collaboration and trust that will enable our churches to become more fruitful?

The mission of our church is to “Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” That is the main thing that defines what we do as the church. Vital congregations equip and empower people to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

So, how can our churches become more vital congregations? How can we as leaders equip and empower others to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

Rev. Litten discovered important lessons in our leadership group, but he also received something far more valuable. Ron became part of a group that provided spiritual nourishment and encouragement. This safe environment gave him the freedom and nurturing he needed to think about what a leader of the church should and could be.

Our Bishop’s Steering Team is stressing the importance and usefulness of Discipleship Circles as a way to share information and learn, all within an environment of spirituality, trust and collaboration. Discipleship Circles could very well be made up of groups that are already in place. This leadership group that Litten became a part of serves as an example of a Discipleship Circle.

Litten went on: “A leader does not follow. He or she leads, sets the example, tells the story, relates the dream, plants the ideas. I had always tried to DO the ministry so that others would like and approve of me. But now I proclaim the ministry God has called us all to do and I vow to share in this ministry with the church.”

“I used to get defensive whenever

I was confronted by church leaders. But now I listen, really listen, and from that I draw an understanding of what the issues are and seek ways to resolve the issues. I now truly listen and then reflect back to the committee members making sure I have heard them clearly. From there I take that information and look for ways to relate it to the greater ministry of the church. This way the vision is still alive, and answers often come from church leaders themselves and not as an edict from me. This has been the most valuable lesson I have learned.”

Four lessons:

- 1.) Rather than get defensive, I listen, really listen.
- 2.) I draw an understanding of what the issues really are.
- 3.) I look for ways to relate it to the greater ministry of the church.
- 4.) The answers often come from the church leaders themselves.

“I have also learned to lead by example,” he added. “For me that means being more transparent in my ministry. For example, I shared with the Finance Committee that I would always tithe my salary. This is something I have never been able to do before. Later, I shared that information with the congregation in a sermon about giving. One person said it was the best sermon he ever heard. Again, no edict, just witness of a personal example given encouragingly.”

Ron Litten is only one example of what has happened to many of the people who attend our Leadership Group each week. We’ve learned, shared and offered encouragement to each other. We’ve talked, prayed and worshiped together as we seek to follow God’s will for our personal lives as well as our churches.

WORK IN PROGRESS

In the interim...

Beginning Jan. 1, all Virginia Conference churches began entering statistical data each week on the "VitalSigns" website, <http://vitalsigns.gcfa.org>.

Churches will use the denomination's "VitalSigns" website until the conference "All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations" work teams have completed development of the new reporting system which is expected to simplify all reporting for local churches.

All conference churches were signed up on the "VitalSigns" website by their district offices. A contact e-mail address was entered for each church. In most cases it was the pastor's e-mail.

A VitalSigns e-mail is sent out every Sunday as a reminder to report data for the previous Monday through Sunday.

The e-mail contains the link to the 'My filing page' for the church. To enter your data, simply click on the 'Submit your filing' link in the e-mail message. No log-in, user name or password is required. Five weeks of data will be displayed. Data can be entered/edited for any of the fields visible. Five weeks will always be visible on this screen, moving the oldest data off the screen each week.

When data entry is complete, click 'Submit My Filings.' An acknowledgment of receipt of data will be displayed.

For more information about entering data on the "VitalSigns" website, including answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), go to the conference website at www.vaumc.org/pages/news/va-news/vanews_vitalsignsdashboard.



What would a "culture of improvement" look like?

The Virginia Conference believes that Vital Congregations can help focus the work of our conference, districts and local churches on our mission: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

When the Vital Congregations project was initiated in 2011 by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, their research identified a "vital congregation" as one that has:

- **Inviting and inspiring worship**
- **Engaged disciples in mission and outreach**
- **Gifted, equipped and empowered lay leadership**
- **Effective, equipped and inspired clergy leadership**
- **Small groups and strong children's programs and youth ministry**

The goal of Vital Congregations is – through five simple measurements (worship attendance, professions of faith, number of small groups, persons in mission and missional giving) – to establish a culture that will encourage churches to be more effective – to bear fruit.

In order to do that in a way that promotes collaboration, support and a culture of constant improvement, eight teams of clergy and laity are currently working to adapt Vital Congregations for use in the Virginia Conference.

"We made a conscious effort not to just concentrate on the data," said Larry Davies. "We want to use the data to help churches improve, not be judged. The real key to this is to find a way to share the information in a nonjudgmental way so that together we can use it in a way that will be helpful for all of us – so we can grow and improve."

Those involved in the eight work teams have stressed that reporting shouldn't be like a test you can pass or fail, but an opportunity to celebrate growth, evaluate efforts and improve approaches in order to make disciples. "We do not want to be creating a climate of judgment," said Bishop Young Jin Cho. "We want to create a climate of encouragement and improvement for all of us here in the Virginia Conference."

"We have a lot of talented, dedicated people working hard to make sure that we succeed in this effort," Davies said. "And it is clear that they are not working alone. God is at work."

All Things New - Equipping Vital Congregations Work Teams

Bishop's Steering Team

Bishop Cho
Larry Davies, Chair
Brenda Biler
Marc Brown
Shirley Cauffman
Lydia Rodriguez Colon
Warren Harper
Mark Ogren
Brandon Robbins
Martha Stokes

Prayer Team

Bob Parks, Chair
Kim Barker-Brugman
Dan Dietze
Paul Greer
Johnnie Morris
Young Bong Kim
Mary Jane Rawley
Larry Tubbs

Data Re-Ordering & Automation Team

Melissa Dunlap, Chair
Karen Albro
David Bailey
Denise Bates
Bryan Compton
Sherry Daniels
David Dommissie
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▲ In September, **Community UMC** in Virginia Beach, Elizabeth River District, celebrated the 60th anniversary of its formation (Sept. 7, 1952). Along with the two current pastors, six former pastors returned to celebrate. Pastors pictured, from left: Walt Whitehurst, Deborah Austin, current senior pastor Leroy Seibert, District Superintendent Brad Phillips, Lewis Morgan, associate Christa Mercer Springstead, founding Pastor Doug Newman and Bill Logan.



▲ **Main Street UMC** in Suffolk was treated to Pastor Myrtle Hatcher's "Cookie Factory" on Dec. 2. Pastor Myrtle and her sister, Angel Cooper, baked 1,600 cookies, their Christmas gift to the congregation.

HomeAgain's 50 residents enjoyed a puppet show, crafts, Christmas carols, lunch and a visit from Santa on Dec. 22 at a Christmas party with members from the **Brandermill Church**. The Children's and Family Ministries, under the direction of Tammy Tipton-Nay, has been celebrating Christmas with the residents for several years, but this year the number of residents reflected the dire effects of the economy. The mission of HomeAgain is to assist homeless families in Richmond by providing emergency and transitional shelter and programs to build skills to obtain and maintain permanent housing. ▼



Washington Farm UMC, Alexandria District, continued a tradition begun more than 20 years ago with the donation of 30 Christmas trees to lower ranking soldiers and their families stationed at Fort Belvoir. Each recipient also received a gift bag containing Christmas ornaments, pencils and candy. The handcrafted ornaments (a mix of wooden bells, snowmen, boxes, acorn birdhouses) and pens were all turned and donated by the Capital Area Woodturners. In addition to the outreach to Fort Belvoir this year, the congregation donated 71 trees to Rising Hope UMC, United Community Ministries and Mondloch House. ▼



This year marks the 210th birthday for **Dumfries UMC**, and the 225th year of a Methodist presence in the town of Dumfries. The church has planned a series of celebration events, with the main anniversary event in June.

FEBRUARY

United Methodist Day at the General Assembly

Feb. 7: Bon Air UMC
The annual opportunity for United Methodist members and clergy to meet with their senators and delegates in the legislature will happen on Feb. 7. Participants will gather at Bon Air UMC. Registration fee of \$35 includes information packet, breakfast, lunch, parking, transportation to the State Capitol grounds and afternoon speakers.

School for Children's Ministry

Feb. 9: Springfield UMC
March 9: Baylake UMC, Virginia Beach
April 13: Bonsack UMC
Training offered from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for all involved in ministry with children. Seven different workshops will be offered: Children & the Worship Experience; Communication through Technology; Family Ministry; Involve Them!; Think Fast!; Volunteers and Kids in Mission.

Lay Servant Academy

Feb. 22-24: Blackstone Conference and Retreat Center
As lay servants care, lead and communicate, they encourage, equip and support others for deeper commitment to Christ and to faithful discipleship. To register, visit www.vaumc.org under "Events" and the date. For more information, e-mail Johnnie Draughon, conference director of Lay Speaking Ministries, at johnnie.draughon@cox.net or David Bailey, Lay Servant Academy director, at dw.bailey@comcast.net.

Vital Congregations: What Would Asbury Say?

Feb. 25: Virginia United Methodist Center, Glen Allen
The Society for Wesleyan Studies will host Dr. John Wiggen for a day-long event at the conference office. Wiggen will help us consider lessons from the vitality of early American Methodism under Asbury's leadership, and how we might apply them today. Cost is \$45. For more information e-mail questions to myron@setapart.org or rbrucejohnson2010@gmail.com.

5 Talent Academy

Feb. 23: Floris UMC and satellite locations
This 5 Talent Academy teaching session on faith development will feature worship with Bishop Young Jin Cho. The speaker will be Mindy Caliguire, founder and president of Soul Care, Transformation Ministry director for Willow Creek Association and author of "Soul Care Resources." The event will be live streamed from Floris UMC in Northern Virginia to five other locations around the conference:

Danville area: First UMC, 146 E. Main St., Martinsville; Eastern Shore: Franktown UMC, 7551 Bayside Rd., Franktown; Richmond area: Good Shepherd UMC, 9155 Hungary Road; Shenandoah Valley: Bridgewater UMC, 219 N. Main St., Bridgewater; Tidewater: Francis Asbury UMC, 871 N. Great Neck Rd., Virginia Beach. For more information, contact Pat Hickman at PatHickman@vaumc.org or call **1-800-768-6040, ext. 155** or **(804) 521-1155**.

Clergy Spouses' Retreat

Feb. 28-March 2: Blackstone Conference and Retreat Center
The theme will be on spiritual development. Leaders will include the Rev. David and Judy Canada. Bishop Cho will lead the Friday morning session. The Revs. Brian Siegle and Carl Perez will be worship leaders, and Josh Wortham again will be music leader. Visit the conference website at www.vaumc.org under "Events" and the dates to register. For details, contact Bill Moore at **(540) 364-0027** or wjmoorewj@gmail.com.

MARCH

Extension Ministers' Annual Gathering with the Bishop

March 22: Richmond Hill Retreat Center
This annual day apart for extension ministers and those appointed beyond the local church will be held by Bishop Young Jin Cho and his wife, the Rev. Kiok Cho, on spiritual leadership and spiritual disciplines. The cost is \$20 and CEUs will be offered. For more information, contact Beth Downs at BethDowns@vaumc.org or call **1-800-768-6040** or **(804) 521-1100**.

APRIL

Order of Elders Retreat

April 21-23: Blackstone Conference and Retreat Center
This retreat will be led by the Rev. Graham Standish, pastor of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Zelienople, Pa. He is the author of six books, including *In God's Presence: Encountering, Experiencing, and Embracing the Holy in Worship* (2010) and *Humble Leadership* (2007). He has also written numerous articles on spirituality, spiritual direction and spirituality in congregations. For more information, contact Beth Downs at BethDowns@vaumc.org or call **1-800-768-6040** or **(804) 521-1100**. CEUs are being offered.

Devotions from International Lesson Series

LIVING THE WORD



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Rick Dawson has been the Executive Director of Camp Highroad for the last 12 years serving first as a lay person and, in July, 2010, appointed a Licensed Local Pastor. He serves a full-time appointment at the camp in addition to his duties as the director. Rick and his wife, Sara, have been married for 17 years. Dawson served 23 years in the Marine Corps before retiring and becoming the regional vice president for the Pinkerton Detective Agency. He retired from that career in 1999 and felt the call to outdoor ministry.

February 3, 2013
Colossians 1: 15-20
Awed by creation

It was a week before Thanksgiving and my wife and I were visiting the Maryland beaches, partly to see how much damage had been done by Hurricane Sandy, but mainly to take Sabbath time away from our daily routine. Waking up to the sound of the waves and seeing the sun attempting to break through the storm clouds that were building was a sight that should awe all who see it.

My appointment is at Camp Highroad, a United Methodist Camp and Conference Center located near Middleburg. I am blessed to see the different natural sights of God’s creation each day; the stands of mighty oaks and tall tulip poplars, the deer grazing in the fields, an occasional bear passing through looking for food, the fox cubs barking at night. I am also blessed to experience the sudden summer rain showers, the winter snow storms that blanket the forest in white, the sun setting in the west.

Being at the shore and seeing and hearing a different view of God’s creation, the waves pounding the shore line instead of the gentle rustling of leaves, the broad expanse of open water instead of the rolling hills with tree stands and open fields, and to observe the damage that was a result of the hurricane, caused me to pause and reflect.

How can anyone spend any time outdoors and not be aware of the awesomeness of God and God’s creation? Why do we not look at other humans with the same amazedness? We are all part of God’s creation.

In the book of Colossians, Paul’s purpose seems to be to show that Christ is pre-eminent – first and foremost in everything – and the Christian life should reflect that priority. Paul points out that “for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” When we accept Christ into our lives we also must recognize that He has all authority within the church. His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection creates a new path for Christians from that time forward. Christ is the head of the church and each day we are given on earth is a day of new creations that we, as the body of Christ, have to recognize – not only the amazing events that have happened, but also the new opportunities for today.

February 10
Colossians 2: 6-15
Living a Life in Christ

This past summer a teenage girl, who was spending her second summer with us, wanted to tell of her journey over the past two years. She stated that she came to camp not really knowing about God and with no religious grounding. She stated that at the end of her first year she had gotten to know about Christ and his sacrifice for our sins and that she had learned about loving others. She told how she had gone home last year feeling like she had had a mountain-top experience, but after three weeks at home, with all the drinking and fighting in her household, she went back to her previous sinful behavior.

This year when she heard that she might be able to return to camp on scholarship, she remembered how she felt at camp and returned. She worked on building a relationship with Christ and working on spiritual disciplines that would help give her ways to resist temptation and to reinforce her beliefs. She stated that she is now a true believer and that the Spirit was at work in her life. She committed to ignoring the peer pressure that she felt in her neighborhood and was going to look for a church in her area with an active youth group. She closed her talk with these words: “This year I am not going home alone... God will be in my heart.” Her eyes were filled with tears, but they were tears of joy.

After the closing service, this girl came to me and asked for continuing prayers as she knew that the road ahead was going to be one of constant struggle. I assured her that I would indeed keep her in my prayers, but that I would also contact a pastor friend of mine that lived in her area. I recently received a call from this friend and was told that she is attending church and youth groups every week and has even stood before the congregation and given her testimony

Paul states “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.” This lesson had been not only learned, but put into action. Thanks be to God!

February 17
Colossians 3: 1-17
Dressing for Christ

When I first came to Camp Highroad, I was concerned about the way young people dressed in a provocative manner and treated each other in cruel ways. The boys wore their jeans low on their hips and the girls wore the shortest shorts possible. It appeared that they had little respect for themselves or others.

I mentioned this to some of my camping peers during a meeting that we were having and was told that this was a battle that I did not want to fight, and that kids were just doing what they were doing at school and in their neighborhoods every day.

I spent some time thinking about this and considering my next step. Paul said in verse 5 and 6 of the lesson, “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly, fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.” I wondered if we could put together the way the youths were dressing and treating each other and, through scripture, show them how Christ calls us to act.

We decided to start staff training with this scripture lesson and to build on it all through staff training. Summer counselors were encouraged to develop daily devotions addressing the issues that face the age group that they would be working with. Worship themes were developed for our daily worship times and skits were written for the Thursday evening worship service. We encouraged campers to look at their lives and see how pressure and “being accepted” peer issues affected their behavior.

We approached opening of camp

with some apprehension but also with a belief that what we were doing is what God called all of us to do. Our fears were soon vanished as we saw how the campers listened to our opening campfire and immediately responded to our request to set aside worldly thoughts and desires and listen to what Paul was talking about in verse 15 when he said, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”

The result of structuring the camp session the way we did was amazing. Campers started treating each other with love and respect, and this helped build trust that led to more in-depth conversation and a deeper level of sharing and growth. They also showed a greater degree of self-respect and confidence.

Our attendance at summer camp has grown steadily since this practice has been put into place and the campers are learning to” Above all, clothe yourself with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

February 24
Colossians 4: 2-17 (4:17)
Pray, Give Thanks, Act

This past Thanksgiving I received several telephone calls, text messages and e-mails from people I have mentored over the past few years. These remembrances touched my heart in warm and wonderful ways and also caused me to think of the many people in my own life who took me under their wings and guided me at a time when I could have gone in the wrong direction. I could not help but pause and wonder if I had appropriately shown my gratitude for these guiding angels who came into my life and not only gave wise counsel but also loved me and held me accountable.

If you have ever had a spiritual moment like this you know how difficult it is to hold on to that special feeling once you return to your normal daily routine.

If you are like me, you make all types of promises as to how you are going to change things in your life. Your heart is in the right place but sticking to it is like making New Year’s resolutions, frequently made, and seldom kept. In this lesson, Paul is encouraging us to always give thanks to God and to remember in our prayers not only those close to us but also those who have not yet heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and are still walking in darkness. This scripture is also calling on us to not only receive mentorship but also to pass it on by mentoring others. This concept is reinforced each time we, as a congregation, witness a baptism and the pastor addresses us and says “Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care”? What a powerful and inspiring challenge to each of us.

In my role as a camp leader and chaplain, I come into constant contact with the youths of our community. I can tell you from first hand knowledge that they are looking for role models and mentors. They are growing up in a world that is sending confusing messages as to whom and what should they believe. We, as Christians, have the word and we are called to share it with the world. Each of us, every day, has an opportunity to be a positive influence on another person, but do we do it? Paul says in Colossians 4:17 “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.”

Are you completing your task? 🌟



CLERGY & DIACONAL

("Vital," continued from page 19)

conference contributes to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

District Processes

Each district has its own way of doing things. The challenge for this group is to help us rethink and, possibly, redesign those processes in order to enhance relationship building, communication and resource alignment. Across the conference, clergy, lay leaders and churches will be more effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

At this time the Bishop's Steering Team: "All Things New – Equipping Vital Congregations" is a work in progress. The final report will be due later this year and presented at the 2013 Annual Conference. But I hope you see that progress is being made in a way that will be long-lasting and helpful. As Jesus reminded us in John 15: If we lose the connection between the vine and the branch, there can be little or no fruit. If there is little or no fruit, we should take a closer look at the connection between the vine and the branch.

Will "Vital Congregations" provide all the answers we need toward making our churches more vital? Of course not, but "Vital Congregations" could provide a framework for discussion and prayer as we work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. ☞

-The Rev. Larry Davies is superintendent of the Lynchburg District and chair of the Bishop's Steering Team for Vital Congregations

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("Gun collecting," continued from page 5)

kids who picked on me, but because I was very much a rule-follower (at one point in my life). Even though the other kids picked on me, I wanted my teachers and other adults to think I was a good kid. But what if something really intense had happened like a horrible rumor about my sexuality or something, and I was terrified of going to school and filled with adolescent rage against the kid who started the rumors? Could my immature 14-year-old brain have lost all sense of scale and reality and consequences?

At what point does it become morally irresponsible? How many guns is too many? Is there a cap? I don't know the answer to this question.

When they interviewed people who knew Nancy Lanza, the Connecticut shooter's mother, they said that she used to go to the shooting range with her sons but that she owned all her guns "strictly for self-defense." If you're going to the shooting range, that's a hobby; it's more than self-defense. I'm not saying it can't be a hobby. It would probably help my stress management if I went to a shooting range myself every now and then. But where do you draw the line?

Can there be a line?

Garry Wills wrote that guns have become the American idolatry, analogous to the Canaanite god Moloch. What do you think of that comparison? If Jesus came to you with a sack and said He wanted you to put all your guns inside it, would you be able to do it? I think that's the test of whether you're dealing with an idol, whether it is guns, baseball cards, liquor, stock portfolios or whatever else. Could you do without it? Or do you see it as essentially definitive of your personhood?

Because of my own life experiences, what I cannot say is that the people who cause these incredibly evil tragedies are just "bad people" whose existence is in a wholly different category than mine. Some loner kids who get bullied in middle school grow up to become mass murderers; others grow up to be pastors. I don't think Nancy Lanza loved her son any less than my mother loved me. It's not fair that God protected and nurtured me the way that God did; I can only be grateful for God's grace and try to be an understanding adult to kids who seem like they're having a rough time. ☞

-The Rev. Morgan Guyton is associate pastor at Burke UMC



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NCUA

Deaths



The Rev. Paul Peyton Campbell, 88, of Richmond, died Dec. 21, 2012. Rev. Campbell served Tappahannock, Fairmount (Richmond),

Good Shepherd (Richmond), Hillcrest, Disputanta, Kenwood (James River), Christ (Covington). He retired in 1988. A memorial service was held at Westhampton UMC.

Juanita E. Basham died Dec. 3, 2012. She was the surviving spouse of the Rev. Earle E. Henley, who died in 1973.

Former Virginia Conference United Methodist Men's President **Hardaway Smith "Ab" Abernathy**, 96, died Dec. 17, 2012. He was a member at Community UMC in Virginia Beach.

Mae W. Morton of Farmville, mother of the Rev. Lyle Morton, died Jan. 6, 2013. He serves Woodlawn-Faith UMC, Alexandria District.

Births

Chloe Y. Huh was born to the Rev. Keon Huh, Associate Pastor at Korean UMC of Greater Washington, Arlington District, and his wife, Michelle, on Dec. 19, 2012, in Fairfax.

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FROM THE BISHOP



Why Vital Congregations?

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

This month I would like to share my thoughts on Vital Congregations. From the first Sunday of January this year, all churches in the Virginia Conference started entering their statistical data for five areas on the “Vital Signs” website of The United Methodist Church: worship attendance, profession of faith, number of small groups, number of people engaged in mission and the amount of giving for mission. This is the second step following the four years’ goal (2012-2016) each church set in 2011.

Because of this emphasis on statistical data, some people seem to think that Vital Congregations is just a numbers game. They are also critical of this initiative because this is a top down plan. I understand these viewpoints and acknowledge that Vital Congregations is not a perfect plan.

But we need to take this initiative more seriously.

As we all know, for the past 10 years the United Methodist churches in the United States have lost about 650,000 members while the UM churches in Africa and the Philippines have grown rapidly. I think the time has come to look at our reality seriously and to find a way to turn around this declining trend. We cannot keep on losing members. I do not think that this current reality is what the Lord wants for our church.

But there is a more important reason why we need this initiative. I believe that Vital Congregations should be more than a reactive plan to save our denomination. It should be more than providing numbers to the General Church. It should be a movement to restore a biblical and authentic church in today’s world. I think Vital Congregations has this possibility and, with God’s help, we can improve this initiative.

I am sure that there is no one who is satisfied with our current state. We all know that we have great need for renewal and reform of our churches. Thinking of the spirit of Protestantism – a constant renewal at the hand of God – we cannot be complacent with our reality. We, The United Methodist Church, are in desperate need of renewal and revitalization. Ministry as usual is no longer an option today.

In response to this need for renewal and revitalization of our churches, the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table have developed the Vital Congregations Initiative based upon a denomination-wide research report, “Call to Action.” Though this is not a perfect plan, this initiative can provide an opportunity and a starting point for our new future. We can tweak and improve this plan, but just criticizing without the alternative is not a good approach. I want to say the following words to the persons who criticize and oppose Vital Congre-

gations:

First of all, I want and encourage them to pray about this. If they discern in prayer that the Vital Congregations initiative is not what God wants us to do, I want to hear from them and will respect their prayerful discernment. But I have a next question for them: What is their alternative plan to revitalize our churches other than Vital Congregations? Just objecting to Vital Congregations cannot contribute to our new future. For a more faithful and fruitful future, we need more than criticism and objection. We need an alternative plan. Just repeating the same ministry is not an option now. Our reality is much more serious. If they do not have another plan for a better future, I want them to join this initiative.

Vital Congregations will be one of the focus areas in my ministry. I think this initiative will be an opportunity for all of us. But to become a renewal movement, this initiative should begin with restoring spiritual vitality. My conviction is “No spiritual vitality, no vital congregations!” This is what we learn from the Bible and John Wesley’s Methodist movement. When people were spiritually renewed and revitalized, the church carried out her mission faithfully and fruitfully.

My priority is to restore spiritual vitality through reclaiming our rich heritage of strong emphasis on spiritual disciplines. We human beings cannot turn around our churches. We are neither Messiahs nor the owners of the church. When we humbly open ourselves to God and seek God’s power and wisdom in prayer, our churches will be revitalized and bear much fruit in our mission and ministries. Vital Congregations should begin with our praying knees. Without prayer, this initiative will become just another program and will not bear much fruit. 🍌

Young A. Cho
VIRGINIA ADVOCATE | FEBRUARY 2013

ONE LAST WORD



Tweets heard ‘round the conference

- Lindsey Baynham @LMBaynham**
losing my voiceeeee. got to stop singing those power ballads after work.
- Rev. Sarah Wastella @SarahWastella**
The Sanctuary aisle is my fashion runway, and when I walk it, I choose to showcase Christ. He’s always in style.
- Alan Combs @thricemantis**
Good rule of Thumb. Don’t root against teams named after Jesus’ mom. #NotreDame #BCSNational-Championship
- Steve Jennings @SteveJennings7**
Working on collaborations with other organizations. Time to get off the ministry island. #ministry
- Larry Davies @sowseeds**
The difference between try and triumph is a little umph. – Unknown
- Jordan Markwood @JMSINGIN**
“To love another person is to see the face of God.” I hope you see God today and every day! #LesMis #Godislove#ReceiveLoveGiveLoveRepeat
- Rev. Jeremy Smith @umjeremy**
I got excited there was a #UMC presence in #Farmville when I got notice that @FarmvilleUMC followed me. Alas, it’s a church in Virginia.



Will McCranie walked all 2184.6 miles of the Appalachian Trail in 158 days, raising more than \$10,000 for hunger relief for the Virginia-based Society of St. Andrew (SoSA) and United Methodist Men and their “Meals for Millions” program.

The walk was an effort to raise awareness of hunger in America and to raise money to help SoSA in its fight to end hunger and food insecurity for 40 million Americans. So far McCranie has raised more than four thousand dollars for Meals for Millions, a joint program between SoSA and United Methodist Men to combat hunger in America. He chose Meals for Millions in part because UMMen at his home Peachtree City UMC sponsor Boy Scout Troop 175, where he earned his Eagle rank at age of 13.

Food was also on McCranie’s mind during much of his trek, where he lost 44 pounds. “There is a lot of food I got tired of and hope to never see again,” McCranie said. “I ate oatmeal every day for breakfast, and I don’t think I’ll ever eat trail mix or jerky again.”

The University of Georgia senior walked from Baxter Peak on Mount Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in north Georgia.

McCranie estimated that he walked with others for only 35 days of his trip, meaning that for more than 150 days of his trek he was alone. He found the loneliness to be one of the biggest challenges of the trip.

“I could go 24 hours without seeing another person,” he said, adding that in patches with no cell service he often found himself talking to squirrels or salamanders.

Someone always knew where he was on the trail, though, either through communication with his iPhone or a spot GPS locator that could send out a message of his location and that he was OK. It also had a 911 button that could alert people to his location if he needed help. He emerged from his trip without enduring any significant illness or injury, although he was taking a lot of ibuprofen towards the end for the aches and pains he accumulated throughout his journey.

“My knees will never be the same and I have tendonitis in both my feet,” he explained, adding that he was lucky because stress fractures are common for walkers on the trail.

McCranie spoke fondly about the people he met on his trip and the places he visited.

“There are a lot of towns along the trail whose economy is based on trail walkers,” he explained. One of his zero days (days without a hike) was in Hanover, New Hampshire. “A lot of the restaurants there give free items to walkers like a slice of pizza or a donut. I bounced around from place to place.” The town also had a list of people who could help out walkers, either giving them a place to sleep for the night or a place to take a shower or do some laundry. That friendly spirit showed up for McCranie all along the trail.

“There were other instances of ‘trail magic,’ like someone leaving a cooler of cold sodas for walkers to enjoy,” McCranie explained. 🍌



"Now the Lord
is the Spirit, and
where the Spirit of
the Lord is, there
is freedom."

- 2 Corinthians 3:17

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