

Advocate



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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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PILLOW TALK



Madeline Pillow
Editor

It can be hard to be grateful. I'm almost mentally gearing myself up for the commercials that are soon to come where the marketing for every product from cars all the way to the Pillsbury Doughboy will be telling us to be grateful.

Good marketing can make you stop and count your blessings. Others feel as frilly and meaningless as a platitude handed to you in the midst of a hard time in your life.

I don't know how your year has been, but I'll be the first to admit I feel a little beat up. Work has been hard this year. When my faith denomination is my job and The United Methodist Church is going through a very contentious time, it often feels like there is no escape.

I lost my grandfather this year. It felt like that could never happen and there's regret now; things I wish he could see like my wedding later this year or my brother's journey further into ministry in the church.

But no matter how your year has been, whether it makes it easier or harder to be grateful this year, I know that even in the hard times, we can be grateful. It might just take more of an effort.

A few years ago, I realized how easy it was for me to narrow in on negative thoughts and let those thoughts ruin my day. That's when I started to make a little more effort to be internally positive. The way I did this was by writing down on a piece of paper something good that happened that day. Some days were hard and some days saw a bounty of a few things being written down. At the end of each year, I enjoyed looking back through all these little and big moments because I kept them all in a jar. Research has shown that doing something like this can actually change our mindset and make us more able to think positively.

This month in the Advocate, we share more past history of the magazine, and our feature focuses on gratitude.

Although our last issue of this publication is next month, I would be remiss dear readers if I did not take the time in this gratitude issue to say that I am grateful and thankful for all those who have supported and 'advocated' for our staff and this magazine. 🍀

Until our next issue,

Madeline

Grateful



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The *Virginia Advocate* Staff

Madeline Pillow | Editor, Director of Communications

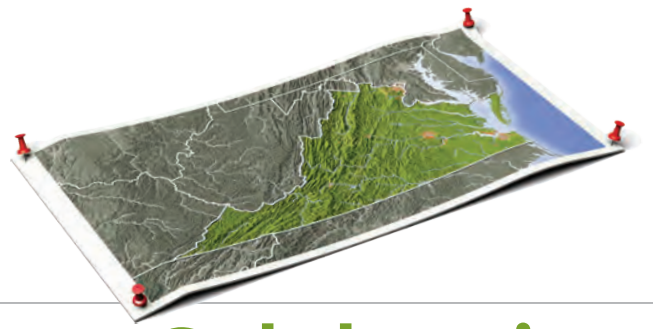
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The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



UMFS Auxiliary: Celebrating 90 years of service to United Methodist Family Services



Helen Wood, UMFS Auxiliary President



HELEN WOOD HAS FOND MEMORIES OF UNITED METHODIST FAMILY SERVICES (UMFS). When she was 4 years old, her mother was a member of the UMFS Women's Auxiliary. While her mother volunteered, Helen kept busy with a coloring book and an eight-pack of crayons. Today, she's a member of Chamberlayne Heights United Methodist Church and keeps busy leading the Auxiliary as its president. "To be

involved is a passion for me," Helen said. "And the people have been so welcoming."

Dot Gay attends Laurel Hill UMC and has been a member of the Auxiliary since the 1990s. Some of the most impactful moments she's experienced during her time as a UMFS volunteer have been at Commencement ceremonies, in which youth at UMFS celebrate the completion of their residential treatment. Dot recalled one

Commencement in particular and the profound words a father said to UMFS staff and leadership: "Thank you for giving my son back to me." It's a moment Dot said she'll never forget.

The Auxiliary has been providing moral and spiritual support to the children and teens at UMFS since the days it was an orphanage. The Auxiliary formed in 1929, and its earliest efforts included furnishing the orphanage with fireplace sets,



The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA

pianos, and washing machines. The generosity and monetary support continues to this day, and just as UMFS has evolved, so too has the Auxiliary. Composed of volunteers from Richmond area churches, the Auxiliary had been an all-women organization until recently. The bylaws changed to allow men to become members, and Helen's husband, Phin, is one of three men who currently serve.

"The Auxiliary is an extension of our agency," said Greg Peters, UMFS President and CEO. "They are a compassionate group of unwavering champions for young people. Every member provides a level

of care and attention to detail that brings joy to children and teens who are facing challenging circumstances."

That attention to detail is evidenced in the quarterly birthday lunches the Auxiliary hosts for young people at UMFS. The group makes a point to recognize each and every child's birthday with a celebration of lunch, cake, games, and presents, of course. It remains one of the Auxiliary's most popular activities, perhaps because — as many students have noted through the years — it's the only birthday party they've ever had.

Also popular are the Auxiliary's annual square dance and high

tea, during which young people at UMFS get to don elaborate hats and formal neckties as they are treated to a traditional lunch experience. "The students are always appreciative and respectful," Helen said.

The Auxiliary has built trust with the children and teens at UMFS by maintaining a consistent presence and connecting with them on a personal level. Dot noted that sometimes students don't want to talk, so to break the ice she'll turn to sports as a conversation starter. And if that doesn't work? "I'll try to guess their age," she said smiling. "You know, just try to find some common ground."

And the ability to

find common ground is just one of the many reasons the Auxiliary is vital to UMFS. "The work they do for our agency, and especially for our young people, is just remarkable," Greg said.

Said Dot: "It's one of the greatest things our church does."

Contact Volunteer Manager Lisa Nicoll (804.239.1038 or lnicoll@umfs.org) to learn how you can make a difference as a member of the UMFS Auxiliary. 🍷

UMFS Auxiliary members in front of stained glass window they donated to the charter school in Richmond.



Advocate Memories



In March 2019, it was announced that The Virginia United Methodist Advocate magazine was coming to an end after almost 200 years of publication. The magazine has gone through many changes over the years from name (it all started with the Methodist Christian Sentinel) to format to frequency of publication. In the final issues of this publication, you will find history about the magazine, memories of past issues and words from the magazine's former and present staff. Thank you for being a part of this journey, Advocate readers.

Fair winds and following seas.

Diving through history

by Madeline Pillow

AS PROMISED, I will share in this issue some more information about the *Advocate* we have been uncovering from the *Advocates* from the 1890s that were donated to our office.

The *Advocate* really was a large source of news of the day for United Methodists. You can see this in the amount of information detailing what happened at Annual Conferences past as

well as the length of obituaries.

Below I share some interesting findings:

The writing

No matter what one is writing about, there can be poetry in prose. There can be magic in the words. In the obituaries in these past *Advocates*, you get the sense of this poetry in prose. You get the personality of those lost. Here is an excerpt below:

"Fell asleep in Jesus at her home in Scottsville September 15, 1894, Sister Florence Lindsay Pitts, beloved wife of Capt. J. L. Pitts, and daughters of Brother Pleasant Burgess, of Fluvanna County.

If, as has been often said, 'death loves a shining mark,' then his aim was unerring when he struck down the subject of this obituary. Young, bright and happy, the idol of her father's home, the queen of her husband's heart, the guide of her little ones, the leader of

every good work, it seemed we could not spare her; but she is 'not, for god took her,' and we look up through our tears, and try to say, 'Thy will be done!'"

Each issue always featured some witty and insightful thoughts to ponder. I share a few below:

"A snappish saint surfeits Satan."

"The religion that lives through a cold season is well housed in a warm heart."

"The Bible is a lamp to our feet. It does not light up the whole way at once. But it never fails to shed light on the path just ahead of us. He who carries it with him will always be able to see how to take the next step."

The editorials

I have to say I really enjoyed reading Dr. John J. Lafferty's words. He was the magazine's first journalist in the role as editor. Working on the *Advocate* for 30 years, he had a very prestigious career from studying at the University of Virginia, being chaplain and later achieving the rank of major of cavalry in the Civil War,

Quick Fact

The New York Times ran one of the *Advocate*'s photos when the assignment of a new bishop was the occasion of an unprecedented two-day fly-around the Virginia Conference. Learn more in the Rev. W. Hewlett Stith's article in the September *Advocate*.

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Our Journey Around THE World

editing and publishing *The Lexington Gazette*, teaching stenography at Washington College and finally becoming the editor of the *Richmond Christian Advocate*.

In his obituary, his writing is described as "trenchant and facile" and "it was a bright, breezy pen that carried sparkling to the paper the emanations of his busy, well-stored mind." Someone even said of him: "John J. Lafferty is a true wizard of the ink-horn, and magician with words."

His words can be biting as when he created a whole special edition of the magazine to clear himself of the negative

remarks of a former editor (more on this in the December *Advocate*!). His words also carry resonance even today:

"Nothing is more deceptive than a crowd. We nearly always overestimate its size, and if it is our crowd, we are sure to overestimate its significance. We take a large congregation as the measure of a preacher's usefulness, whereas it is only an evidence of his popularity. We demand that our preacher shall be able to 'draw,' because we imagine that the larger the crowd, the more

good he will accomplish. Occasionally the preacher himself falls in with our way of thinking. Starting with the premise that if the people will not come to church, he cannot do them any good, he jumps to the conclusion that to do them good, he has only to get them to church, and forthwith an ecclesiastical side-show is set up to advertise his services. The side-show deceives nobody but the preacher. The people come with an eye to the show: they have ears, but hear not. [...] 'Attractions' do not save a declining church: like a stimulant, the dose must be continually increased, and the best they can do is to lengthen out the dying hour."

— (December 1895)

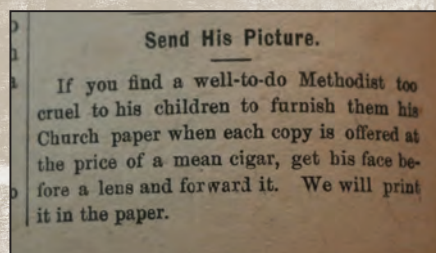
I love what he has to say about Christmas:

"We welcome Christmas, not because it emphasizes Christ—for it does not—but because it brings with it unusual opportunities for testing His teachings and culti-

(Con't. on next page: "LAFFERTY.")

The carriage was one of the modes of transportation as evidenced in this 1890 *Advocate* advertisement. How times have changed!

(Top) Advocate editor Dr. Lafferty had no problem making sure people subscribed to their Advocates!
(Bottom) In the 1890s, these drawing puzzles were featured in many of the Advocates we saw.



vating His spirit. It is the one time of the year when love is in the air; when kindness is catching; when generosity rules, and avarice and selfishness are outlawed. It is the time when heart and purse are easily opened, and, therefore, the best time to test the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive. In a world frozen by greed what a blessing is the festival that tempts men from their dens in the earth out into the sunshine of heaven, and makes them generous for a day!"

"This is the time of year when the prudent pastor begins to remind the festive lambs of his flock that every Christian belongs to a fraternity, the good name of which depends not on Christians in general, but on each Christian in particular."

—(November 15, 1894)

His word on politicians:

"Now that the elections are over, the religious papers are 'improving' the occasion by saying that if preachers would only exhibit a tithe of the zeal which politicians manifest, this nation would be converted to God in no time. Perhaps; but it takes something more than zeal to elect a candidate, as the whipped party usually finds out. It would be safer to say that if the politicians would exhibit the same faithfulness to their people and their principles year in and year out that our preachers manifest, they would soon become

invincible."

—(November 15, 1894)

His thoughts on circuit riders:

"The greatest discoveries of the century have been made not by scientists, but by circuit-riders. The world honors a man for discovering a bug; it has never honored a man for discovering a man. Else every preacher would have a monument. The list of great men discovered by Methodist preachers alone would fill a fat volume. The unwritten history of Methodism is rich in stories of bright youths picked up out of the woods by faithful fishers of men, and turned into the path which leads upward. That history will never be written, and the nation will never know of its debt to those heroes who let not their left hands know what their right hands were doing. But the 'Father which seeth in secret Himself shall reward.'"

Reminders of change

Some 30 years after the Civil War, the magazine of the 1890s features reflections concerning the war often as its effects were still largely felt.

There are also reminders in this time that even this version of the magazine underwent format changes. Below are some reactions:

"The 'Old Richmond' has surprised us all. Hard as these times are, here she comes with a sparkling new dress on, and her foretop hanged and

arched. How she shines! We didn't know her. The improvement is wonderful. Always full of the very best, spiciest and raciest, last week it was better than ever. But one thing is evident, she never flirts with anybody of anything, but speaks right out square and honest."

—Alabama Advocate

"The Richmond Christian Advocate came out last week in a new dress and in a new form, having changed from a four-page blanket sheet to a sixteen-page paper, four columns to a page. The Advocate is one of the best religious papers we receive, and the Methodist Church is fortunate

in having so gifted a man as Dr. Lafferty represent it in an editorial capacity. Long live the Advocate!" 🍷

—Bedford Democrat

Editor Lafferty's gravestone highlights his role in the publication.





We will
continue
to tell the
old, old
story of
Jesus and
his love.
But we will
tell it in
new, new
ways.

Cultural shift affects conference communications

By Linda S. Rhodes

I CAME TO VIRGINIA AFTER HAVING SERVED FOR 15 YEARS as director of Communications for the Northern Illinois Conference, headquartered in Chicago. My first day as Virginia Conference director of Communications was April 16, 2007 – the day of the Virginia Tech shootings.

Immediately, we were all plunged into activities to get words of healing, comfort and hope out to the public, particularly to those in the Blacksburg area who had been traumatized by the mass shooting that left 32 people dead and more than a dozen wounded.

We worked with United Methodist Communications and the Igniting Ministry program to get billboards up in the Blacksburg area that said “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.” We produced radio spots with District Superintendent Steve Hundley offering comfort and counseling in our local churches.

And, of course, we used the *Virginia Advocate* to report on the experiences of those at the Virginia Tech Wesley Student Center and the reaction of Korean congregations experiencing emotional distress because the shooter was born in South Korea.

One of the things that impressed me after I arrived in Virginia was the fact that the *Virginia Advocate* was paid for by subscribers — and completely self-funded. All of the magazine’s printing and distribution costs were covered by subscription fees received from readers. (Conference staff salaries and overhead were not included in this cost.)

I had come from a conference that had a budget line item of almost \$100,000 to pay for the weekly newspaper that was sent to all conference pastors and local church lay leadership. I knew of many other conferences across the United States that were spending large amounts of money for a printed

magazine or newspaper used to communicate with clergy and laity. I also knew of many conferences across the U.S. that were being forced to shut down their printed publications because of budget crunches.

And yet the Virginia Conference, with the oldest United Methodist printed publication in the country, had a magazine that people were willing to pay to get. And the subscription income not only paid for publication of the magazine, it also provided funds to be used for other communications ministries.

This was not to last forever, however. Digital media was becoming more and more popular each day. The Virginia Conference Communications Commission had made a decision the year before to post the *Advocate* online in a digital format. Anyone could read the online magazine at any time at no charge.

It was obvious to many that this would have a negative effect on paid subscrip-

tions — and it began to do just that. Why would someone pay for something they could read online for free? The following year, the Communications Commission decided to require a paid subscription from readers who wanted to read the *Advocate* online. But the damage had been done.

It was also becoming obvious that the *Virginia Advocate* was no longer a news magazine. It had been referred to that way for many years, but a monthly publication could not possibly offer timely, current news reporting. Instead, we relied on Clergy Net and Laity Net and other conference email groups to allow clergy and laity, conference districts and the conference to share pertinent events and information.

We introduced the e-*Advocate* which provided conference and denominational news via e-mail on a weekly basis. News items were posted on the conference website. And we changed the emphasis of the magazine from news reporting to more interpretive feature articles and resources for local churches.

We also introduced a Virginia Conference Facebook page, Twitter

feed and Instagram account to respond to the growing use of social media.

And staff began to change. In 2012, Production Assistant Debra Duty resigned, and Cathryn Huff was hired as graphic designer for the magazine. Peggy Cribbs, Communications office secretary and *Advocate* subscription manager, retired after many years of service. Pam Culler was hired to fill that position. We also hired Nick Ruxton to be conference videographer, first on a part-time basis and then as a full-time staff member. Fortunately for all of us, Brenda Capen, webmaster and database manager, continued in her job.

When *Advocate* Editor Neill Caldwell resigned suddenly in February 2015, I served as editor of the *Advocate* for several months while we searched for a new editor. After a nationwide search, we hired Madeline Pillow to take over the job, effective June 1.

But declining subscriptions remained a concern. As membership in United Methodist churches declined, so did our *Advocate* sub-

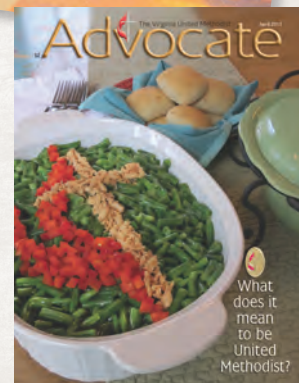
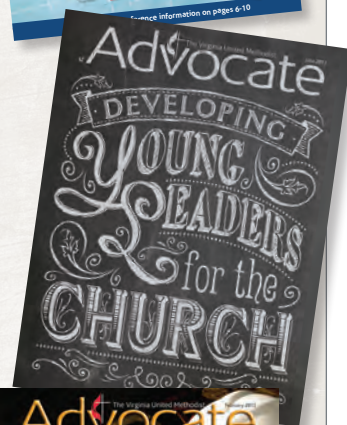
scriptions. But we were also facing a cultural shift that I was not really prepared for.

During a discussion about the *Advocate* at one of our Communications Commission meetings, one of our young male pastors declared: “I don’t read.”

It stunned me. I am a voracious reader. I grew up knowing clergy with enormous libraries — shelves crammed with books, journals and magazines used as reference material for sermons and study. But today, many people are like the young pastor and don’t read. They get information from social media, the Internet, TV and movies. And those of us charged with getting out the Church’s message must adapt to that cultural shift.

And, so, we say “goodbye” to the *Virginia United Methodist Advocate*. New methods of communication will be used to get the Church’s message to the people who need it. We will continue to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. But we will tell it in new, new ways. 🍷

— Linda S. Rhodes served as the conference Director of Communications from April 2007 to September 2016.





Over the years the Advocate has brought us conference news, educated us, connected us with United Methodists across the world, celebrated wonderful local church ministries, and equipped us to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Board of Communications remembrances

By Jill Gaynor

I JOINED THE BOARD OF COMMUNICATIONS IN 2014. Over the last five years, I have enjoyed being able to work with my fellow board members and the talented conference communications staff on this important ministry. I really appreciate being part of a ministry with such a long, fruitful history. The predecessor to the *Advocate*, *The Methodist Christian Sentinel*, published its first edition in 1832. I've always enjoyed looking through old magazines and newspapers. I was therefore thrilled to join *Advocate* editor Madeline Pillow to review some of the old editions from the 1890s that Rev. John Peters recently donated to the conference. What a treasure!

Over the years the *Advocate* has brought us conference news, educated us, connected us with United Methodists across the world, celebrated wonderful local church ministries, and equipped us to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation

of the world. One of my favorite recent issues tapped the expertise of local church communicators and asked them to share some of the ways they are using technology in their ministry. I was fascinated to learn that several churches have started conducting online Bible studies using Zoom video conferencing. It's an ingenious way to ensure that their members can participate

in small groups even when they can't be there in person.

Technology continues to evolve and allow us to connect in new ways. The *Advocate* has changed and evolved multiple times over its history to meet the changing needs of the time. As we celebrate the past, I am also excited about what the future holds. I look forward to undertaking the next step on this journey, utilizing the digital tools that will help us continue to expand and enrich this ministry. 🍁

— Jill Gaynor, President,
Board of Communications

In the spirit of
Thanksgiving,
we wish to extend
a heartfelt
Thank You
to our clients and
partners.



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Goodbye, old friend

I AM SO SAD TO LEARN OF THE PENDING DEMISE of my old friend. Shortly after my husband, Raymond S. Kelley, received his first appointment in 1963, we began subscribing to the *Advocate*. It is like an old, old friend coming to visit us each month. We've been through the name changes, edi-

tor changes, format changes across the years.

We've eagerly awaited the next issue to find articles of inspiration and happenings across the Conference. We scanned the notices at the end to learn of life events of our friends. And, of course, if we were unable to attend the Annual Conference, we could find where our friends have been moved this or that year.

Throughout his appointments, we have

always been fortunate to have articles that we have submitted included in the magazine. I just mentioned to my 21-year-old granddaughter that I will be sure to include in her things the *Advocate* with the article, complete with picture, of her being baptized by her grandfather using the bell of my son's ship, the USCGC Hamilton, in California.

My husband has moved on to his heavenly appointment, but I continue to receive my

copy each month. Now I also anxiously await to read where Bishop Lewis will take me in my Daily Bible Readings for next month. And I love the last page "One Last Word". Many of these have shown up on my correspondence "signature".

And now, my "Last Word"...Goodbye, Old Friend. You have been a wonderful friend and I shall miss you terribly. 🍷

– Joyce M Kelley, member of
White Memorial UMC,
Roanoke District

"I don't want to be another statistic."

– MARK, FOSTER CARE YOUTH

The national statistics
for youth in foster
care are grim:

50%

don't complete
high school by age 18

91%

don't graduate
from college

MARK HAD A ROUGH CHILDHOOD, which included the imprisonment of his father and the death of his mother. He was struggling and behind in school when he entered the UMFS Treatment Foster Care program in 2014. UMFS matched Mark with a loving foster family. With his new support, Mark was able to catch up in school and graduate with honors. This fall, he became the first person in his family to attend college. Help other foster youth like Mark.

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♥♥♥ Hearts of



Gratitude ♡ ♡ ♡



By Madeline Pillow

As the leaves turn and begin to fall, our minds turn to a season of thankfulness and blessings. I am, of course, speaking of Thanksgiving and Christmas. It is during these holiday periods that we think about our blessings through our own inclination to do so or because of the thousands of commercials promoting products from cars to Pillsbury that remind us to do so.

And while we may not be able to get enough of the Pillsbury Doughboy's biscuits or cinnamon rolls, we know that our blessings go far beyond the material. When we truly consider our blessings, we focus on our families, friends, those places of love and security that no money or power can hope to touch.

This month, Kindred Project helps us reflect on having a heart of gratitude. We also asked readers to share with us reasons why they are grateful. These stories span from health to individuals.

We hope you find the blessings in each of these stories and, by doing so, carry blessings with you into this season of thankfulness and blessings. ♡



Having a heart of gratitude

by David Canada

"Sometimes it seems that many people who say they are blessed really mean: 'My life is turning out the way I wanted!'"

– Quote from an anonymous clergyperson

"God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them."

– St. Augustine

"Gratitude should go forward, rather than backward. In other words, if you carry the message to still others, you will be making the best possible repayment for the help given you."

– Bill Wilson, Founder of A.A.

"Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude."

– A.A. Milne


Please take a moment and ponder each of the above quotes. For me, they say a lot about having a heart of gratitude.

When my mother wanted me to be attentive to something, she would say, "David, take this to heart!" It took many years for me to begin understanding what she meant. Her words sound so simple, yet they lead to a profound spiritual reality and a long spiritual journey. Within the context of the above quotes, I invite you to ponder my mother's instructions to me.

In this article I will share two steps that God continues teaching me are necessary to have a heart of gratitude. These steps involve emptying and filling our hearts. We take both steps each day. Wesley would call these two steps the journey of Sanctifying Grace. Sanctification is a journey of purifying and expanding our hearts.

The first step is taken when we look deeply at the things with which we fill ourselves. This list will be different for all of us. In my own life it helps to take all of these concerns and all of the things that keep my life busy and keep me "occupied" and give them to God. Prayer and meditation are at the center of this step in our journey. Years ago I learned that I could not have a very good day unless I began it by spending time with God in silence and in prayer. This awareness continues even though I am retired and far less busy. There is always "stuff" that comes into my life and clutters it. Before the phone starts ringing or before the day's activities begin I have to be alone with God. Often this prayer time is spent in darkness. One morning, while sitting in my darkened office and praying silently I had a vision of myself falling into the darkness. Rather than being frightened, I felt held and loved in strong hands and arms. That vision has stayed with me. It began teaching me that it is often in emptiness and openness that my heart is able to grow and experience gratitude.

How do we find that openness and emptiness in the world that exists outside of quiet prayer time in a darkened office? There are many ways and places available to help us. Each month a number of us meet in Kindred Project circles to be in silent contemplative prayer with each other. The silence then leads to conversation that flows from the prayer. This is an ancient Christian practice that is being rediscovered by many.



Many people practice another ancient form of prayer known as breath prayer. One ancient and simple breath prayer is known as the Jesus Prayer. In its simplest form it is done by inhaling as you say aloud or silently "Lord Jesus", and as you exhale you say "have mercy". Sometimes I sit in silence and practice this breath prayer, and sometimes I practice it when I awake during the night. For some years I've been practicing doing this prayer throughout the day. I especially try to do this when I feel stressed or rushed. The breath prayer is a simple way of emptying ourselves as we exhale, and then beginning to fill ourselves with life as we inhale.

Filling ourselves is the second step in our journey. This involves attentiveness to those things that bring you gratitude and taking them to heart. In Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) people in recovery talk about developing an "attitude of gratitude." It is a practice you can do alone in prayer, or in prayer circles, or in support groups such as A.A. Ask God to show you the things for which you are grateful. You could make a list of the things in your life that bring happiness and joy. I invite you to pause for a moment, and begin pondering the things that bring you gratitude. Ask God to help you be attentive to those around you. A parent and child next to you in the supermarket checkout line, the beauty of a sunrise, and the gift of a new day are some of the things you could start with. As your list expands your heart will expand.

Some months ago I wrote a poem that came from an issue I was struggling with. Looking at the poem now I realize it is about this journey of emptying and filling. I hope it will help you as you continue your journey toward a heart of gratitude.

Wrapping my heart around it

"I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around all of this!"

That's what I find myself thinking this morning.

Then I hear a small yet powerful voice saying,

"Don't even try! Let it go!"

Release it so that it can drop to the deepest part

of your heart.

Then wrap your heart around it!"

With a bit of struggle I let it go.

For an instant it seems to just drop like a rock,
then tumble like a falling stream,
then float like a leaf carried by the autumn wind,
then it seems to stop and rest deep within my heart.

I ask God to help me hold it gently.

In that holy place of love I invite God to open all of it...

all of these confusing and scary thoughts and feelings I'm trying to grasp...

and to let divine love enfold all of it.

Whatever feelings: fear, anger, sadness, even joy or relief;

I invite the Holy One to gently bless all of it.

As I allow my heart to wrap around all of these things...

that I still can't express or even understand...

the One who knows and loves me most,
begins to show me infinite possibilities for new life and meaning.

My heart continues to wrap around all of this swirling stuff

and I become aware of God wrapping loving arms around my heart,

around all that is me, all that is dear to me, and even all that is beyond me.

Then all of this begins to fade or maybe carry me to another place in my heart.

I sense that my journey continues.

All I have felt called to do and be is somehow held and wrapped in Holy and loving arms.

In that embrace I am re-shaped and given a larger heart

now starting to wrap itself around all of this morning's bother and worry.

A small yet powerful voice deep within invites me to a spiritual journey unimaginable. ♡

—The Rev. David Canada is a retired elder with the conference and a member of the Kindred Project. The Kindred Project is an ecumenical movement in and outside the conference for the advocacy of a prayer focused lifestyle. Learn more: <https://www.kindredprojectva.com>.



Stories of Gratitude

Seven days a week at Journey UMC



Day 1:

"I am Lesia, and I am grateful to be alive. I was driving my late father's Bronco, and I thought it had transmission trouble, but it turns out it just leaked fluid. Driving from Goodman's in Amelia, I was a few miles east of here when a tire fell apart, causing me to spin into the median into incoming traffic. I am okay, and praise be to God, I didn't hurt anyone. It could be so much worse. (Tears come, words flow.) But here I am and I need a place to leave my car until I can order a new big tire for the car. Thank you."

"God is Good." I (Betsey) say.

Lesia responds, "all the time," and smiles as she is reassured the car can stay as long as is needed.

Day 2:

"It was hot, and I didn't have time for a flat tire, but I pulled off at Journey and it really wasn't that bad. Then just as I am finishing, here comes the pastor with cold water for me. God is good. All the time."

Day 3:

"I can't believe my radiator overheated again, but glad I kept that empty water container. Do you have water? Can I fill this here?"

"Of course, I will fill it right away," I (Betsey) say. A quick, "Gracias!" and I am quickly on my way.

Day 4:

"I am from Amelia Social Services and we just got a call about a woman who has nothing. Can we get help from your emergency pantry?"

I (Betsey) responded, "Of course, you can. Let me pack a grocery bag for you. Oh, some of these donated cans do not have pull tabs. Do you think she can open them?"

"Not likely."

"Then let me get a can opener for you, too."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for all that you do."

Day 5:

"Our brakes went out. Can you smell that? I can't believe it. I told my husband to stop and not drive that camper one more mile. Our brakes are out. Can we leave it here and have it towed tomorrow? What? There's a repair shop, Goodman's right down the road? Here's the number? Thanks. Hey, we can make it before they close today. Thanks so much."

Day 6:

Three young people working on a disabled muscle car in the dark (after it had been there three days) are freaked out to see the pastor coming in their direction. Thinking they are going to catch heck, they are relieved to be blessed instead.

Day 7:

"I overloaded my pickup on the way to the dump and a huge bag fell off the truck, exploded on impact and spilled garbage all over the highway in front of Journey. Everyone at the restaurant noticed the mess and discussed the probability that I would never return. Five minutes passed. To everyone's surprise, my truck returned and I immediately started picking up trash. Out the door went the pastor. "Why?" said all. The pastor presented me with a meal ticket for doing the right thing."

Gratitude to God for planting a church always open and always on a mission from God. 🍀

– Betsey Davis



Ten years of gratitude

I have always felt blessed and felt gratitude for the life of faith I've had. However, 10 years ago, six months after the death of my husband Zig, a retired elder, I was diagnosed with Stage 4 ovarian cancer. The doctor said "You have a serious disease but we can treat it." No time limits, no "we can't help you," but "it is treatable."

Ten years later after surgery early on and numerous chemo treatments, I am still here.

I cannot begin to name the myriad people who have helped me on this journey. My gratitude is beyond naming, but, family first! My two daughters, son-in-law and grandsons are always there to assist as much as possible — extended family likewise. The teams of doctors, nurses, techs and office personnel who have supported me, prescribed and administered treatments, or simply helped with appointments have meant a great deal to me. Faraway family and friends, local friends, friends of friends, neighbors, and a variety of church and prayer groups, my college nursing classmates who are in touch regularly, and my church family at St. John's UMC in Staunton have all offered assistance where they could.

Ten years of gratitude beyond measure! 🍁

— Sue Volskis



Last Christmas present

The last Christmas gift my mother gave me was a set of commentaries called Connections.

Working with them as I prepared my sermon for Baptism of the Lord Sunday a few days after her death on Jan. 8, I came up with a sentence that said that there are no generic relationships with God. I am grateful to know that God knew my mother from before the time she was born, and that helps me as I grieve her death. 🍁

— The Rev. Ned Alderman

Grateful for chaos

This is going to sound weird, unbalanced and unfocused, but there is something that I have grown to appreciate with my whole being... I am grateful for chaos. One side of the coin is the uncertain atmosphere that chaos creates, whether in family relationships, congregational upheaval, worrisome work environments, economic distress, troublesome tweets with disjointed discourses, even homework challenges (remember that one course you just couldn't get?). So why is the fog of chaos a sign of gratefulness?

There is far more to chaos than upheaval and uncertainty, there is the response that one gets eventually when backed into a corner where there is no other option, where there is no other place to turn. Enter Jesus. As Americans we pride ourselves on our independence and self-reliance so when chaos occurs we have a tendency to unravel in various ways. But isn't chaos an opportunity in disguise to build a more lasting relationship with Christ? Doesn't Christ have our awesome side to bring hope and solidarity with something greater than the disaster du jour? I believe chaos brings uncertainty, but also opportunity, and for any opportunity to relate to God is just one more opportunity for gratefulness. You just have to get through the fog first. 🍁


— Kip Robinson

Gratitude for a journey of recovery

After some 38 years of ministry, I was put on medical leave in September 2018. An interim pastor took over at West Point UMC for me, and, at that point, I had no idea a double liver and kidney transplant was ahead. Without this surgery I would surely not be alive now to express my gratitude to God.

I am grateful for the doctors, nurses, specialists in a variety of medical fields, the caregivers and support staff who have been and continue to

(Con't. on next page: "GRATITUDE.")



("GRATITUDE," cont. from previous page.)

be involved in my recovery. The congregation and interim pastor of West Point UMC were most supportive allowing my family use of their parsonage and embraced us with many acts of kindness and love. All these persons along with many prayers from individuals and congregations from across the annual conference played a major role as instruments of God's grace.

There is one precious person whom, as far as know, I never met and who never met me, found it in his/her heart of hearts to sign the organ donor commitment on a driver's license or the family, in the midst of their grief, made this choice to allow their loved one's organs to be donated. Because of this gift that precious person is still alive in me!

Last Thanksgiving fell on my birthday, and I was still in the hospital being evaluated to determine whether I would be a viable candidate for double transplant surgery. My wife, three daughters and grandson brought in a Thanksgiving meal and we gave thanks for our family, life, love and for the numerous other blessings received as expressions of God's grace. This is grace we have discovered that is always sufficient, even in the darkest of times.

January 18, 2019, the call came that we were waiting to receive. The surgical teams were ready to rush me into surgery with healthy organs. I cannot express the many emotions, the shock. Yet I gave thanks for a compatible donor and ask for God's peace to be with the family and friends of my donor who were in midst of their grief.

Let me express my gratitude to God for all of those who have been supporting me and my family. The journey continues, the journey of recovery along with the unending journey a heart of gratitude for the abundance of God's mercy and grace! Thanks be to God! ❧

— The Rev. Reggie Rumburg

An Attitude of Gratitude



A church member once shared with me that she begins every day with a prayer thanking God for the gift of another day. She found that it made her days go better. I now make that a part of my practice, discovering that how I begin the day does set the tone for what will follow, and reflecting on my blessings helps me embrace an attitude of gratitude for all of life.


Expressing gratitude is something we must choose to do in appreciation for life's blessings. Too often we take our blessings for granted, accepting them as a normal expectation in life without acknowledging the Source of the blessings. An old hymn suggests "Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done!" When we choose to be grateful we discover just how many blessings we can count.

Angeles Arrien, in her book *Living in Gratitude: A Journey that Will Change Your Life* states: "Of all the universal themes that have been transmitted through perennial wisdom, the expression of gratitude continues to be the glue that consistently holds society and relationships together."

If gratefulness is a state of being that is essential to a good life, why then, should we not express it on a daily basis? Perhaps the reason we do not make gratitude a part of our daily lives is because the fast-paced and multiple distractions of modern life make it easy to ignore its importance.

The Apostle Paul knew the importance of an "attitude of gratitude" when he wrote, "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." (1 Thessalonians 5:18) Everything includes even the difficult times and challenges of life that attempt to pull us down and throw us off course in our faith journey. When we decide to thank God for everything, we have taken a step toward developing an attitude of gratitude. Choosing the attitude of gratitude and focusing on what we have instead of what we don't have becomes a lifestyle for faithful living. When we choose gratitude we realize how we can cope and





make the most of our blessings.

The British author, G.K. Chesterton expressed in his autobiography what he considered to be the most important lesson he ever learned in his life: "When it comes to life, the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude."

We human beings, whose lives are God's gift to the world, have the capacity to feel and express gratitude. Our gratitude can be expressed in many ways: praise, prayer, appreciation, compassion, and generosity. And when we choose to practice, integrate, and embody an attitude of gratitude, our lives will be enriched and have the potential to enrich the lives of others. Happy thanks-giving! 🍁

– The Rev. R. Franklin Gillis, Jr.

A Few Pieces of Corn

His name was Kenny. My best friend in elementary school, Kenny was a little taller than me with bright red hair and a sprinkling of freckles across his face.

His family had just recently moved over beside the Methodist Church on B Street. I met him one day out on the sidewalk. We quickly discovered we had much in common.

He had three sisters, and so did I, so we were able to comfort one another.

He liked to collect coins, and so did I.

He went to church, so did I (though not to the same one).

He liked the coolest girl in 5th grade, and so did I.

His family had moved from a place called Massachusetts. Kenny and his family had a peculiar accent I often teased him about it, but he would rightly point out I had quite an accent as well.

Kenny and his family also had strange customs. I discovered one when they invited me to a meal around Thanksgiving.

In the dining room, the table was set - plates and glasses but no food. We all sat down and then I noticed beside each empty plate were five corn kernels.

Kenny's father nodded to his youngest daughter,

and she asked, "Father, why are there pieces of corn beside our plate?"

I wanted to know that too. I don't remember everything Kenny's dad said, but the gist was the Pilgrim fathers and mothers faced many hardships when they came to America seeking freedom to worship God. One of those was hunger. One of the first winters they had only a little bit of food, not much more than a few pieces of corn per person each day to eat. The next spring, however, because of God's blessings through help from their Native American friends, they had a bountiful harvest and raised their voices in thanksgiving, inviting their new friends to a great banquet — the first Thanksgiving. So, the pieces of corn are there, his father said, to remind us of their suffering, of our many blessings, and our need to give thanks.

He picked up a piece of corn and looked around at his family and told them and God just how thankful he was for them. He laid the piece of corn on the other side of the plate. Then Kenny's mother took a kernel of corn and named something she was thankful for. They went around the table until they got to Kenny. He looked at me and said that he was thankful for me for he didn't think he would make any friends when he moved here.

It was my turn as I picked up a piece of corn and then shared thanks for Kenny and his whole strange family, for I was beginning to like them all. We went around the table until everyone had given thanks for a blessing, one for each piece of corn.

After that, we all went out to the kitchen and there on the counter were all kinds of foods.

Kenny and his family moved again a few years later, something to do with his dad's job – he was a United Methodist minister! I did not see him for years and we had not stayed in touch.

It was early 1982 soon after our son Michael had been born prematurely, and I remember taking Michael to the doctor and a man came in with the doctor, a man with a familiar face.

Guess who he was?

Yes. He was Kenny!


He helped take care of my son! And he still had a weird accent!

Isn't God good? 🍁

– The Rev. Bass Mitchell



Gratitude for local church


On February 10, 2019, my father passed away. He had been visiting our family here for a month before he went to my brother's in South Carolina. My husband and I took my dad down on February 3, 2019. A week later he was gone. My heart of gratitude goes out to my church Portlock UMC for the prayers, texts, messages, and cards that were sent to me. When I returned home after the funeral the finance secretary called me and said that several people had donated money in my dad's name, what would I like to do with it? My dad was an avid reader and I thought a bench, that could be placed near our Little Library (outside) and near the bus stop so people could stop take a book and return it when they were done. Our first Sunday back so many people came up to us and shared stories that they shared about my Dad, and things they remembered. It gave my husband and I "hearts of gratitude" that will live with us forever. Thank you, Portlock UMC. 

— Desiree Flora

What is a grateful heart?

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving 2017, I got up early to prep our family feast: baking pies and getting the ingredients together for our favorite fried dressing. By that afternoon my heart rate was over 200 beats per minute, and I was in the back of a screaming ambulance being cardioverted while still conscious.

Less than a week later, during my cardiac ablation, my doctor observed that my life-threatening condition was due to Wolff-Parkinson-White Syndrome, previously undiagnosed congenital heart abnormality. There's just something about the heart and Thanksgiving. Just as the Grinch's heart, mine grew in size. It filled with gratitude for the first

responders and medical team, friends and neighbors. It pumped with generosity toward those less fortunate. It beat steadily with genuine love for my family. Its gentle pulse affects the rhythm of my life. Through God, my defective heart transformed into a grateful heart. 

— Lela Martin

Sharing a Heart of Gratitude


This September Mt. Vernon UMC in Toano celebrated its 132nd anniversary. While not as big a celebration as the 100th anniversary, it was still very special, thanks to a long ago member who wrote 20 short stories about her memories of growing up in Mt. Vernon Methodist Church in Toano.

Miriam Fitchett Middleton was born in the 1930's into a family which devotedly served the James City Chapel (founded in 1791), which was relocated four miles by railcar to Toano in 1885, and rededicated in 1887 as Mt. Vernon Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Miriam continued the family legacy helping her mother with altar flowers, serving Mt. Vernon as a choir member, and becoming an active participant in the church youth activities.

After college and nursing school, Miriam and Jack Middleton married during a memorable wedding at Mt. Vernon in 1956. After the preacher pronounced them as husband and wife, they quickly moved down the aisle and grabbed the rope of the church bell, ringing the bell together with a broad smile on their faces much to the surprise of attendees. Over subsequent years, Miriam regularly visited with her mother, and attended Mt. Vernon during those visits.

This past winter, Miriam sat down with pen in hand, and wrote short stories about her memories. She wrote them especially for the members of Mt. Vernon today, her family and descendants. The stories were bound together as *My Memories of Mount Vernon Methodist Church, 1930's-Forward*.

A few of her stories told us about tragically losing her father at the age of eight, and how members of Mt. Vernon responded to help her family; how the effects of WWII came to Toano by the loss of



a young man who was a friend to many; how her mother provided for the family during the years of WWII; how she enjoyed Easter egg hunts and youth fellowship activities as a teenager at Mt. Vernon; her favorite pastors, and what they meant to her; being in the choir, and the special choir director who influenced so many of her young friends; and her best friend, Betty, and their happy times together before she died so young. She even provided a word sketch that told us about what the sanctuary was like before and after the 1942 renovation, things that no current members knew about.

Combined, Miriam's stories become a life story, a story mixed with happy moments, sad moments, tragic events, family, church, and community. It is also a story of faith. It is a story of her faith. A faith that is inspiring to us all. It is a story that she gladly shared with us.

Miriam closed her stories by saying: "Most importantly, the church is about its people. I loved Mt. Vernon because Mt. Vernon first loved me. The love of God which emanated from His people to me in my Mt. Vernon years not only mentored me in the way to live, but touched my deepest recesses, resulting in transformation. I am thankful to have been a part of that Body! I will always cherish my years there!"

"As I conclude my stories of growing up in Mt. Vernon church, my heart is filled with one predominating emotion: Gratitude! I am so thankful for God's church and for God's people!!"

Miriam Fitchett Middleton is truly a person who has a Heart of Gratitude, and gladly shares it with others. Today, Miriam and Jack reside in a Christian community in the Denver area and are proud parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. 🍁

— Carol Dishman, Mt. Vernon UMC,
Toano, church historian

Cultivating gratitude

The dictionary defines gratitude as "a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation." We all know how good it makes us feel when someone remembers to say "thank you."

I would like to recommend that we adapt an "attitude of gratitude". We have Thanksgiving Day once a year to give thanks for our friends, family, health, work and homes, but I think we often miss the more subtle blessings, the smaller joys of every day living.

Think about how our bodies are knitted together with bone and blood in a symphony of life and motion. Isn't it amazing how day after day our hearts beat, waking or sleeping, and our lives continue in the rhythm set in motion long before we were born? Life is such a wonderful gift! How grateful we should be for the years we are granted!

Sometimes as adults we lose the ability to find a reason to be thankful every day. In First Thessalonians, Chapter Five, Verse 18, we read: "In everything give thanks." Maybe if we try to see the world through the eyes of a child, we too can be thankful for the little things in life: the softness of our pet's fur, bubbles in the bath tub, and rainbows after the storm.

Often, however, we can only truly appreciate things when we have traveled far beyond childhood. I recall being overwhelmed with gratitude when a friend extended a hand during a time of grief. It could be a gentle hug, a warm smile, or a pat on the back that filled you with thanks as well. Little gestures of understanding bind us to others. We can look for them but also seek opportunities to offer them, and in so doing, we cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

My prayer is that these coming months may be marked by the blessing of an attitude of gratitude for life's simplest gifts, offered in the humble wrapping of ordinary days. 🍁

— MaryKay Cochran





Hope beyond the bars

I was barely holding on after my son was sentenced to eight years in prison for a crime he did not commit. My heart and mind were consumed by fear and anxiety. I could not stop the terrible thoughts from flooding back into the forefront of my mind. The more I entertained these thoughts, the stronger they became. I had to find a way to put God back at the center of my life.

Counting my blessings was the only thing that brought any light into my deepest darkness, and I was in constant conversation with God seeking meaning in my heartache.

My son befriended an inmate from Honduras and worked to help him communicate and learn some basic English. This gave him purpose amid his circumstance. I was inspired by his example and sought ways for me to be helpful. It was then that I met inmates Joe and Andy.

I began correspondence with them believing I would be the source of Christian support. It was them that inspired me and strengthened my faith as no one else could. Through this our program, Hope Beyond the Bars, was born. I learned that there is hope beyond the bars and men hungry to share it. They want others to be filled with the hope of redemption and the security of everlasting life.

Joe is our founding visual artist. He says, "I prayed and asked God if I was truly worthy, to give me a sign or someone to help me. Then, Abigail came along. She nurtured and reinstated my faith. God has taken the blindfold off my eyes and illuminated my spirit by remarkably renewing my faith in Jesus.

Jesus is changing me from the inside out regardless of my 60-year sentence. We all fall short of the glory of God, no matter who we are or where we come from."

Andy is our founding literary artist. He says, "The power of evil can be compelling and mustering up the strength to combat it is exhausting. I've been incarcerated for 24 years and I'm grateful to have this program that doesn't use my past as a measuring stick to judge my character now."

Many in here don't have someone to call or write and have zero support. The smallest communication

is vital and can be very therapeutic. The outlet of expression or the mere fact of being "heard," means so much.

Searching the scriptures with thoughts of uplifting others is extremely powerful. The long-term benefits are immeasurable. I am so motivated and strengthened by this program. I'm thankful for this opportunity. It is a real privilege to be a part of."

I am so grateful for the unlikely friends that God brought into my life to help navigate this very broken road I found myself on. Visit our website: Hopebeyondthebars.org to learn about our program.

I have read that one of the highest callings of a Christian is to invest in another man's soul. I am so grateful that I did. 🍁

— Abigail Grace





ONE LAST WORD

Where is meaning?

In September 2017, The Pew Research Center asked thousands of Americans where they find meaning in life. They shared many of the responses sharing that “each one tells a part of the story of the American experience — a small part of our collective hopes, dreams, triumphs and tragedies.” Some responses and insights are shared below.

- ❖ My family is the focus of my life. I feel like I should have said Christianity; however, that is a given for me, underlying and surrounding everything in my life. My greatest joy comes from my loved ones.¹
- ❖ Wow, what a terrible time to ask. I would have said my job until last week but we’ve gone through a surprise ownership change and I don’t know if I’m quitting/getting fired tomorrow! I guess what keeps me going is the surprising acts of kindness I see everyday in this city. A kid dropped and broke his toy on the train during rush hour and had a melt down. Strangers grabbed the pieces and worked together to snap it back together while the frantic father tried to usher his screaming child off the train so they didn’t miss their stop. The toy was fire brigade through the train to a grateful dad and a no longer screaming child. I’ve never seen that look of relief on a man’s face or a happier kid. That makes it worth it!
- ❖ The worrisome and dissatisfying thing is seeing how many others are suffering and not able to do well — because as a (global and national) society we have not yet fully embraced what it takes to share and care for all.
- ❖ I have two wonderful daughters. Both are very young and their innocence, joy, happiness, and absolute trust in me add such meaning and grant me a wonderful reprieve from more adult concerns. It’s easy to forget what’s wrong in the world when you are pretending to be a puppy with your daughter.²
- ❖ I actually like my job, but it is all consuming and

very difficult. I am a teacher. We are not paid enough and the resources for our students are limited. But I do enjoy helping them learn and there is some satisfaction in helping them succeed.³

- ❖ I want to get to a point in my life, not where I am rich, but I can go to the grocery store, the gas station, the movies, or go on vacation, and not have to worry about the amount of money in my bank account. I want it to be an afterthought. I am getting closer to this dream, and that is what is keeping me going.⁴
- ❖ A group of friends and I do water aerobics several times a week, then breakfast afterwards. They have become close confidants and just fun to be with. I would be lost without them.⁵
- ❖ What keeps me going? My faith in God, the Creator of our universe, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but I know you will delete this last part.⁶
- ❖ They say “If you love your work, you’ll never work a day in your life”. It’s true. I wanted to make a living in music, and I have. Not as a rock star, but by repairing musical instruments. I still get to be a rock star every weekend with my band.⁷ 🍷

1 Family was the most common topic Americans mentioned when talking about what keeps them going. Two-thirds (69%) brought up their spouse or romantic partner, children, grandchildren or simply “family” in general.

2 A third of all Americans (34%) brought up children or grandchildren when describing what makes life feel meaningful, making it the most commonly mentioned specific aspect of family.

3 Americans mentioned jobs or careers just as frequently as they did children or grandchildren (34%). More educated and higher-income Americans were more likely to mention the topic.

4 Money was also a common topic, with one-in-five Americans (23%) mentioning it in some way. Most of the time it was in a positive context, but finances were also frequently mentioned as a source of difficulty or concern.

5 One-in-five Americans (19%) mentioned their friends or “relationships” in general when describing what keeps them going. Those with higher household incomes or more education brought up the topic more often.

6 When describing what makes their lives feel meaningful, 20% of all Americans noted some form of spirituality or faith. It was an especially prominent theme among evangelical Protestants (43%), very conservative Americans (38%) and black Americans (30%).

7 Americans brought up a wide variety of activities — 19% mentioned hobbies or activities — in some form, and 4% specifically mentioned creative activities. Atheists were the most likely to say they find meaning in creativity.

LIVING THE WORD



Jessie Colwell is the pastor of the three-point Rappahannock Charge UMC in the Charlottesville District. She is starting her 10th year in ministry and is an ordained elder in the Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church. She is passionate about discipleship, music and helping others discern God's calling upon their lives. Her first book Blessed Wrestling: Discerning God's Calling Upon Your Life will be published by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry in the fall of 2021. Colwell is very connectional and has served on various global, national and local boards and agencies. She received her B.S. from Virginia Tech and her Masters of Divinity from Duke Divinity School. She has been married to Nelson for six years. They have a four-year-old son, Dean.

Nov. 3, 2019 **Called to be Strong** **2 Corinthians 13:5-11**

As a pastor, I often feel that, above all else, I am called to be strong for my congregation no matter what is going on in my life. This past year, I found myself in a state of weakness when my husband was diagnosed with cancer. It was a time when so many unknowns were floating about in my heart and my head, and yet my three small congregations remained strong. They rose to the occasion. They prayed for my husband daily. They brought meals. They were gentle with me. They embodied to me Christ's compassion and love.

This experience reminded me that so often we do not allow the church to be the church. When we take a step back and the church takes a step forward God reminds us that we are all in this together and we need each other.

God's greatest gift to us was Jesus Christ, but the second-best gift is the gift of the church, the place where we can encourage one another and hold each other accountable, the place where we can honestly share when our faith is being tested and when we feel the Holy Spirit moving in beautiful ways in our lives.

In 2 Corinthians 13:9, the Apostle Paul admits his weakness in body and in spirit. He is less concerned about himself but is more concerned that the church of Corinth remains strong. He writes his hopes and instructions for them in this letter so that

when he gets to visit them in person he can simply enjoy a time of fellowship with them.

Through this Scripture the Apostle Paul continually points the church of Corinth to Christ as the example – not to himself. The good news for us is that through our faith in Jesus Christ we can always draw our strength, even in the toughest seasons of our lives. Focus for this week: Think about specific ways you can be more attentive to those in your life who may be in need of Christ's strength.

Nov. 10, 2019 **Holiness in the Midst of Worldliness** **1 Peter 1:13-25**

In our Wesleyan tradition, we are blessed that holiness of heart and life are deeply engrained into our practice of our faith. Simply put, there is no part of our lives that does not involve God. In our daily living our souls wrestle with the desire to be holy and the desire for others to believe that we are holy.

Through social media, we have been taught to compartmentalize our lives, only sharing the good and the beautiful. We even do this when we are away from our computers and smart phones and people ask us how we are doing. Almost always we immediately respond: "well" or "fine."

This can leave us feeling isolated, unable to share our struggles with one another as we all strive to become more like God who is holy. Interestingly, some of the most holy conversations I have experienced happened when people were completely vulnerable with me or vice versa. Confessing our sins to each other is a way we can strive to be more holy.

In this Scripture, Peter was encouraging his audience to pursue holiness. He told them to "love one another deeply" (1 Peter 1:22b). We also are invited to participate in Peter's call to holiness. We are



called to seek after God each day so that we may better understand the One who created us.

The good news is this – God has already made us holy through the blood of Jesus Christ! We can't mess that up; it is something that Christ has already done for us.

God continues to call us into this lifestyle of holiness where we seek the desires of God before our own desires, where we empty ourselves of pride, hatred and selfishness, so that we can be full of Christ. Focus for this week: Have a holy conversation with someone you love by listening to what God has placed on their heart or by sharing what God has placed on your heart.

Nov. 17, 2019 **Moving Forward** **2 Peter 1:3-11**

Regret. It is the thing that continues to keep us living in the past instead of living into Christ's promise of hope. We live in regret when we play over in our minds the things we wish we could go back and do differently. While we know this practice is not helpful, it is sometimes hard for us to move forward, to live in the present. An example from my life: when I forget to call a congregation member, I beat myself up about it because I want each person in my congregation to know they are equally important.

In our Scripture for this week, Peter reminds us to let go of our regret. He says, "For anyone who lacks these things is short-

sighted and blind and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins" (1 Peter 3:9). When we hold on to regret, we forget that Christ has already died for our sins. The good news is that Christ has already taken our shame and our guilt! When we recognize what Christ has done for us, we must move forward in hope and invite others to come with us. We move forward in hope when we do not dwell on the past, when we make plans for the future to serve Jesus Christ, and when we name the gifts we see in others. We move forward with Christ when we learn from the mistakes of our past and live in the present, aware of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit moving in the world. Focus for the week: Write down some things you think are holding you back in your discipleship. Then write three ways you are excited about serving God this month.

Nov. 24, 2019 **A Time of Thanksgiving** **1 Thessalonians 1:2-9**

There is such power when other Christians spend time in prayer for one another. This year we started a new ministry on our charge. We started praying over prayer shawls and the people who would receive them. We each put our hands on the prayer shawl marveling at the design, stretching it out so that each person could hold on to a piece. Each time I started the prayer thanking God for both the person who made

the prayer shawl and the person who would be receiving it. Our hope was that when the person received the prayer shawl and placed it around their shoulders they would feel the power of all the prayers that had been prayed for them. I really love this new ministry because it calls us to be thankful to God, even in the midst of sickness and pain.

I love how Paul started this letter to the Thessalonians, thanking God for these people he is in ministry with. As we approach Thanksgiving this week, we too are called to be thankful to God for the many blessings in our lives. In this season and every season, we too are called to thank God each day for the people God has placed in our lives.

When we have a mindset of thankfulness, we can more readily see how God is working in and through our lives. The good news is we always have something to be thankful for with God. Focus of the week: Call or write someone this week to tell them you are thankful for them. ☺

The 2019 Living the Word devotions are from the *Standard Lesson Commentary* from Cokesbury. Note: you can follow the November readings for the 2019 Bible Challenge from Bishop Lewis on pg 31.

CLERGY & DIACONAL



DEATHS



The Rev. Lynn R. Wilbur, 76, died September 26, 2019, in Henderson, N.C. Wilbur began his ministerial career in 1972 in West

Virginia. He transferred to the Virginia Conference in 1985 and served Mecklenburg, Annex, Hot Springs, Rapidan, Short Hill, and the Jeffersonton-Culpeper Circuit. He retired in 2008.



The Rev. Russell Eugene "Gene" Larkin, retired pastor, died August 24, 2019. He served Charles Wesley UMC and

Chesterbrook UMC in the Arlington District, Salem-Olive Branch, Crittenden-Ebenezer, McKendree in Norfolk, Oakland in the Danville District, and Park View in Lynchburg.

Judith Woodburn, 72, died September 14, 2019. Her son, **the Rev. Jon Woodburn**, is pastor of Oakland UMC, Danville District.

Kenneth H. Jones, 68, of Richmond, died August 28, 2019. His brother, **the Rev. Dr. Steve Jones**, retired as Richmond District Superintendent.

Mark Douglas Young, 60, of Gloucester, died August 25, 2019.

His daughter, **the Rev. Kristie Askew**, is pastor of Shackelfords Chapel UMC.

Tim Ewing, 58, Scouting Coordinator on the York River District of the Virginia Conference, died August 19, 2019, in Newport News.

Miriam R. Livermon died August 17, 2019. She was the wife of the late **William R. Livermon Jr.**, retired U.S. Army Chaplain pastored in United Methodist churches in South Boston, Martinsville, and Danville.

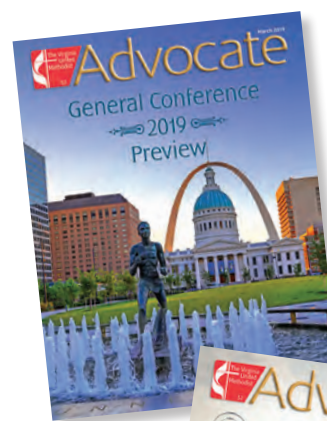
BIRTHS

The Rev. Joe Varner, pastor of Thalia UMC, Virginia Beach, and his wife, **Morgan**, welcomed **Mollie Joseph Varner** on Sept. 6, 2019. 🍀



Advocate subscription reimbursement

If your Advocate subscription runs past 2019, you may contact the conference Communications Office to get a reimbursement at 804-521-1110 or email advocate@vaumc.org.





Bishop's Bible Challenge readings for November

Nov. 1	2 Samuel 19-20; 2 John
Nov. 2	2 Samuel 21-22; 3 John
Nov. 3	2 Samuel 23-24; Col. 1
Nov. 4	Nahum 1-3; Col. 2
Nov. 5	Habakkuk 1-3; Col. 3
Nov. 6	Zephaniah 1-3; Col. 4
Nov. 7	Ezra 1-2; 2 Timothy 1
Nov. 8	Ezra 3-5; 2 Timothy 2
Nov. 9	Ezra 6-8; 2 Timothy 3
Nov. 10	Ezra 9-10; 2 Timothy 4
Nov. 11	1 Chron. 1-3; Jude
Nov. 12	1 Chron. 4-6; Lk. 1:1-20
Nov. 13	1 Chron. 7-9; Lk. 1:21-38
Nov. 14	1 Chron. 10-12; Lk. 1:39-56
Nov. 15	1 Chron. 13-15; Lk. 1:57-80
Nov. 16	1 Chron. 16-18; Lk. 2:1-24
Nov. 17	1 Chron. 19-21; Lk. 2:25-52
Nov. 18	1 Chron. 22-24; Lk. 3
Nov. 19	1 Chron. 25-27; Lk. 4:1-30
Nov. 20	1 Chron. 28-29; Lk. 4:31-44
Nov. 21	2 Chron. 1-3; Lk. 5:1-16
Nov. 22	2 Chron. 4-6; Lk. 5:17-39
Nov. 23	2 Chron. 7-9; Lk. 6:1-26
Nov. 24	2 Chron. 10-12; Lk. 6:27-49
Nov. 25	2 Chron. 13-14; Lk. 7:1-30
Nov. 26	2 Chron. 15-16; Lk. 7:31-50
Nov. 27	2 Chron. 17-18; Lk. 8:1-25
Nov. 28	2 Chron. 19-20; Lk. 8:26-56
Nov. 29	2 Chron. 21-22; Lk. 9:1-17
Nov. 30	2 Chron. 23-24; Lk. 9:18-36

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PUERTO RICO SPRING BREAK MISSION TRIP 2019

The Marlin Ministry Mission Team traveled to Arecibo, Puerto Rico to work with the Puerto Rican Methodist Church and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). The team was assigned to two houses that had been significantly damaged by Hurricane Maria, and said it was a joy and a tremendous learning experience to serve their Puerto Rican brothers and sisters with Christ's love. ¿Quien vive? Cristo vive!



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