

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – FEBRUARY 7 EDITION

Bishop Graves sets church planting and revitalization as a priority

When Bishop David Graves arrived in South Georgia he established three priorities for the South Georgia Conference: disrupting and dismantling racism, clergy mental health, and resourcing the local church for ministry.

This year he is adding an additional priority: church planting and revitalization.

“God has opened up some new windows of opportunity to plant and revitalize churches,” said Bishop Graves. “With a renewed sense of commitment, I believe God is calling the South Georgia Conference to new and abundant life.”

Bishop Graves has asked Mrs. Anne Bosarge, who serves in the Office of Connectional Ministries as Director of Leadership Strategies and Local Church Resources, to oversee this initiative as a part of her current role.

In addition, he is asking the already established Congregational Development Committee, chaired by the Rev. Dr. Ben Gosden, to provide oversight.

The committee will look at three objectives: planting new United Methodist Churches in areas where there are not UMC churches, strengthening churches nearest to those areas, and inviting all the churches of the South Georgia Conference to experience revival and renewal in Jesus Christ. The committee will be studying the conference’s statistics and the growth of communities as they contemplate how best to make more disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The committee has begun to meet and has already formed one Task Force group that will focus on fresh expressions and home churches.

“The time is here for churches in South Georgia to do new things to reach new people in new ways,” said Bosarge. “We want to move from maintaining what is to thriving in our mission to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

“I have already met so many people, both clergy and laity, who are ready to start and be part of the new things God is doing. We already have some of these new things in the works, and I can’t wait to be a part of more of what God is already doing here in South Georgia.”

Bosarge and the committee will also work closely with Bishop Graves and the Cabinet to identify areas of opportunity.

Recognizing that this is a challenging season of change as some local churches choose to disaffiliate from the denomination, Bishop Graves looks toward the hope and joy that is experienced through faithfulness.

“We have found that people are affected by disaffiliation in many different ways,” said Bishop Graves. “Some need a period of time to grieve the loss of community and their ‘spiritual home.’ Others may be excited to do something new and may feel God calling them to take on the leadership to be part of something new. Still others might want to transition into an existing UM church in their area.”

A page has been established on the conference website that helps guide church members affected by disaffiliation in whatever direction God is calling them: www.sgaumc.org/moving-forward-in-mission.

“If you find yourself lost and displaced by the disaffiliation of your church, we want to work with you and provide resources that will help you stay on track as we all continue to move and press into the UMC’s mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ,” said Bosarge.

Bishop Graves is committed to these areas of priority and is excited to see where God leads.

“As we move forward, I want you to know my commitment is focusing on the people and churches of the great South Georgia Conference and moving forward in this next season of ministry together,” said Bishop Graves. “God is at work in great ways, and I look forward to how we, together as the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church, can change our corner of the world.”

As the committee continues to meet and make plans, more information will be shared with the conference.



Celebrating Black History Month with a focus on unity and love

By Denise Rooks

This past Christmas and many Christmases previously, Christians all around the world have celebrated the birth of Christ. This isn’t practiced because the Bible teaches us to celebrate Christmas, but because we want to take the time to celebrate and be thankful for the gift of Christ that God gave us. Christmas, like many celebrations, is an opportunity to share our faith and help others to understand it.

When the Covid pandemic occurred, we had to change the way we celebrated the day, but that didn’t stop us from celebrating. We found a way to celebrate the birth of Christ, and many of us found ways to witness our faith through other mediums than in person. Like many of our celebrations, we understand without Christ in the midst, it is just another day.

With this same spirit, we celebrate Black History Month - not because it is practiced in the Bible, but because it is an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of our African American sisters and brothers and to praise God for those accomplishments while looking back from where God has brought his people.

African Americans, like all our Christian brothers and sisters, understand what Paul refers to in Ephesians 4: “that glory goes to God” because he has done a mighty work for black people and caused us to “accomplish infinitely more” than our ancestors could have imagined.

As chairperson of the Advocacy committee, I want you to know that our committee is committed to focusing on unity and love. **February is a great opportunity for all Christians to practice exactly that - love and unity.** Some would argue that celebrating this creates division among the saints; however, I want to remind everyone that celebrating the accomplishments of brothers and sisters in the faith together is a great way to glorify God in the process.

Celebrating Black History is celebrating America’s history. Through John Wesley’s teaching, which were spirit led, we can see why The United Methodist Church took a stance against slavery at a time when it was not popular to make such a stand. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. **We, members of The United Methodist Church, have been at the forefront of uniting the body of Christ in unity and love even in our most challenging times. We are the body of Christ, different members, making one body with Christ as the head.**

When Carter Woodson came up with the concept of celebrating black history for a week every February, it was at a time when it looked like Black Americans had no history except being an enslaved people. Carter wanted the people to celebrate the wonderful contributions that African Americans had given to this country. His call to arms was to remind the people and the nation that just because people came to this country for a negative reason doesn't mean God can't use them for positive contributions. Isn't that what all of us want? To be acknowledged and valued? We are all more than our mistakes; through Christ Jesus, **we are more because God equips us for works of service, and we become, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4, the mature body of him who is the head.**

As a child growing up in the South were it not for the church, I never would have known of the many contributions that African Americans made to help this country become a great nation. Back then, Black History was only celebrated the second week in February. It started out that week because Carter Woodson wanted to especially highlight the birthdays of some great Americans whose birthdays were in February: Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and WEB Dubois. Now Americans celebrate Black History Month the entire month of February. **It's a month of celebrating our history with others by showing everyone how God moves in the lives of his people.**

This February, as we celebrate Black History Month, we have the power not to change the past but to **move forward as brothers and sisters in Christ** serving one God not just with words but with our actions. We have **the power to confound the world with the things of God** by choosing to honor those who helped make this country the great union in which we live. We, the people of The United Methodist Church in order to form a more perfect union, choose to **unite in Jesus Christ through all generations** to thank God for his grace and mercy given to all who seek to do his will. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:5, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all, in all, living through all."

Black history is America's history because it honors the accomplishments of those who made America the great country it is today.

Mrs. Denise Rooks is a member of Harper's Chapel UMC in Baxley, South Central District Lay Leader, and the chair of the Conference Advocacy Committee.



Pittman Park UMC's David Keene has a helper's heart

By Kirsten VanBeverhoudt, *Grice Connect newspaper*

If you want to know what genuine love looks like, meet David Keene. Keene is a man who believes in giving with his whole heart, and in most cases, no matter the ask, he always says "yes."

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, Keene moved to Statesboro, Georgia, in 1983. The year after he moved to Statesboro, his oldest brother passed away, and when his parents became immobile, he and his wife, Mary, decided to remodel their house and have his parents stay with them. David and Mary have been married for forty years and have four children that they're proud of.

Keene is an active church member at Pittman Park United Methodist Church. He loves to serve God's people so much that during one recent Wednesday night at church, he sliced 18 turkey breasts by hand for a Thanksgiving feast. He later had to rest with a heating pad to reduce the pain, but nonetheless he pressed on in his efforts of lending a helping hand.

“You got to keep moving,” he said.

He’s also involved in the community outside of the church as a poll manager at the Williams James Middle School precinct and assists with early voting.

However, the volunteer role that Keene is perhaps best known for is serving as the [East Georgia Regional Medical Center](#) Auxiliary President. He’s held this position since 2012, helping with many different projects in the span of those ten years. (You can learn more about the Auxiliary packing Thanksgiving bags for needy families [here](#).)

Paying it forward may have saved his life

Several years back, he experienced his own medical emergency and found help at the facility so dear to him. In the span of his lifetime, after being born and having his tonsils removed, he’s only been to the hospital once. It was in 2011, the day after New Year’s, when his wife drove him to East Georgia Regional Medical Center, as he was having a hard time breathing. As she drove, he had the window rolled down in an attempt to breathe.

After arriving at the hospital, he spent four days allowing the cardiologists to take care of his heart condition. Two months later, he got two stents in his heart, and in 2015, two more stents were put in.

After that experience, his love for East Georgia Regional Medical Center goes beyond words. You might say that EGRMC is near and dear to his heart both literally and figuratively.

“They have a good bunch of people that try as hard as they can, and I made a lot of friends here,” Keene said.

Sadly, some of the people he met in the hospital passed away during the peak of COVID-19, but the joy he has gained from his Auxiliary experience is priceless to him.

“What’s the greatest thing in the world is if you have a contact with somebody in the hospital and you’re walking around Walmart and they come up and tell you how good it made them feel from something you said,” Keene shared. “That’s worth more than money, and I’ve had that.”

Keene hopes that everyone gets a chance to experience that in their lifetime, and he hopes to continue his service at the hospital going forward. He expects to see big changes on the horizon.

Kirsten VanBeverhoudt is a freelance writer for Grice Connect, a local newspaper in the Statesboro, Ga. area. She can be reached at kmvanb@yahoo.com. [This article was originally published on December 19, 2022 in the Grice Connect.](#)



From a Trip to a Journey

By Shannon Baxter

John Jones went on his first mission experience this past summer. He loved it so much he wondered what it would be like to do this for longer than a week or two. He didn’t feel called to do this full-time but did feel like he could give a couple months to serving others. He started asking around, but no one knew how to go

about doing that. He just knew there had to be a way. If it did exist, it's got to be the best kept secret out there! He was ready to graduate from a trip to a journey...

Many of us have been on mission trips before. Trips where we spend a week or two living with people we don't know, using our gifts and talents to help provide some service or support, and sharing the love of Christ with people we just met and may never see again. These experiences can be life changing and eye opening!

That's how it was for me in college when I went on my first Spring Break Mission Trip with the Auburn Wesley Foundation. In the midst of trying to figure out who I was, God opened my eyes to those I was being called to serve. It is a lesson I will never forget and one that changed my trajectory forever. I went on the trip because I thought it would be a neat thing to do with people I was just getting to know. Little did I know that it wasn't just a trip but the beginning of a journey of service, all in response to the lavish love that God had and continues to pour into me.

A number of years ago, the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) sought to change how we viewed these types of opportunities. "Mission Trip" sounded too touristy and vacation like. Sure, what people were doing was going on a trip, but it didn't describe what they knew God was doing in the lives of those who participated. The decision was made to encourage the use of the phrase *Mission Journey* instead of trip.

The change wasn't just semantics. It was meant to express reality. Rarely would someone go on such an experience and not be changed in some way. That change didn't end when they got home, laid in their own bed, and got back to daily living. It stirred up in them a fire to connect with God on a deeper level. It caused hearts to burn for the needs of the world around them. They couldn't see their surroundings in the same way. They had started traveling a new road, a new *journey*.

That's exactly what brought six individuals to Dallas, TX, on November 30 for four days.

The journey had actually begun some time ago. Their hearts had been pricked, and they couldn't turn back. They had time to give to the intentional work of sharing their faith by serving others and wanted to be obedient to that call.

So they applied for the Mission Volunteers Program that is overseen by the GBGM. The program is designed for individuals or couples 18 and over to serve anywhere in the world for as little as two months or for as much as two years. The participants commit to funding themselves, either through their own means or by raising support from family, friends, or their home churches.

For those four days, the six Mission Volunteer applicants engaged in Bible study and group discussion to prepare them for their time of service. They discussed the challenges of serving outside their typical support structure, working through cultural differences, how to budget their resources, how to connect with the people they would be serving, and how to set boundaries so as not to burn out. Each person arrived there on a deeply personal journey, and each would leave with an assignment that fit their personality and their individuals giftings. From Henderson Settlement, KY and Las Cruces, NM; to Ecuador, Costa Rica, Japan, and Prague! Every location vastly different from the other, but all are founded on the goal of being a Christ-like presence with people who need tangible evidence of the love and grace of God.

So, if you have wondered what it would be like to serve long-term in another state or anywhere in the world, please consider the Mission Volunteer Program. At any given time, there are up to 100 people serving with United Methodist organizations and missionaries, providing support for ongoing ministry. Each location

goes through a vetting process and each Mission Volunteer is supported by GBGM staff specifically focused on their work.

For more information, visit www.umcmmission.org/mission-volunteers. There will be three trainings spread throughout 2023 in three different locations: Pennsylvania, California, and Florida. Applications are available year-round. If you have specific questions about the program and would like to talk with someone in the Mission Volunteers office, you can email Una Jones at mv@umcmmission.org.

Our participation in mission activities are more than trips or one-off activities. They are part of the journey of becoming like Christ and expressing the love we have been given to the world. Consider how you can live that out beyond special events. Let God guide you to a life of service so the world can see in you the transforming power of God’s love.

Rev. Shannon Baxter serves as the South Georgia Conference United Methodist Volunteer in Mission Coordinator.



Feb. 27 book talk to focus on how prayer changes us

Throughout 2023, four book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts, and encourage our prayer walks. Connectional Ministries is excited to kick off the Book Talk Series with the Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn’s book, “Prayer Changes Us.” Participants will read the book and then gather on Zoom February 27 to chat about what they learned and received from the book. This first book talk, featuring the author of the book, is set for Monday, February 27 from noon-1pm. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.](#)

In addition, make sure to check out February’s focused prayer guide, written by the Revs. Michael Culbreth, Michelle Dailey, Cedric Jackson, and Precious Hawkins. It is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.



The Harm Caused by Church Conferences Voting to Disaffiliate

Dear Friends of the South Georgia Conference,

This is the third in a series of four articles I am releasing related to church disaffiliations. At the beginning of January, [I shared some updates for the new year](#). In this first article, I reminded you about the [process in place in our Annual Conference](#) that extends the terms of South Georgia’s current disaffiliation policy through December 31, 2024, based on ¶2549. The term we will use after December 31, 2023, is “departure.” I also announced my plan to call a special annual conference session in August of 2024. This will allow churches to have comprehensive information from the 2024 General Conference session scheduled for April 23-Mary 3, 2024. While we cannot predict outcomes, there could be matters that the annual conference will need to address at the conclusion of the session. We will seek to base our decisions on facts to make strategic decisions. For this reason, I have repeatedly asked churches to stay in the United Methodist connection and place their energies on making disciples.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared my second article entitled, “[This is NOT a business deal](#),” which made the rounds throughout the denomination. My focus was to be a voice for leaders who are surrounded by

individuals spreading misinformation and calling for disaffiliation. While each reader will certainly have their opinions of that article, it has garnered significant discussions in the connection.

Church conferences are happening in some of our Alabama West-Florida and South Georgia congregations. Most of these are being held to finalize the voting process on disaffiliating. To summarize in one brief statement, these conferences are causing harm in several ways. While some churches are to be commended for the honorable way they have conducted the disaffiliation process, many have not, in my opinion. From my observations, anxious actions are often driven by a few people, including some pastors, whose ultimate goal is to vote. They are rarely a truthful and spirit-led discernment process. When the aforementioned group cries out for discernment, what they really are asking is to vote. We live in a culture of, "If they said it, it must be true." For years, data has shown what most people believe about the Bible is what someone else has told them, not what they have read and studied for themselves. I believe this same dynamic is happening in local churches around voting and disaffiliation.

Stories continue to flood my inbox: the young and the old crying after a church vote; people 40 and under walking out and leaving after a vote; the grief of losing the church they once were a part of; and the cruel and hard things people say in these meetings. Several have written and stated that they don't want to get involved in a church that wants to be focused only on what the church is against. The church in America has become irrelevant in many ways and our "witness" is making it worse. We have played into the hands of our culture in thinking that church should reflect our own personal views and values. This is not true everywhere, but we are fast approaching this mindset.

What I am about to share happened 26 years ago to me. As a young pastor I was appointed to two mid-size congregations for the purpose of merging to form one church. It would be quite easy to put the blame on my bishop and district superintendent for appointing me to such a situation, but I was the one who suggested it. My bishop and district superintendent provided me with a wonderful support system. In recent months, I assumed that I had worked through my pain and woundedness of the one year that I served in that appointment. However, the present-day stories of church conferences voting around disaffiliations have triggered the trauma of a very difficult time in my life, one that almost cost me my ministry.

In 1994, I was appointed to a church that had a membership of just over 300 and was averaging around 100 persons in worship. It was a church that ten years prior had another small-membership church merge with them that was declining and no longer self-sustaining. Within three years we had grown to a membership in the high 300s. averaging 300 people in worship in two services. We had run out of parking and worship space. The church sat on one acre of land. We had small groups meeting everywhere, including storage closets. We received phone calls on Monday morning from our neighbors who complained about traffic and people blocking driveways, etc. It was an exciting time, but we needed more space. Another United Methodist Church just over a mile away had 500 members and was averaging about 200 people in worship with more parking, more facilities, and 14 acres of land. Their pastor was retiring in June of 1997 and the logic was that if these two churches could merge, they could move to the larger property and do new ministry together. Both church charge conferences voted to pursue the merger.

In June of 1997, I was appointed to this new two-point charge. It was the only two-point charge I served as a pastor until I became a bishop. We worked together on several projects that summer with combined nightly worship services, and we shared our resources. A task force was announced representing both churches to negotiate the merger details which included staff, property, finances, and church leadership. This group worked hard and as we moved into August, there were rumblings of why this merger was wrong. Some members from both churches did not want it. In fact, they formed a group consisting of people from both churches to fight to end the process and call a vote. "Let's vote and get this decided," they declared. Straw polls were taken, and some people were actively working to defeat a potential merger while others worked to

pass it. The call to vote now became louder, and people were showing the worst of themselves. Does any of this sound familiar?!

One day, my daughter, who was in the 7th grade and very active in the youth group at that time, asked my wife, “Why don’t people like my dad?” That deeply hurt.

On September 21, 1997, we voted. The pressure to vote was overwhelming, and I regretfully gave in. “At least this part will be over,” or so I thought. What I learned that day was that it was only the beginning. The two churches held the votes at the same time, and four district superintendents oversaw the process. The thinking was that both groups would not know how the other had voted before their vote.

These two churches showed up to vote as both churches were full and the membership was represented. That night I learned first-hand what power and control were all about. Both churches had to pass the resolution to merge for it to happen. Only a simple majority was needed to move ahead. At the first church the vote failed 60% to 40%. At the second church it failed by **one vote**.

It wasn’t the fact that the vote to merge failed that upset me that night, it was what I witnessed from people. People stood and said so many harmful things about others. People who had not been in church for years showed up because someone told them to come and vote no and “save their church.” Sadly, many of these persons who came and voted did not show up the following Sunday, or the next, or the next. They brought one woman in on a gurney from the care facility to vote NO and promised her a McDonald’s hamburger on the way back to the care facility. One man was bragging that his son who had come and voted saved their church.

I could go on, yet I think you know the story. Perhaps it hits too close to home. The aftermath of that September night was tough. Some people were dancing in the parking lot, others were arguing with each other, while many were just overcome with emotion and grief of what they were witnessing. When I finally locked the second church up and headed to the parsonage, it was late in the evening. At that moment, I just wanted to be alone. I had told my family after they voted to go home. I didn’t want them to be exposed to what I knew was coming. When I arrived at the parsonage, it was full of people from both churches who were upset and wanting to be supportive of me. The understanding from the district superintendent was if the merger vote failed, I would be moved and not pastor either church. All I knew in that moment was I was exhausted and had to get up the next morning and be the pastor to these two congregations. All of them! Sunday was coming.

Over the next nine months, I had to work hard to overcome my grief and pastor people. As we approached January, my Bishop ultimately decided that giving me a new appointment was the best thing for all involved. Both the churches that had voted no to merge have had their ups and downs. One of the churches went on to have some of their best years of ministry in their history. Today, they are filled with people fewer in number, one is still a two-point charge, but still doing ministry and proclaiming Jesus. Most of those who fought the merger have died. Sadly 12 of the people that were so vocal died in the following 9 months after the merger vote. I conducted all of their funerals at their request. I look back on that with awe of what God did in one of the most difficult times of my ministry and life.

What I learned is that everyone counts. I wanted a church merger to happen, but if it did pass in both churches, there would have been a lot of people hurt on the other side. It’s a real-life example of why I don’t like church voting. At times it is necessary, but we must work to heal and not hate; to love and not demonize; to forgive and not be bitter.

We are inflicting a lot of harm to each other with these disaffiliation votes. In many places when you vote you are not ending the division, you are only beginning a cyclical process. It will take two or three

generations to move past some of what is being done right now in our churches. Some people will leave, others will leave over time, and new people will come. The sad part is that some will leave church altogether and never return. In the year to come, data will reveal how many of these churches who disaffiliated end up closing.

In later years, God has spoken these words into my soul many times about 1997, “If you had been bold about not voting and waited until a year or two with these two congregations working together, it would have been revealed to more people of what the next steps were.” I believe that so much in hindsight. Yet the cry to, “Vote, let’s vote, let’s get this over with,” ruled the day.

Hear my heart in why I am asking all of us to wait: I feel we need to wait on the Lord. If you feel differently, please remember that all voices are relevant in this discussion!

“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

- Isaiah 40:31

In Christ,

Bishop David Graves

This is the third article in a series from Bishop Graves. The next and final article in this series will focus on how God does God’s best work in our messiness.



The 2023 Appointment-making Timeline

A Word from Bishop Graves

Colleagues and friends,

Currently the Cabinet, pastors, staff-parish relations committees, and churches are working on the upcoming appointment year which runs July 2023 to June 2024. I have found that Cabinet transparency is vital in building trust. To inform you of our process, but most importantly to ask for your prayers, I want to share the following.

The Cabinet, consisting of the six district superintendents, Dr. Jay Harris, and myself, will be working to make appointments between now and [Annual Conference, scheduled for June 4-6](#) in Tifton, Ga.

There are many factors that go into this process: retirements, appointments open due to the death of a pastor, pastors leaving our annual conference, local church needs and concerns, pastors’ needs and concerns, and family considerations, to name a few. The combination of these circumstances leads to many emotions. Our United Methodist appointment process is like no other mainline denomination.

What I have come to learn and have experienced is that the Holy Spirit is in this process. As unusual as it may seem, I have been so blessed by my appointment-making time both as a district superintendent and as a bishop. It is sacred work, and the South Georgia Conference has a Godly Cabinet that makes our work deep and rich. Please pray for us!

To help guide your time of prayer, let me share how we will complete our work:

February 9-10: The Cabinet begins to make some appointment projections even though they may not be communicated out of the Cabinet immediately. For the past several years, we have used a helpful online appointment system/tool that has streamlined the process. As consultations take place, the district superintendent marks each pastor as “remain,” “must move,” “should move,” “could move,” or “retiring.” Approximately 75-80% of pastors will be marked “remain.”

February 23-24: Appointment making continues.

March 8-10: The Cabinet projects most of the appointments during these days.

Clergy and SPR Committees will begin to be informed of the appointments affecting them when it is appropriate. At the same time, they will be notified when they can share the information with the congregation. Once the congregation has been informed, the information can be shared with others. Please note: Because changes sometimes occur after the projection of an appointment, the only public release of the appointments will be at the conclusion of the 2023 Annual Conference Session.

March 28-29: The Cabinet meets to review all projected appointments and make any necessary adjustments.

March 29 - June 4: The Cabinet continues to work at filling part-time appointments and other situations that might arise as pastoral introductions are made.

TBA: All pastors who are moving or beginning a new appointment are required to attend a Moving Pastors Workshop, the details of which will be released soon. This workshop provides helpful information so all may have a successful start. Pastors receiving a new appointment will be contacted by the superintendent of the district they will be serving with additional details, including the location.

From June to September, churches receiving a new pastor will be invited to participate in a process called on-boarding to help the new pastor move into his/her new appointment. More information will be forthcoming.

As you see, the appointment process is the most important work we do as a Cabinet, and one that I want to live into God’s will. I feel it is important to be transparent to all our clergy and congregations. Please be mindful that as the bishop for both the Alabama-West Florida and South Georgia Conferences, I have two cabinets and two appointment processes to complete during the next three months.

I need and appreciate your prayers.

In Christ,

Bishop David Graves



2023 Georgia Pastors School set for July 17-20

Georgia Pastors School is set for July 17-20, 2023, at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island. This spiritual formation event for pastors will feature Rev. Juanita Rasmus, co-pastor of St. John’s United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, and Johnny Sears from The Upper Room as this year’s teachers.

Rasmus is a preacher, transformational coach, author, and speaker with a passion for coaching people to live their most expansive lives. She travels speaking on spirituality and the transformational lessons she learned after a life-altering major depressive episode. Rasmus’ memoir chronicling her dark night of the soul moment titled, LEARNING TO BE: Finding Your Center after the Bottom Falls Out. Additionally, she released Forty Days on Being a One (Enneagram Daily Reflections).

Sears is the Director of the Academy for Spiritual Formation at The Upper Room, an international ministry that offers experiences in contemplative community and emphasizes an integrated spirituality of body, mind, and spirit. His personal search for a deeper connection to God carried him on a pilgrimage into the world of contemplative prayer and spiritual formation that eventually led him to leave his job in the corporate world to lead The Academy. His ministry is driven by a deep passion to help people awaken to and embrace the contemplative life for their own transformation and, ultimately, for the healing of the world.

Bishop Robin Dease, episcopal leader of the North Georgia Annual Conference, and Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader from the South Georgia Annual Conference, will be the preachers for the school. Rev. Tony Crosby and Ms. Angie Carr will lead the music.

“Pastors School is an opportunity for renewal, restoration and spiritual formation,” said Rev. Danita Poston Knowles, Dean of the Georgia Pastors School. “It is time for us as pastors to take care of ourselves spiritually and to renew our souls and bodies in order to dynamically lead our flocks. Don’t miss this opportunity!”

CEUs are available. One CEU is earned by attendance. An additional one and one-half units will be awarded for reading and writing a report on any book from the approved list.

To register and for more information, visit www.georgiapastorsschool.org. Register for housing at www.epworthbythesea.org. For questions, please contact Rev. Knowles, Dean of the Georgia Pastors School, at danitaknowles52@gmail.com.



GCFA launches new group ruling website

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) delegates some of its responsibility to central organizations to streamline the process for organizations to be recognized as tax-exempt organizations under the 501(c)(3) tax code. In order to help local churches with tax-exempt status, the General Council and Finance (GCFA) recently launched a new Group Ruling website. Although the functionality of the site remains, it now has more features and coordinates with GCFA’s Chronicles. You can now request to be on the IRS database (The Exempt Organizations Business Master File) and have the answers to the most common group ruling questions and tax related resources easily. Visit the new website at www.umgroupruling.org.



February 12 Lesson: Reminder of the Call

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 3: God’s Call

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 12, 2023

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:3-14

Key Verse

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13)

Lesson Aim

- To introduce the idea of reminders and confirmations of the call of God to be a Christ follower
- To acquaint ourselves with Paul and Timothy so we can make connections to Timothy's situation
- To explore the roots of our faith, God's prevenient grace, and the need to claim our faith
- To examine the laying on of hands as a way to confirm faith
- To learn the importance of remembering when faith began in order to rekindle one's faith
- To reflect on self-doubt and to recall God's promise to guard the investment of our lives in faith
- To explore what it means to hold on to sound teaching
- To claim your ministry as a Christian

Reminders and Confirmation

The title for our lesson is "Reminder of the Call." Think about situations in which you need reminders of the call to keep going as a Christ follower. Another title that this lesson could be given is "Confirmation of the Call." Just as we need reminders of the call, we also need confirmations. Think of times when something tentative in your life or in your faith was made more firm. Think of times later down the road when you have looked back on those confirming experiences. Confirmations and reminders go hand in hand. These experiences are absolutely vital to sustaining faith and growing in faith.

An illustration I want to visit throughout this lesson is the occasion when people publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ before the church. In some traditions, we call this experience "confirmation." Confirmation is symbolized by the laying on of hands. As a pastor, I have been able to witness many times both young people and adults participate in this familiar ritual in the life of the church. I have observed how these moments have provided vital touchstones for those whose faith was being confirmed. Looking back on the public parts of these experiences reminds me of the many back stories and conversations that led to the professions of faith and the laying on of hands in these worship services. Some of my favorite memories in ministry are the occasions where I have shared in these conversations and subsequent celebrations. I will refer to the experience of confirmation as we go through this lesson. Hopefully, doing this will help you connect with similar experiences in your own life and the life of your church.

What experience(s) do you look back on where your salvation was confirmed? What was it about the experience that did this for you? How have experiences like these served as reminders to you of the call to be a Christ follower? When have you been at a low point in your faith walk, and then some reminder made a difference and you got back on track?

Next, we're going to dig into our scripture. Prepare to look deeply for the scripture's insights into our walk of faith.

A Pastor Writes to His Spiritual Son

This epistle is a pastoral letter written by the apostle Paul to a young man named Timothy. This letter is the second of two letters that have been preserved and made part of the New Testament. In both letters, Paul refers to Timothy as his child in the faith—his spiritual son. The 3rd and 4th verses help set the tone and purpose of the letter.

³ I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

From these verses we understand that Paul was praying for Timothy non-stop. Paul remembered Timothy's tears the last time they were together. We don't really know exactly what those tears were about, but you get the impression that Timothy's spiritual state was somewhat fragile. Paul remembered Timothy's tears and a part of him probably regretted having to leave Timothy in his vulnerable condition. Paul felt the physical distance between them and longed to reunite with Timothy in the hopes that those tears could be replaced by the joy of their reunion.

Timothy was not just Paul's child in the faith, but also a fellow pastor. The role of pastor was something Timothy and Paul shared in common. Paul knew firsthand some of what he was going through. Paul knew the responsibility that Timothy was carrying on his shoulders. Paul, however, was definitely the more experienced pastor, and Timothy still had a lot to learn.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul said, "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Timothy 4:12a). Timothy was a young adult, and apparently there were some in the church who held his young age against him in some way. I still remember being a pastor in my mid-20's. I was not only new to the role of pastor, I was also a newcomer to adulthood with a young wife. We both worked full-time, and we had a one-year-old. I like that Paul encouraged Timothy to embrace his youth as an asset, and not necessarily as a liability. Even though Timothy was young, Paul knew that he could still "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12b). Nevertheless, Timothy was unsure of himself.

How will Paul speak into Timothy's life? What wisdom will he have to share? Perhaps the most urgent question is, "Where will Paul begin?"

How have you been in Timothy's situation before in your life? How would you describe your own situation? Did someone speak into your situation and encourage you? How did they do it?

The Roots of Timothy's Faith

⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

Paul began by reminding Timothy of his own sincere faith. Whatever doubts that Timothy might have had about being a young pastor, he possessed a sincere faith that was perhaps beyond his years. His faith had deep roots in the loving and steady witness of a believing grandmother and mother. Also, in the absence of a believing father, God had made a special provision for Timothy by giving him a mentor like Paul. These were the ones who nurtured Timothy in the faith. The faith had been modeled for Timothy, and now Paul was sure that the same deep faith lived in Timothy.

There are times when we need to remember the people who mothered and fathered us in the faith—the people who mentored and taught us—whether they are blood related or not. We need to remember them not only because the memory of their example resides in us and informs us, but also because it is a reminder of the prevenient grace of God.

Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before our salvation. It is God's work, which precedes our acceptance of Jesus as our Lord. It is the loving influence of God working in our lives to lead us to the point where we come to know the Lord. God works in our hearts through the Holy Spirit to do this, and God uses the people around us and the church to witness to us. God used Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother, to lead Timothy to faith in Christ. Being reminded of this experience would help Timothy remember that God began loving Timothy even before Timothy was aware of God.

Everyone's experience of God's prevenient grace is different, but know that God began working in you to bring you to faith even before you were aware of God. Think how God began to make you aware of him and his love for you. God chose us before we chose him. God claimed us before we claimed him. Sometimes we waver in our faith, but God never wavers. We are tethered to God not by our own strength, but by God's strength. God never lets go of us.

Paul reminded Timothy not only of the example of his grandmother's faith and mother's faith, but also of their love and, most importantly, God's love working through them. It was also important for Timothy to remember how he had claimed that faith for himself.

Your relationship with God must be your own. Your parents and grandparents can't believe for you. There's a saying that there are no grandchildren of God, only children of God. In other words, you can't be one generation removed from God and live out your relationship with God through your parents. Even if you have the godliest parents in the world, they can't have a vital relationship with God for you. God wants a first-hand relationship with you, not a second hand. Paul reassured Timothy that his grandmother's faith and mother's faith had found a home in Timothy himself.

What are the roots of your faith? Who were your spiritual influences? How did God work in your life and your experiences to bring you to faith? When did you claim your faith? Was there a special moment or do things happen more gradually for you?

The Need to Remember When Faith Began in Order to Rekindle our Faith

⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

The reason that Paul was reminding Timothy of the roots of his faith was because the gift of faith that Timothy possessed needed rekindling. The embers of Timothy's faith were cooling and needed to be fanned into flame once again. Other versions of this verse talking about the need to "stir up" the gift of God within us.

An illustration that speaks to people in my part of the country has to do with sweet iced tea. If you like sweet iced tea, you know that it's best to sweeten it when you brew it, while it is still hot. Sometimes, however, you find yourself in a restaurant in a location too far north or west where they serve only unsweetened iced tea. They have packets of sugar or sweetener on the table. Have you ever seen someone put loads and loads of sugar or sweetener in their glass and still be dissatisfied with its sweetness? You see the mound of sugar settled in the bottom of the glass. You know the problem. They do not need more sugar. They need to stir up the sugar or sweetener they already have in the bottom of the glass.

The illustration works in relation to faith. Sometimes it is better not to think of needing more faith, but stirring up the faith we already have. If you like the image of fire better, sometimes the fire in your grill doesn't need more lighter fluid. The coals just need to be fanned into flame. Save your lighter fluid.

In relation to the rekindling of Timothy's faith, Paul reminded Timothy of an earlier experience where he had laid his hands on Timothy. The laying on of hands is a symbol used since biblical times to signify the conferring of a gift and the reception of a gift. This symbol is used in healing, ordination, confirmation, consecrating, commissioning, and in conjunction with baptism. In each of these rituals, a gift is being given and received.

On an earlier occasion, Paul had laid his hands on Timothy in a ceremony. Was it confirming the gift of salvation or Timothy's ordination? The laying on of hands is used in both situations. After someone is baptized, it is appropriate to lay hands on him or her to symbolize the reception of God's gift of grace. When someone is ordained, hands are laid upon the person to signify the gift of God's call and the response to that call. (See 1 Timothy 4:14, Acts 6:6 & 13:3.)

In the case where someone was baptized as an infant, or baptized at any age too young to make a decision for one's self, the laying on hands is used later in the person's life in the act of confirmation. This action occurs when the person accepts for himself or herself the gift of salvation by professing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The person may be a teenager at the time or an adult. The laying on of hands symbolizes the marking of the seal of the Holy Spirit which is the mark of assurance that we have been saved. Such acts in the life of a person are meant to serve as reminders of what occurred in our lives at the time so that we can return to those times in our minds and hearts when our faith needs reaffirming. Paul was reminding Timothy of God's gift that he received. Paul was saying that God's gift was sufficient at the time and for all time. Timothy needed to rekindle that gift already granted to him.

Why did Timothy need to rekindle this gift? Evidently, Timothy had been struggling with self-doubt. It manifested itself as a spirit of cowardice or timidity. I imagine Paul's use of these words did not come as a surprise to Timothy. I imagine these words simply summing up for Timothy what he had been saying to Paul about himself. Self-doubt is a serious matter nevertheless. God does not want us to operate out of a spirit of fear, self-doubt, cowardice, or timidity. God wants us to minister out of a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Ministry requires inner strength. To love others through our ministry makes us vulnerable because we never know how that love will be received. There is always a fear that our ministry will be rejected. Still, we love. Love requires strength and courage. Love and ministry require self-discipline. We discipline ourselves to get up each day and enter the struggles of others to bring the healing and redeeming ministry of Christ.

Has there ever been a time when your faith needed rekindling or stirring up? What was going on at the time? Has someone ever reminded you to rekindle your own faith? Has someone ever reminded you of the time when faith began for you—when you said “yes” to the Lord? Is there a time when a pastor or members of the church laid hands on you in a ceremony? Was there some other experience that had the same confirming effect being described in the ritual of confirmation?

When Times of Self-Doubt Come

⁸ Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, in the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Why would Timothy be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord? Let us first consider the rest of the sentence. Why would Timothy be ashamed of Paul, the Lord's prisoner? Paul was often imprisoned because

the sharing of his faith in Christ was seen by the authorities as disturbing the peace and public order. Paul was often persecuted. Later in his letter, Paul will bring to Timothy's remembrance Paul's persecutions, sufferings, and things that happened to him in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. Paul wrote, "What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

The world implied in so many ways that to serve Jesus Christ was a losing proposition and even dangerous. What Timothy saw happening to his mentor on a regular basis would probably cause most people to doubt whether or not they could live out this calling. Paul said however, "Join with me in suffering for the gospel." Paul reminded him that they did not do this ministry on their own power after all, but "in the power of God." God had saved them and called them with a holy calling.

Paul reminded Timothy that their calling was not something they had earned or deserved. It was not because they were qualified necessarily. There is a saying that God does not call the qualified but qualifies the called. God called Paul and Timothy "according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." The calling that God places on our lives is a calling that is much older than we are. Even Jesus himself stepped onto the world's stage with the story of redemption already in progress. The center of God's story of redemption was "revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

¹¹ For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹² and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

It strengthens us and our response to God's call to remember that the call upon our lives is larger than we are, because the gospel we share is larger than we are. When we remember this, we can endure the low times, the hard times, the rejections, the resistance, and the times when we are let down by our fellow believers when they act more like the world than the Body of Christ.

Despite occasional feelings of failure, we do not have to feel defeated or ashamed, for we know the one we serve. We have put our trust in Christ. We have entrusted him with no less than our lives. We believe that Christ will guard this investment we have made. Christ will honor it because of who he is. Christ is more than able and more than willing to safeguard the investment of our lives. There will be a day in the future when Christ will reward us for our investment. That knowledge gives us joy in the present and the strength to serve. Christ is counting on us, and we are counting on Christ.

When has self-doubt entered your life? Have you ever been reluctant to let others know that you are a Christian? Do you need more boldness? Do you believe that God will guard the investment you make of your life?

The Importance of Holding on to Sound Teaching

¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Notice the dual focus of what Paul is saying. In verse 12, the focus is on what we have entrusted to God. In verse 14, the focus is on what God has entrusted to us. In verse 12, Paul says that we can count on God to guard what we have entrusted to him. In verse 14, Paul is saying that we too have an active role to play to guard the good treasure entrusted to us. The Holy Spirit is living in us to help us guard this treasure. Guarding this treasure means holding to the standard of sound teaching that we have received. We hold on to

this sound teaching in the faith and love that is wrapped up in our relationship to Jesus Christ. This is what it means to keep the faith.

There is an old joke about three pastors who were friends whose churches were located close together in the same town. They each had a problem with an infestation of bats in the attics of their churches. They complained about the bats and vowed to try to do something about them and report back what they did. The first pastor to do something shared that she had set up traps. She trapped the bats and took them to the outskirts of town, but the bats beat her back to the church and went back into the attic. The second pastor went into the attic with a shotgun. He scared the bats away, but it wasn't long before the bats came back into the attic. The damage he did in the attic did not please the Church Trustees. The third pastor said that he had successfully dealt with the bats. The other pastors asked, "How did you get rid of the bats?" He said, "I baptized and confirmed them, and they haven't been back to church since."

That story always makes me chuckle, but the joke only works because there have been too many people who have made a public commitment to Christ and then gone about their lives as if nothing changed. That is a sad truth.

We have been focusing on the confirmations and reminders that we need to sustain the call to follow Christ over the long haul. We must rely on sound teaching about how to live the life of love and faith as a Christ follower.

I think of people who made their decision to become a Christian as the result of an emotionally charged invitation to salvation that focused too much on avoiding hell or the fear of being left behind in the rapture. What they were accepting amounted to an insurance policy rather than an invitation to become a lifelong follower of Christ. Their decision was motivated by fear instead of love for Christ. They became satisfied with having a brief transaction that assured them of their future when they died rather than accepting a life of living *for* Christ and *in* Christ daily for the rest of their lives on earth.

Sound teaching is absolutely necessary for the life of faith. Our decision to follow Christ should be informed by sound teaching. The need for sound teaching does not end when we make our decision. It must continue because there is so much life to be lived after we begin living for Christ. Accepting Christ means accepting him as both Savior and Lord. Christ wants to be the Lord of our lives from the time we first give our lives over to him. The blessings of salvation are not reserved for when we die. The blessings of salvation are to be experienced every day that we follow Christ as our Lord.

An important part of every confirmation experience is the place given to sound teaching. This is why churches have confirmation. Even here, care must be given to the decision a person is making. Faith is not just believing certain beliefs. It is not just about giving mental assent to a set of doctrines. Sound teaching informs a life of faith. As a pastor, I always let the confirmands attending confirmation classes know that at the end of their experience they would be given an opportunity to give their lives to Christ. The decision had to be their decision, not their parents. If they were not ready, it would be better for them to wait than just to follow the herd or go through the motions to please their parents. This is why churches often pair the confirmands one-on-one with mentors, so they can interact with someone who can model the faith before them. The confirmands can ask their mentors questions.

Sound teaching involves learning the basic Christian story contained in the Old and New Testaments. It involves believing that central story to be true and to be relevant. This learning continues throughout our lives. Sound teaching is also about how we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, including how we develop a life of prayer, how we study the Bible, and how we participate in the life of the Church through worship, discipleship training, Holy Communion, giving, service, and witness.

This is what it means to hold onto sound teaching. This is how we guard the good treasure entrusted to us. This is a life of faith and love. As we imagine this life unfolding, we begin to get a good look at how we live this life with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our ever-present companion and guide. The Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. The Holy Spirit continually teaches us as we gain insights into scripture, into the nature of God, into prayer, into our human relationships, and into the way we are called to share our faith with others. The laying on of hands at confirmation is not only meant to confirm a person's commitment to God and God's commitment to them, but it is also meant to symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead the believer in a life of faith.

One thing I share with young people and adults as I lay my hands on them in the act of confirmation is that their confirmation is also their "ordination" as they claim the ministry of the laity. The ministry of the church is not confined to the ministry of the ordained clergy. Those who are ordained to the ministry of the clergy are commissioned to lead all of God's people in the ministry that belongs to clergy and laity alike. All believers are to serve and give witness to their faith. The Holy Spirit is the One who enables believers to find and claim their ministry, equips them with the gifts that will shape what their ministry is to be, and empowers them to do more than they could do on their own power.

How are you guarding the good treasure of your faith entrusted to you by God? How are you holding on to sound teaching? Do you need to step up your routines and holy habits to grow in the grace and knowledge of your Savior Jesus Christ? If you are a lay person, are you living out your "ordination" into the ministry of the laity? Are you in tune with the Holy Spirit working in your life?

Remember that every time you celebrate the Lord's Supper is a time to recall the story of your faith and to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.

Prayer

Gracious Lord, You have given us the Church, the Body of Christ, to give us a place and a people to live out our faith. Help us recall the roots of our faith, appreciate the sufficiency of your gift of salvation, and sense the Holy Spirit working in our lives, that we may rekindle the fire of our faith and be bold in our living, our witness, and serving, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever more. Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Ministerial Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



For Sure, A Great Need

by Hal Brady

One of the greatest needs of our time and all time is "kindness." Imagine how different everything would be if kindness prevailed. I started thinking about this when I saw a meaningful definition and explanation of kindness. Initially, though, I was reminded of this when I remembered three signs I saw on a trip to Lake Junaluska, North Carolina a few years back.

The first sign was on a painted plate where we (family) were staying. It read, "Be Kind or Leave." Nothing confusing about that!

The second sign was seen on a walkway around the lake. The sign said, “One Way Bridge, Please Be Courteous.” Not difficult to understand!

The third sign was seen in a candy store. It stated, “Be kind to Your Children, They Pick Your Nursing Home.” Humorous but not quite as entertaining as the others.

As you know, all those signs point to the issue of being kind and courteous toward others – a message desperately needed to be heard and practiced both in the church and society.

In church, as congregations face major implications concerning social issues, sometimes discernment leads to determining directions of a congregation’s future and may result in a vote. The important thing to remember is that this can lead to winners and losers and may result in frustration and hard feelings. However, strong convictions should never crush kindness. As the scripture states, “Love is kind.” And it is, and is intended to be.

In society! I was in a meeting the other day with a group of ministers. One well respected retired minister said that in his lifetime he had never seen things so worrisome as he is seeing today. I’m sure that minister is speaking for a number of us. The polarization, separation, and disrespect of others is obvious – in the political discord and double-speak, the disrespect of law officers and the law itself, the out of control violence, the victimization of criminals, the drug traffic and cartels, the disappearance of moral standards and the list goes on and on. Kindness is the antidote.

What got me into the subject was this liberating sentence by Samuel Johnson, “Kindness is in our power, fondness is not.” In other words, kindness is not felt but willed. Kindness is not passion or affection or friendship, but an attitude of unshakable and unwavering goodwill to others, whether we like them or not.

Just a few additional thoughts about kindness:

1. Kindness is inclusive.
2. Kindness is a choice we make.
3. Kindness takes a lot of time.
4. Kindness is of Divine origin.

So why are we to be kind? First and foremost, we are to be kind because of God’s special kindness to us. As Paul put it, “For by grace (God’s kindness) you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8).

Then, secondly, we are to be kind because our kindness has something to do with the salvation and well-being of others and society.

Love is kind!

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com)



Solid Financial Advice

**JOHN WESLEY MOMENTS
DAVE HANSON**

If you asked John Wesley's advice in handling your money, one of the first things he would advise you would be to make a will. He told one friend, "Go make a will. Do it now, before you go to bed. With no will your goods will be scattered."

Do you have a will?

The Rev. Dave Hanson is a retired pastor and John Wesley scholar.

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Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

Check out the [dates & registration for the 2023 classes](#).

Confirmation Retreat – March 3-5

The 2023 South Georgia Conference Confirmation retreat will take place March 3-5 at Epworth By The Sea. Designed for students in the fifth grade and above, the "Join the Journey" Confirmation Retreat will provide churches of ALL sizes an opportunity to connect with others through worship, study, and fellowship. Bishop Graves will be joining us to kick off the event! For more information, [click here](#).

Clergy Ethics Training – March 16, April 11, April 20

Every three years, according to the South Georgia Conference Sexual Ethics policy, persons serving under appointment by the bishop (clergy, local pastors, extension ministers, appointed lay speakers) are required to attend a Sexual Ethics Workshop. Under the guidance of the Office of Ministerial Services, the South Georgia Conference will offer Clergy Ethics trainings in March and April 2023. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Clergy Spouses Retreat – March 17-19

The 2023 Clergy Spouses retreat is set for March 17-19 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Meeting under the theme "Let's Be Real: Being Authentic as Clergy Spouses," this weekend promises to be a great time together worshipping, learning, sharing, and having fun. Rev. Laurel Griffith, Associate Pastor at Albany First UMC, will be the speaker. Contact Cindy Rollins, retreat chair, at 706-326-4862 if you have any questions. For more information and to register, visit www.sgaumc.org/clergyspouses.

United Women in Faith Spiritual Growth Retreat – March 24-26

The 2023 United Women in Faith Spiritual Growth Retreat is set for March 24-25 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. This will be a weekend of worship, growth, connection, and fun. Meeting under the theme "Fully Rely on God," this year's retreat features speaker Sue Owens. For more information and to register, visit www.sgaumc.org/umw.

ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety Training – March 25

An ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety Training is set for Saturday, March 25, 2023. The training will take place at Pierce Chapel UMC (5122 Pierce Chapel Road, Midland GA 31820). The basic ERT class will begin at 8am with the chainsaw safety to follow. Lunch is included. This training is a collaborative effort of the United Methodist Committee on Relief and United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. Mac Woodridge from Pierce Chapel will serve as the host. [Register now](#) For more information, contact Mac Woodridge at macdaddy1977@gmail.com or Glenn Martin, Northwest District Coordinator, at Gmartin0704@gmail.com or 912-312-6341.

Eagles Fish Fry – April 13

The South Georgia Conference Eagles After-Easter Fish Fry is set for April 13, 2023, at 12:00 noon at McRae UMC in McRae, Ga. All retired pastors and spouses are invited to attend. The McRae United Methodist Men will cook fish, grits, fries, hush puppies, and provide the tea. Attendees are asked to bring salads, vegetables, and desserts. To RSVP or if you have any questions, please email me Rev. David Tart, Eagles President, at revdtart@bellsouth.net.

Called Annual Conference Session – May 21

A special called session of the annual conference has been set for Sunday, May 21, 2023. The meeting will begin at 4 pm using the Zoom Webinar platform in conjunction with an online voting system. The sole purpose of the special called session of the Annual Conference is to complete the process of ratifying the current requests for disaffiliation of local churches who have met the requirements outlined in ¶2553 of the Book of Discipline and who have met the published South Georgia Conference deadlines. [Click here for more information.](#)

Annual Conference Session – June 4-6

The 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference session will be held Sunday, June 4, 2023, through Tuesday, June 6, 2023. The conference theme will be: *When They Prayed*, based on Act 4:31. [Click here for full Annual Conference details.](#)

2023 Summer Camps

Don't let your kids miss out on this summer's Camp Connect - the South Georgia Conference Camping Ministry at Epworth By The Sea. These week-long residential camps are offered for elementary, middle and high school students in June and July. For more information, [click here.](#)

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Resource Roundup – February 2023

29 ways you can participate in Black History Month

Black History Month is an opportunity for all of us to celebrate and reflect upon the remarkable contributions African Americans have made to American history. No matter who we are or what our background is, Black history is a part of our history. Through its R2 Hub, The General Commission on Religion and Race has provided 29 unique ways to participate in Black History Month and make a difference in your community. [Learn more](#)

Find 2023 Lenten worship resources

Want to explore Lent with your congregation but need some resources to get you started? Discipleship Ministries has compiled a fantastic worship series complete with preaching notes, graphics, youth lessons, suggested hymns and more. Discover how Lent can be the perfect time to journey inward and move outward as you learn to share Christ with the world. [Learn more](#)

Local church grants available for outreach

The Foundation for Evangelism has opened the 2023 Equipping the Local Church grant cycle. A total of \$350,000 is available for grants of \$5,000 or \$10,000 to small and medium-size congregations, or clusters of churches working together, in a Wesleyan-tradition denomination. [Learn more](#)

Get that video on your website

When exporting videos for the web, the trick is to reduce the file size without compromising the quality. In this tutorial by UM Communications, discover the best way to optimize videos that you can upload to your website and make them play in the most efficient way possible. [Learn more](#)

The church website still matters!

It is important to regularly review your church's website and ensure that it offers what viewers want and expect. Following a few basic guidelines will help you get the most out of your site and you can increase your ability to spread God's love and grace in your community. [Update your website today](#)

The top 10 free services your church may be missing

You can't beat free. Are you taking advantage of the pro-level services and tools from United Methodist Communications to reach out into your community? This list is a result of a conversation and request from a group of them. [Learn more](#)



Obituary: Mrs. Day Watson

Day Watson, widow of Rev. Hamp Watson, Jr., passed away Saturday, January 28, 2023. The funeral service will be Saturday, February 4, 2023, at 1 pm at H.M Patterson and Son Funeral Home (4550 Peachtree Road, NE, Atlanta, GA 30319).



Obituary: Rev. Grady Estes Vance

Grady Estes Vance 74, went home to be with his Lord on January 24, 2023. He was born in Atlanta, GA on January 12, 1949 to the late George and Kathleen Vance. Grady served proudly in the United States Marine Corp for 6 years. He was a Viet Nam Veteran and a true patriot who loved God and country. He graduated from Emory University with a Masters in Divinity and served in The United Methodist Church for 30 years. He was an avid hunter, fisherman and enjoyed playing golf and bowling. Grady had a very contagious laugh and possessed the gift of being loud. His hugs were big and memorable. Most of all he loved spending time with his family and friends.

Visitation will be on Monday, January 30, 2023 at Vining Ivy Hill Chapel from 4 to 6 PM. There will be a ceremony and interment at Georgia Veteran Memorial Cemetery on February 1, 2023 at 11 AM.

Grady is survived by his loving wife Dianne Vance sons Grady Estes Vance II (Becky), Richard John Vance (Nicole), daughter Melanie Vance Register, grandchildren Ashley Dianne Houston (Randall), Megan Elizabeth Register, William Alexander Register, Lexis Victoria Vance, Noah Isaac McBride, Jesse Thomas McBride, brothers George Richard Vance, Doug Leon Vance and numerous nieces and nephews.

In lieu of flowers: Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Matt10:8—Let your light shine and love always.



Obituary: Mrs. Brenda France

Brenda France, wife of [Jesse France](#) (Sikes Chapel – Northeast District), passed away Friday, February 3, 2023.

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Retired Clergy Birthdays – February 2023

2/01 – Rodney Body: 1205 North Palm Dr.; Plant City, FL 33563
2/03 – Eugene Barlow: 605 Victoria Circle; Warner Robins, GA 31088
2/03 – David Barton: PO Box 497; Talbotton, GA 31827
2/03 – Gary Page: 136 Altamaha School Rd.; Baxley, GA 31513
2/04 – John Bagwell: 5300 Zebulon Rd., Apt. 2226; Macon, GA 31210
2/06 – Robert Buckles: 5429 Sirius Dr. Unit 107; Wilmington, NC 28405
2/06 – Robert McDaniel: 1065 Dr. Deryl Hart Rd.; Buena Vista, GA 31803
2/07 – Bill Brown: 109 Woodlawn Dr.; Statesboro, GA 30458
2/09 – John O’Connor: 247 Jim Nash Ct. NW; Lilburn, GA 30047
2/10 – Paul Best: PO Box 747; Social Circle, GA 30025
2/10 – Bill Reinheld: 102 Arthur J. Moore Dr.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
2/10 – Tommy Veal: 340 Pine Hill Rd.; Dublin, GA 31021
2/12 – Tim Steffen: 4383 Old Harrodsburg Rd., Suite 130; Lexington, KY 40513
2/14 – Jim Jensen: 4323 15th St., East Beach; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
2/15 – Mark Carter: 903 Upper River Rd., Americus, GA 31709
2/16 – Bill Lee: 480 Bostwick Circle; Vidalia, GA 30474
2/16 – David Griffin: 1561 Griffin Rd.; Baxley, GA 31513
2/19 – Dennis Lanning: PO Box 98; Byromville, GA 31007
2/19 – Don Proctor: 106 Ingham St.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
2/20 – C.G. Haugabook, Jr.: 215 Walters St.; Plains, GA 31780
2/20 – Lee Pulliam: 16702 Olliffstown; Metter, GA 30439
2/21 – Eddie Conaway: PO Box 2612; New Britain, CT 06053
2/21 – Jim Duvall: 10502 Regal View Loop; Clermont, FL 34711
2/22 – Wayne DeFore: 1257 Moore Haven Circle; Townsend, GA 31331
2/25 – Wesley Jones: 6191 Peake Rd.; Macon, GA 31220
2/27 – Jim Osborn: 310 Slash Pine Dr.; Broxton, GA 31519
2/27 – Donald Sparks: PO Box 407; Portal, GA 30450

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Scripture Readings – February 7 edition

February 12

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A

- [Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)
- [Psalm 119:1-8](#)
- [1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#)
- [Matthew 5:21-37](#)

February 19

Transfiguration Sunday, Year A

- [Exodus 24:12-18](#)
- [Psalm 99](#)

- 2 Peter 1:16-21
- Matthew 17:1-9

February 22

Ash Wednesday, Year A

- Isaiah 58:1-12
- Psalm 51:1-17
- 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
- Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21