

## **SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – FEBRUARY 20 EDITION**

### **Wrightsville First United Methodist Church is nurturing hearts, building legacies** *Church establishes Education Plan for Wesley and Henry Hagan*

By Kelly Roberson

Wrightsville First United Methodist Church stands as a beacon of love and faith in their community.

Rev. Dr. Mike Bankston, the senior pastor of Wrightsville First, shares a deeply rooted philosophy of shepherding children and youth with care and intentionality. For this church, children are not just the church's future; they are its present. Through intentional engagement, education, discipleship, worship, and inclusion in church life, Wrightsville First ensures that the children and youth of the congregation understand the significance of their faith and their place within the church community.

“I believe that when you are intentional in letting children and youth participate in the life of the church, the participation becomes a powerful connection to the church for the children and youth when they become adults,” said Dr. Bankston. “We believe that every child and youth should know the love of God, recognize their sacred worth, and cultivate a relationship with Christ.”

Janibeth Outlaw, the Children's/Youth Director at Wrightsville First, spearheads initiatives aimed at engaging youth and children both within the church and in the broader community. From Sunday School classes to outdoor adventures with Campfire Kids, the church provides opportunities for spiritual growth and connection with nature.

"Our aim is to show children the beauty of God's creation and help them understand its spiritual significance," explained Outlaw.

Betsy Garnto, the Preschool Director at Wrightsville First, also understands the importance of nurturing faith from a young age. Through the church's preschool program, children are not only educated academically but also immersed in a Christian atmosphere where they learn about prayer, the teachings of Jesus, and the importance of serving others.

"Our goal is to make a lasting impact on each child's life, instilling in them God's love that will endure throughout their lifetime," says Garnto.

The preschool serves as a gateway for families to become part of the church community, fostering connections and spreading the message of love and acceptance to all who enter its doors.

At the close of 2023, further demonstrating their love and commitment to children and youth, the congregation of Wrightsville First established a 529 Education Plan for Wesley and Henry Hagan.

Rev. Kirk Hagan and his wife, Robin, served Wrightsville First from June 2013 - June 2019. Wesley was four years old when the Hagans were appointed to Wrightsville First, and Henry was born in 2014, just a little over a year after their arrival. For six years, the Hagans were an integral part of the congregation and the community.

In the Fall of 2023, [Robin passed away at the age of 45](#) after a hard fought battle with cancer. The members of Wrightsville First felt the loss tremendously and knew they wanted to do something to honor her memory.

Building on the church's belief that every child deserves to feel valued and loved, it felt natural to do something for Wesley and Henry.

Joseph Sumner, a member of the congregation, recalls a moment of clarity amidst personal grief, driving him to rally support for the Hagan family.

The idea for creating an education fund came to Sumner the day after Robin's passing as he drove alone to his daughter's cross-country meet. Reflecting on his own children and the impact of Robin's death on Kirk and their two children, Sumner was moved to find a way to support them through the tragedy.

Sumner's belief in the importance of education, instilled in him by his grandfather who lived through the Great Depression, further fueled his dedication to creating the education fund. He views the fund as a way to provide Wesley and Henry with something that can never be taken away, ensuring that their mother's legacy lives on through their education.

Sumner recognized that the strength of the community lay in its people, and he wasted no time in rallying support. He contacted key individuals in Wrightsville, who all immediately offered their assistance and asked, "What can I do to help?" This outpouring of support demonstrated the community's deep care for the Hagan family and their willingness to come together in times of need.

"The story is not and should not be about me," explains Sumner. "It should be about Wrightsville, Georgia, and the community there that welcomed Kirk, Robin, Wesley, and Henry, delighted in their triumphs, and prayed for, stood with, and ultimately grieved with them after Robin died."

For Sumner and the Wrightsville community, the establishment of the education fund is a tangible expression of love and solidarity, ensuring that Wesley and Henry will have the support they need to pursue their dreams and carry forward their mother's legacy.

"The whole thing comes down to the love of a community for a pastor and good guy, his late wife, and their children," said Sumner.

*If you are interested in giving to the Education Fund, you can contact Wrightsville First UMC at [wrightsvillefirst@gmail.com](mailto:wrightsvillefirst@gmail.com) or [visit their website](#) to give online.*

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## **Adjusted Dates for the 2024 Annual Conference session announced**

The 2024 Annual Conference session dates have been adjusted. The conference, originally scheduled to begin on Sunday, June 2, and conclude on Wednesday, June 5, will now adjourn on Tuesday, June 4.

The decision to adjust the dates was made after careful consideration by Bishop David Graves and conference leadership.

"After reviewing the agenda for our time together, we do not feel that the half-day originally scheduled for June 5 is necessary," said Mrs. Meredyth Earnest, Conference Secretary. "Our recent norm has been to utilize a Sunday-Tuesday schedule in non-voting years, and we feel that this timeline still allows for adequate discussion of all matters before conference members."

The 2024 Annual Conference session will be held at the [UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center](#), in Tifton, Ga. Conference will begin on Sunday evening, June 2 with an opening worship service. It is now scheduled to conclude by 5:30 pm on Tuesday, June 4, with the fixing of appointments and sending forth service. The theme for this year’s Annual Conference is “One Matters” based on Luke 15. [The basic agenda can be viewed here.](#)

Conference members are advised to make any necessary adjustments to previously-made hotel reservations directly with the hotel.

“We look forward to a successful and meaningful conference and thank all participants for their active participation on behalf of their local churches,” said Earnest.

Full Annual Conference details can be found at [www.sgaumc.org/annualconference](http://www.sgaumc.org/annualconference).



### **Bishop Graves and Bishop Wallace-Padgett form task group for Episcopal transition**

Bishop David Graves and Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett have collaboratively established a task group to begin shaping the future of the United Methodist annual conferences in South Georgia, Alabama West-Florida, and North Alabama.

This forward-thinking initiative sets the stage for a comprehensive and strategic pre-work plan over the coming year to ensure a seamless transition for the assigned bishop, set to begin on September 1, 2024.

In January, the Southeastern Jurisdiction (SEJ) Committee on Episcopacy [announced a recommendation for new episcopal areas to take effect September 1, 2024](#). In the recommendation, South Georgia, Alabama West-Florida, and North Alabama Conferences would become one episcopal area served by one bishop. This recommendation must still be voted on by the SEJ delegates, who will meet July 10-12, 2024, at Lake Junaluska, NC. At that meeting, bishops will also be assigned by the SEJ Committee on Episcopacy to the areas that are approved by the delegates.

This is not a merger, explained Bishop Graves, who is currently serving the South Georgia and Alabama West-Florida conferences, and Bishop Wallace-Padgett, who is currently serving the North Alabama and Holston conferences; it is one episcopal area that will share one bishop. And, while the recommendation for these three conferences to be one episcopal area is not official until approval by delegates in July, the bishops indicate that they believe doing the pre-work now ensures a solid foundation if the SEJ Committee on Episcopacy recommendation is approved at Jurisdictional Conference.

As the task group begins their work, Bishop Graves and Bishop Wallace-Padgett express their confidence in the ability of the team to pave the way for a bishop who will serve all three annual conferences, recognizing each conference’s unique identity as they collaborate together in one episcopal area.

The task group comprises members selected from the three annual conferences, bringing together diverse talents and perspectives to foster unity and collaboration. Rev. Rick Owen, clergy person from North Alabama, will facilitate the group.

Representing South Georgia are: Dr. Jimmy Asbell, Rev. Rebecca Duke-Barton, Meredyth Earnest, Rev. Doreen Smalls, Patsy Thomas, and Rev. David Wood.

Representing Alabama West-Florida are: Clara Ester, Rev. Emily Kincaid, Pat Luna, Dr. Cory Smith, Rev. Richard Williams, and Dr. Jeff Wilson.

Representing North Alabama are: Rev. Sherill Clontz, Rev. Dedric Cowser, Rev. Brian Erickson, Lisa Keys-Mathews, Rev. Ron Schultz, and Scott Selman.

Recognizing the pivotal role of effective communication in the process, the task group will also include seasoned communicators Danette Clifton (North Alabama), Mary Catherine Phillips (Alabama West-Florida), and Kelly Roberson (South Georgia).

“We are thankful for these individuals who will join us in this work over the coming months to prepare our annual conferences to become one episcopal area,” said Bishop Graves and Bishop Wallace-Padgett in a joint statement. “We have great hope for the future of United Methodism in this region and are excited to see the roadmap created by this task group that leads us into a successful transition. Please join us in prayer as we continue to make the mission of disciple-making a priority in these conferences and in our denomination while giving space for the necessary work that has to be done to move us forward together in this journey.”

The initial directive for this task group will be to focus on all facets of the bishop’s transition, including office logistics, housing arrangements, travel, administrative help, and cabinet structure. The group's work will help guide the assigned bishop towards a successful beginning.

The goal for this work is to have a report ready in early April in order to include any recommendations needing the vote of the annual conferences in each conference’s Book of Reports. Any vote at the three Annual Conferences would be contingent upon the official vote to set the episcopal areas during the Jurisdictional Conference in July. The South Georgia Annual Conference meets June 2-5; the Alabama West-Florida Conference meets June 16-18; and the North Alabama Conference meets May 30-June 1.



## **Connectional Ministries rolls out One Matters Resource Toolkit with focus on ‘Who is your one?’**

Connectional Ministries understand the importance of making disciples and nurturing spiritual growth within local congregations. Transformation is happening every single day across the South Georgia Conference.

This year as the South Georgia Conference puts focus on its theme of "One Matters," the conference staff seeks to walk alongside local congregations to provide resources for the local church’s disciple-making efforts. Each month a toolkit will roll out designed to empower clergy and laity in their sacred mission of cultivating meaningful connections and fostering transformative discipleship. A single challenge question will be presented, followed by accompanying resources tailored to address that specific challenge.

[February’s toolkit hit inboxes of clergy and lay leaders at the beginning of the month.](#) February’s challenge question is: **Who is your one?** Think about being intentional with your discipleship efforts. Is there one person God brings to your mind that you could begin having faith-filled conversations with to encourage and strengthen them as a disciple of Jesus?

To go along with the challenge question, a step by step resource – [5 Cups of Coffee: A mentoring process for equipping disciples who make disciples](#) – is available that will help individuals learn how to equip and empower disciples who make disciples in five conversations over five cups of coffee. [A 20-minute training video, 5 Cups of Coffee Training led by Anne Bosarge](#), dives deeper into what it looks like to find your

"one" and invite that person for a cup of coffee.

A free eBook, ["Becoming a Disciple Maker"](#) from [Discipleship Ministries](#), is another great resource that explores the pathways to becoming a disciple maker using a five-level framework.

Using the 3Practice Circle model to explore our question of the month: "Who is your one?", Revs. Teresa Edwards, Meg Procopio, and Jared Wilson will facilitate this tool for open, honest dialogue that offers space to learn from each other's lived experiences. [More details on the 3Practice Circle model can be found here](#). Set for Thursday, February 29 @ noon via Zoom, the framing statement will be: 'Here's someone I'm thankful for who discipled me in my life with Jesus...' [Register now](#).

## ONE MATTERS CELEBRATION STORY

On the campus of Valdosta State University, the Wesley Foundation is more than just a gathering spot for college students. It's a place where lives are transformed, disciples are made, and forever friendships are formed.

Discipleship is at the core of their mission. The Wesley Foundation is a catalyst for transformation, fostering an environment where students not only strengthen their faith but also discover their purpose and potential.

Amidst the academic pressures, the Wesley Foundation is a refuge. Relationships form into deep, authentic connections that are not just confined to the walls of the Wesley House, they spill over into coffee shops, study sessions, and late-night conversations on the campus lawn.

"We continually invite college students to immerse themselves in a culture centered around knowing Jesus and emulating His ways," said Rev. C.J. Harp, Director of VSU Wesley. "At Wesley, students discover the depth of their significance to God, having been honored by Him in creation, redemption, and through the gift of eternal life. Our worship gatherings, home groups, and discipleship bands cultivate a culture that helps college students grow up in their salvation and live honorable lives that point people towards Jesus."

The Valdosta State University Wesley Foundation is a testament to the power of ONE MATTERS. Being a part of this ministry isn't just a chapter in the students' college journey, it's a foundation that began because every student that walks through the doors know they matter - to the people there and to God.

As the South Georgia Conference embodies this theme over the next year, our conference can collectively make an even greater impact in our communities, guiding individuals toward a deeper relationship with Christ. Clergy and laity are invited to explore this toolkit and join with others across the conference in this shared mission. Also, check out these exciting [hope-filled trainings and experiences planned over the coming months](#).

[View February's Toolkit here](#) | [Sign up to receive the monthly toolkit](#)



## 2024 Georgia Pastors School set for July 17-20

Georgia Pastors' School provides inspiration, education, fellowship, fun and relaxation for North and South Georgia clergy and their families. This year's retreat is set for July 15-18, 2024, at Epworth By The Sea, St. Simons Island, Georgia. 2024 speakers include Rev. Dr. Rodrigo Cruz, Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, and Rev. Dr. Teresa Fry Brown. Both active and retired United Methodist clergy and their families are invited to

experience continuing education and personal renewal at Georgia Pastors' School in July.

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](http://www.georgiapastorsschool.org). Register for housing at [www.epworthbythesea.org](http://www.epworthbythesea.org). For questions, please contact Rev. Knowles, Dean of the Georgia Pastors School, at [danitaknowles52@gmail.com](mailto:danitaknowles52@gmail.com). The school is supported by the tuition of attendees, an endowment established by the board of managers, contributions from the North and South Georgia Conferences, and the generous contributions of our sponsors who provide refreshments during breaks and fellowship times.



## **Finding Hope in 2024: be on the lookout for exciting things coming!**

### **Monthly Resource Toolkits**

In South Georgia, we understand the importance of making disciples and nurturing spiritual growth within our congregations. Transformation is happening every single day across the conference! This year as we focus on our conference theme of "One Matters," your conference staff wants to walk alongside your local congregation and resource you in your disciple-making efforts. Each month we'll roll out a toolkit designed to empower clergy and laity in their sacred mission of cultivating meaningful connections and fostering transformative discipleship. A single challenge question will be presented, followed by accompanying resources tailored to address that specific challenge. [Check out February's toolkit here.](#)

### **Setting the Stage for Digital Ministry: March**

Does your church have a digital presence or are you actually doing digital ministry? If you're ready to move from using social media channels to communicate information to creating online relationships that facilitate transformation, then join us for an introductory zoom that will give you practical ideas for taking your digital presence to the next step. After this introductory zoom, you will have the option to sign up for a five-month cohort that will do a deep dive into digital discipleship and making the most of online tools to create discipling relationships. So whether you want to dip your toe into the water or dive deep, this is where you can begin to explore how to increase your digital impact! Choose the time that works best for you: [March 7 at 6pm or March 8 at 2 noon](#)

### **Dinner Church on the Road: April**

Do you love a good potluck? Have you seen the amazing power of a meal to bring people together at the table? Are you interested in doing church and community in a new way? Dinner Church is a way to provide a spiritual environment for people who might never step foot into a traditional church model. Over a meal and a casual conversation, Dinner Church allows people from all walks of life to discover Jesus in community. [Coming in April to a location near you!](#)

### **Digital Ministry Intensive Cohort: April - August**

Are you ready to do a deep dive into digital ministry and learn how to harness the power of online tools to help create discipling opportunities? If you're ready to move beyond live-streaming, this cohort is for you! Join us as we explore how in-person and digital opportunities can work together to create a holistic discipleship experience for the people you are currently reaching and beyond! This is for clergy and key volunteers or staff who help facilitate discipleship within the church. The cohort will meet twice monthly on Thursday nights from 6-7:30pm via Zoom ([April 11, April 25, May 9, May 23, June 6, June 20, July 3, August 1, August 15, August 29](#)).

**Small Church, Big Impact: June - October**

Conference leadership is focusing efforts around the specific needs of small and rural churches. Anne Bosarge, director of leadership strategies and local church resources, is visiting small churches in the conference and gathering groups of pastors for planning, brainstorming, and dreaming sessions around how small churches can make a big kingdom impact in our conference. [There are several dates set starting in June and going through August throughout the conference.](#)

**SGA Planter’s Academy**

In the Fall of 2024, we will offer two paths for people who desire to plant something new. One path will be customized for laity and one for clergy. If you think you might have an interest in starting a new ministry, faith community, or something we haven’t thought of yet, this hybrid (online and in-person) course is for you! Explore the calling God has placed on your life and learn how you might live that out in South Georgia. More details to come.

To register and for more information, visit [www.sgaumc.org/cd-upcoming-events](http://www.sgaumc.org/cd-upcoming-events). Questions? Contact Anne Bosarge ([abosarge@sgaumc.com](mailto:abosarge@sgaumc.com)) or Stephanie Smith ([ssmith@sgaumc.com](mailto:ssmith@sgaumc.com)).



**South Georgia Hispanic Pastors participate in self-care and wellness workshop**

On January 19, South Georgia Conference pastors serving Hispanic congregations gathered at Centenary United Methodist Church in Macon for an event related to the mental health and well-being of ministers. Some of the topics presented were: overview of mental health, causes and consequences of neglect, needs of the mind, body, and spirit, and well-being in the pastorate and in the family life of the pastor. The presenter was Dr. Eunice Malavé de León who has experience in social work and therapies from a comprehensive point of view. This event was sponsored by the Conference’s Clergy Mental Health Task Force through a grant from the General Commission on Religion and Race and the Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs. “The group of pastors was very receptive to instruction, personal evaluation, and the application of limits and measures related to well-being and comprehensive health,” said Rev. Daniel Medina, director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs.



**Registration for Summer Camp open**

Camp Connect, the camping ministry of the South Georgia Conference, gives children and youth from rising 4th grade through rising seniors in high school the opportunity to spend a week away from normal everyday life in the beauty of God’s creation. Diving into scripture and sharing life stories will show campers they are created in God’s image and for a purpose.

Five camps are scheduled for the summer: one week for high school students, two weeks for middle school students, and two weeks for elementary students. Held at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island, the week-long camps run from June 10 through July 19.

Our prayer is that every camper will have the opportunity to encounter Christ in a powerful, life-changing way during their week at camp! For more information, visit [www.campconnectumc.org](http://www.campconnectumc.org).

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## February 25 Lesson: Faith in God's Purpose

Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God

Unit 3: The Righteous Live by Faith

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 25, 2024

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Habakkuk 2:1-5

**Key Verse:** *For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.* (Habakkuk 2:3)

### Lesson Aims

- To introduce the prophet Habakkuk, his message, and times
- To ponder the questions that Habakkuk asked God on behalf of God's people
- To consider whether this kind of questioning can be part of living by faith
- To examine Habakkuk's watchful stance and relationship with God during his people's suffering
- To explore what a watchful stance involves in the case of Habakkuk and others
- To learn about God-given visions and unfinished visions
- To learn how future visions help us cope in the meantime
- To be reminded that those who commit evil do not have the last say
- To compare "the righteous live by their faith" and "the righteous live by their faithfulness"
- To show how the proud and arrogant become that way because of the lure of wealth and power
- To show how insatiable the oppressors' appetite for gain was and how it leads to ruin
- To bring the lesson around to the theme: Faith in God's Purpose

### Introduction to the Lesson Theme and Habakkuk's Life and Times

This lesson is the last lesson of the Winter Quarter, and the theme is "Faith in God's Purpose." The theme for the quarter has been "Faith that Pleases God." The theme for the month of February has been "The Righteous Live by Faith," which is taken from one of the verses in today's lesson from the Book of Habakkuk. In each of the previous lessons this month, "living by faith" has taken on various meanings.

"Living by faith" will, obviously, take on a special meaning in the Book of Habakkuk. It is the stance that Habakkuk takes in life that deserves a close look. In Habakkuk, we encounter a unique kind of prophet. Instead of serving solely as God's representative to the people, Habakkuk spends as much time representing the people before God. He does this by asking questions of God that God's people would be asking. Be warned that there is a brutal honesty in these questions. The first chapter of the book features these probing questions.

What follows here are paraphrases of the questions Habakkuk asks. How long will God's people cry for help and not get any response from God in return, whether in words or actions? Why are God's people being made to suffer? Why is all this destruction and violence being allowed to happen by a God who is said to be just and merciful? Speaking of justice, why are God's people, who admittedly have been unfaithful, being made to suffer at the hands of a people, the Babylonians, who are even more evil and godless than they? How is this fair and just? If it is unjust and unfair, how long must God's people continue to suffer?



The question “How long?” is more than just a question about mere timing. It is in part a statement that some of God’s people have already suffered to the breaking point. There is a sense of desperation in the question. It is quite literally a cry for help. Suffering is one thing, but prolonged suffering is yet another. Suffering is compounded by its duration, and the resulting depression, despair, and exhaustion. The question of “how long” would not have been asked only by the ones suffering in relation to themselves, but by mothers and fathers and leaders asking on behalf of those in their charge.

The questions about the justice of it all also stick out. How can a just God allow injustice and suffering? This line of questioning is theological in nature and is referred to as the “theodicy” question. The first part of the word “theodicy” refers to God, and the second part refers to justice. The argument goes, if God is good and just, and God is all-powerful, why does evil exist?

**Have you ever considered the theodicy question? Did you consider this question in the midst of your own suffering or the suffering of a relative or friend? If you have ever questioned God in this way, how would you describe its impact on your faith?**

### **Habakkuk’s Stance in Life**

We can stop right here at the end of the first chapter and ask, “Is this kind of questioning on the part of Habakkuk a part of living by faith, or does this kind of questioning demonstrate a lack of faith?” It is Habakkuk’s stance in life, which we will see, that determines the nature of Habakkuk’s questioning. This is what we begin to see unfold at the start of the second chapter, where our scripture lesson begins.

**<sup>1</sup> I will stand at my watchpost  
and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.**

Habakkuk gives us a vivid picture of his stance. It is as if he standing at his watch post. He has stationed himself on a rampart, like the top of a wall of a walled city facing in the direction of whatever may approach. He is keeping watch. What is he expecting to see? He keeps watch to see what God will say to him. His stance is one filled with a sense of expectancy as he listens for how God will answer concerning his complaint. This picture not only describes his stance in life, it goes a long way in describing his relationship with God.

It has been said that there is a questioning that seeks answers and a questioning that seeks excuses. The questioning that seeks excuses often demonstrates a lack of faith, but a questioning that seeks God’s answers is a part of living by faith. Being watchful for God’s answers also means being patient to keep watching. Often, the longer we take up a matter with God the deeper we go.

Keeping watch may mean searching the scriptures, or meditating on God’s past actions with his people. When and where has a situation like this happened before and how did God respond? How did God change the situation or how did God change those going through it?

Keeping watch definitely involves prolonged prayer. We bring our questions to God in prayer. We also bring our supplications and petitions and let our requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6) Prayer changes things, and it also changes us. Praying for justice also has a way of making us more sensitive to the suffering all around us. In the process, we often become more aware of how God is calling us to be involved in the answer to our own prayers for justice and mercy and the answer to the prayers of others.

Notice Habakkuk's use of the word "complaint" in the first verse. A number of the Psalms are songs of complaint. The inclusion of the complaint psalms in Israel's songbook demonstrates that these psalms have a time-honored place among the songs of Israel. A number of the psalms also ask God, "how long?" We bring our complaints to God, because while we are doing so, we are in close relation to God even in our complaining.

The Book of Job provides one of the most well-known examples of complaining against God. There was a point when God chastised Job and rightly put Job in his place for some things he said out of his ignorance, but God did not chastise Job for complaining. In fact, God reserved his harshest words against those who condemned Job in all sorts of ways for complaining against God. In the end, Job celebrated the journey he had gone through with God saying, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." (Job 42:5) Through the journey he had traveled with God, a second-hand knowledge of God was replaced by a first-hand experience of God.

So, when Habakkuk brought to God his questions, his complaints, and his cries for justice and relief, Habakkuk was in the good company of Job, the Psalmists, Jeremiah, and Zechariah.

**What do you think of those who brought their complaints to God and whether or not it was appropriate to do so? How may you have shown a watchful stance when questioning God or your faith or why something was happening in your life? What activities did your watchful stance involve? Were you troubled with your questioning, or did your questioning deepen your faith in the end?**

### **There Is Still a Vision**

We have imagined some of the ways Habakkuk stood at his watch post and kept watch for God's answer concerning his complaint. The next question for us has to do with how God responded to Habakkuk.

**<sup>2</sup> Then the LORD answered me and said:**

**Write the vision;**

**make it plain on tablets,  
so that a runner may read it.**

**<sup>3</sup> For there is still a vision for the appointed time;**

**it speaks of the end and does not lie.**

**If it seems to tarry, wait for it;**

**it will surely come; it will not delay.**

There is nothing random about God's choice to use the language of vision in God's conversation with Habakkuk. The language of vision is very purposeful and intentional. A vision is a picture of a person's or organization's preferred future state. A *divine* vision is a picture of *God's* preferred future state. Prophetic visions are often breathtaking. Visions possess a magnetic quality that draws a person or group toward fulfilling the vision. They produce hope and positive emotions. Visions are evocative in that they bring forth imaginative responses and creative energy. Visions can reassure and encourage.

God's instruction is for Habakkuk to take dictation so that the vision message can, in turn, be delivered to others. The messenger is like the runner in a relay race, but instead of handing off a baton, he is carrying a message. The message must be plain enough for the runner to read and digest it while running. In other words, there is a strong sense of urgency.

God's way of encouraging Habakkuk, and the people who are his concern, is to say that there is a vision for the appointed time. Events are not as random as they seem. The seeming inevitability of endless calamity is

not set in concrete—far from it. There is still a vision for the appointed time. Although we may not know the timing, God knows the timing. It is no less than a divinely appointed time. Although the vision at this point lacks the clarity we would like it to have, a divine vision definitely exists that will come into focus in God's timing.

It speaks of the end—God's preferred future state when God gets all God wants. It does not lie. The purpose is not to deceive or trip anyone up, but to reassure and encourage. If it seems to tarry, we are to wait patiently. We should live with the sure knowledge that God's preferred future will surely come. It may appear to be delayed, but it is not in fact delayed past God's appointed time.

When all of this is taken together, then it's as if God is saying, "The picture you have seen in your present experience may very well be *unjust* and *unfair*, but keep in mind that it is also *unfinished*. God's appointed time has not come and gone. There is still a vision for the appointed time. It speaks of God's goal, God's purpose in the end, and is not a lying vision. If it seems to be slow in coming, we are to trust God. If good things come to those who wait, then God's breathtaking vision is worth the wait all the more. It will surely come. God is not finished yet, but God is nevertheless working. In the end, God wins. Eventually, God gets all that God wants.

**How does it help us cope through suffering knowing that there is a God-given vision that is coming at the divinely appointed time? When the picture we see of our present reality appears to be unjust and unfair, how does it help knowing that the picture before us is unfinished? How should the unfinished quality of life propel us to action? What actions?**

### **What About the Evil We Are Made to See?**

Think about the comfort that God's words would bring to Habakkuk. Habakkuk would still have questions about the presence of evil and the present suffering that was being caused. Where is the accountability? God still had more to say.

#### **<sup>4</sup>Look at the proud!**

**Their spirit is not right in them,  
but the righteous live by their faithfulness.**

It's not just that the enemy, the Babylonian empire, was causing chaos and suffering, the enemy was proud about it. God zeroed in on that quality as being at the heart of the matter. Indeed, their spirit was not right in them—not even close to being right. This is especially true when contrasting the enemy with God's righteous ones.

When we come to the phrase that has given us the theme for the February unit, "the righteous live by faith," we are given somewhat of a curve ball. Verse 4 says, "the righteous live by their faithfulness." There are three epistles in the New Testament that quote this verse, and they say that the righteous live by faith. Yet, both the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version use the word "faithfulness" instead of "faith."

We should first of all note the important linkage between faith and faithfulness. The word "faith" takes us in the direction of belief and trust. The word "faithfulness" takes us in the direction of steadfast loyalty. The Message translation synthesizes the meanings of "faith" and "faithfulness" by using the words, "loyal and steady believing." Our faith, and believing, and trusting form the foundation for our faithfulness and steadfast loyalty. Faithfulness is how faith, belief, and trust get translated in the way persons of faith live

their daily lives. In other words, “faith” and “faithfulness” go hand in hand and cannot be separated in a person’s whole-hearted devotion to God.

When we contrast the “proud” with the “righteous who live by their faithfulness” we must add the quality of humility to righteous living. There is something inherently humble in one who lives by their faithfulness to God. If you leave out the humble quality of walking with God, are you really walking with God?

The proud, in contrast, have a spirit in them that is not right and keeps them from faith in God and faithfulness to God. What leads the proud to become proud?

**<sup>5</sup> Moreover, wealth is treacherous;  
the arrogant do not endure.  
They open their throats wide as Sheol;  
like Death they never have enough.  
They gather all nations for themselves  
and collect all peoples as their own.**

The “proud” in this context was the Babylonian empire. What drove their imperial ambitions was the accumulation of wealth and power. Wealth is treacherous because the appetite for wealth is as deep and wide as Sheol, the vast underworld of Death. The appetite that the Babylonian empire had for tribute (payment) from the nations they conquered could not be satisfied. They could never have enough. They gobbled up nation after nation for themselves and collected subjects to serve them and their interests.

What God was doing in his response to Habakkuk was demonstrating to him that God had the Babylonian empire’s number, so to speak. God was fully aware of their transgressions, and what they represented. They were not getting away with anything. All appearances seemed to suggest the contrary—that the Babylonians were on top of the world. They believed that they possessed the divine right by their false gods to subject the world and its people to their imperial ambitions. Their apparent success only confirmed to them their divine right.

No wonder that the oppressed cried out to God while they were being crushed under the feet of their proud and arrogant oppressor. How long would it be before God re-established justice by rescuing the oppressed and taking away the oppressor’s ability to gobble up nations and people without its power being checked?

We go back to God’s word to Habakkuk. The picture of their situation that looked so inhumane, unjust and, unfair, was a picture that was unfinished. God had a vision, and God was not finished fulfilling it. There was a vision for the appointed time, and so their oppression was temporary. It looked like the oppressor was on the top of the world, but that was temporary too. It was just a matter of time before an empire more powerful than they were would be used by God to bring them to justice and liberate the oppressed,

What the enemy could not realize was that they were headed toward their own ruin. It was because their spirit was not right within them. It was because they were falling prey to an appetite for wealth and power which cannot be satisfied. As verse 5 says, “the arrogant do not endure.”

How do the righteous keep on living in the meantime? The righteous live by their faith and their faithfulness. In the hymn, “This Is my Father’s World,” in the first two verses, we sing of the beauty and order of the created world, designed and made by our heavenly Father, and how “he shines in all that’s fair.” It is the third and final verse that speaks to our lesson.

This is my Father's world | O let me ne'er forget | That though the wrong seems oft so strong | God is the Ruler yet. | This is my Father's world: | Why should my heart be sad? | The Lord is King: let the heavens ring! | God reigns; let the earth be glad!

There are times when the wrong seems so very strong, but God reminds us that he is the Ruler yet. At the end of Habakkuk's message, he expressed his faith in a memorable way: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vine; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the LORD, is my strength." (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

What a beautiful picture of faithfulness and living by faith! When we can rejoice in the Lord even in times of want or loss, then we are living by faith. This does not mean we are oblivious to our situation or that we feel we must suppress our feelings. It does mean that we maintain faith in the God of our salvation through it all. We learn to trust in Jesus. We discover in a thousand ways how the Lord God not only gives us strength, but the Lord, himself, IS our strength.

There is a poem by Grant Colfax Tullar, entitled "The Weaver," which helps us come around to the theme for this lesson: "Faith in God's Purpose."

*My life is but a weaving  
Between my God and me.  
I cannot choose the colours  
He weaveth steadily.*

*Oft' times He weaveth sorrow;  
And I in foolish pride  
Forget He sees the upper,  
And I the underside.*

*Not 'til the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly,  
Will God unroll the canvas  
And reveal the reason why.*

*The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver's skillful hand,  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned.*

There truly is a pattern in what God has planned. God is weaving the pattern using all the colors. Habakkuk is the one who heard God say that the righteous live by their faith and their faithfulness. For Habakkuk, the righteous live by their "faith in God's purpose," and by faithfulness to God's purpose.

Throughout this Winter Quarter, we have gone on quite a journey as we have explored "Faith that Pleases God." It is my prayer that you have been blessed as much as I by the scriptures we have studied. May your faith continue to grow, and may it please God.

**Knowing how the lure of wealth can be unquenchable and lead to ruin, how can we handle wealth responsibly and use it in ways that bless? How can we become more sensitive to patterns of oppression that cause suffering? How can we partner with God to show others a more just and merciful vision of**

**living by faith and faithfulness? What joy and peace might we experience if we grew in our faith in God’s purpose?**

**Prayer**

Loving Lord | You weave purpose, love, relationship, consolation, and restoration into the history of Your people | When we suffer, enable us to wait expectantly and watch patiently for You to act and speak into our lives | That we may praise you as the God of our salvation even when we have more questions than answers | Through Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith, Amen.

*Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at [jharris@sgaumc.com](mailto:jharris@sgaumc.com). Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at [www.layeredbiblejourney.com](http://www.layeredbiblejourney.com).*



**March 3 Lesson: Sustaining Our Faith**

**Spring Quarter: Examining Our Faith  
Unit 1: Faithful vs Faithless**

**Lesson 1: Week of March 3, 2024  
By Dr. Hal Brady**

**Lesson Scripture:** Jude 17-25  
**Key Verse:** Jude 20-21

**Lesson Aims**

1. Identify the doxology in the text.
2. Distinguish between what God promises to do and what he expects us to do regarding personal holiness.
3. Explain what “contending for the faith” is.
4. Create a plan to implement the imperatives of the key verses.

**Introduction**

I am truly excited about the Lessons of the Spring Quarter. According to the writer of the lessons, the Greek word for “faith” appears over two hundred times in the New Testament. The word’s usage can refer to at least two different but related concepts. This quarter we will explore the significance of faith and how the people of God live with faith.

Prior to proceeding, let’s briefly look at the two concepts of related faith. The expression “the faith” refers to the beliefs and paradigms distinct to followers of Jesus (examples: Acts 6:7; 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 Timothy 3:9; Jude 3). The most central belief and the key to the faith itself, however, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Mark 16:1-8). Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, our faith would be in vain. “The faith” can also be referred to as “Community Faith.”

Scripture’s second use of the word “faith” consists of belief in Christ and trust in God. One way a person’s faith is revealed is through their decisions and behavior. As we know, the Gospels provide numerous examples of people who demonstrated faith through their actions.

One example will suffice here. The faith of a centurion led him to ask Jesus for the long-distance healing of his servant (Luke 7:1-10).

The quarter's final unit investigates the spiritual benefits of having faith in Christ. A person can have faith after they hear the good news of Christ (Romans 10:14-17). Believers enter the community of God's people by confessing sin and believing that Jesus is Lord.

As a result, believers can rejoice! Because of our faith in Christ, we celebrate a relationship of peace with God. We were once adversaries of God, but by our faith, we have received the ultimate benefit of becoming children of God.

It's no wonder I'm excited about the Spring Quarter Lessons, and I hope you are too.

### **Lesson Context**

Jude is a brief letter, and it reflects a perilous time similar to our circumstances. Some ambitious and prideful people have attached themselves to congregations, presented themselves as leaders and practiced an immoral lifestyle. Jude calls them "ungodly" people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality (Jude 4). In addition, these intruders exploited their welcome by promoting immorality, mocking the judgment of God and behaving as if God could not hold them accountable for their actions and immoral ethics. They despised authority, spoke evil of others, and sought wealth in their greed (vv8, 11). Jude called them "blemishes at your love feasts" who had nothing true or valuable to offer. They were like clouds "without rain" and fruitless trees (v.12). They "followed" their own evil desires, and though they influenced many, their words were filled with their own ambition (v.16). As we can see, this was a dangerous time for the churches, and Jude addresses the situation directly with both warning and hope.

Who was Jude? Jude, who wrote this letter, was the brother of James who was one of the elders and leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). Since James was a brother of Jesus, Jude was as well. Though both opposed Jesus during his ministry before his death, both became committed believers after the resurrection of Jesus (I Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1).

The book of Jude was probably a sermon that circulated among several congregations as an open letter. He addressed a number of congregations at one time, as they were all endangered by ungodly intruders and leaders. Jude clearly stated his main interest. He encouraged believers to "contend for the faith" that had been delivered to them (Jude 3). He identified the troublemakers, warned that their destiny is the same as that of Sodom and Gomorrah (v.7) and the devil (v.9), and promised God would execute judgment against the "ungodly" for their "ungodly acts" (v.15).

It all boils down to this. What are believers to do? How do they contend for the faith? How do believers live out their faith in such perilous times? Jude sends his letter with a call to persevere in the faith. That call is our lesson text today.

### **Closing**

Verses 17-23 comprises the letter's closing (Jude) as indicated by the direct address beginning in verse 17, "But you beloved, must remember." The closing reiterates and emphasizes what has been said and urges the recipients to attend to and take responsibility for the matter discussed. The closing both repeats the main points that have been made and appeals to the emotion of the recipients to help ensure that they will act as desired.

## **I. Remembrance (Jude 17-14)**

After describing the characteristics of these false leaders and the judgment that awaits them, Jude reminded his readers that this was not unexpected. “The Apostles” warned about the rise of ungodly people who would disturb the church and seek to gain their own followers. For example, the apostle Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus that wolves would arise from among their own leadership (Acts 20:29). Consequently, the situation should not have surprised them. The Apostles told them it was going to happen.

By reminding them of this apostolic warning, Jude highlighted the importance of the apostolic voice in the early church. The apostolic word or teaching both guides and warns the church. According to Acts 2:42, the disciples of Jesus devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The church listens to the apostles of “our Lord Jesus Christ,” heeds their direction and warnings, and follows them as they follow Jesus. Their teaching, along with the prophets, is the church’s foundation, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Thus, Jesus sent the Apostles with his authority, and the Apostles spoke for Jesus.

In another significant happening, Jude not only reminds his readers of the Apostolic warning but also reminds them who they are. They are “dear friends” (also appropriately translated “beloved”) and Jude called them as such three times (Jude 3, 17, 20). While we need reminders about the dangers of any situation, we also need reminders that we are loved by God and loved by our leaders. Jude, for example, was a leader who wrote forcefully against false teachers but compassionately for those whom those ungodly leaders endangered. Believers have been called by God and kept safe in Jesus Christ (v.1).

### **Question! How do you encourage other believers to remember they are beloved by God?**

So what did the apostles say to the church? A time was coming and had already arrived when “scoffers” would arise within churches, and their only concern would be pursuing their own “ungodly interests.” When Jude used the language of “the last times” or “last time,” he was not referencing to something in the distant future, though it included that. Rather, he reminded his readers about this warning because it was already happening in their congregations.

Often “last days” (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; 2 Peter 3:3) refers to the last era of God’s redemptive work in the world. This is the final era because after this comes the judgment of God and the salvation of God’s people. It was important to hear the apostolic warning not only apply to some final moment in the world’s history but also to Jude’s readers and the whole history of the church. Mockers and scoffers have always been part of the story of the church, and the warning is for all believers throughout the lifespan of the church. And this is a constant danger rather than a unique one.

What drives these false leaders? They mock God’s judgment and scoff at any thought of personal responsibility or accountability. They simply did not believe God’s judgment applied to them or perhaps that there was any coming judgment at all. Rather, they followed their own desires. They had their own agenda, and they are interested only in indulging their own cravings.

The Apostles warned that people would come who had no interest in authentic faith. Rather, they would ridicule accountability before God and pursue their interests for their own gain.

Jude described these ungodly people in three ways. They (1) are divisive, (2) are worldly, and (3) lack the “Spirit” of God. In essence, Jude identified this ungodly presence by their works or their effect on the congregation. Simply stated, they lacked the fruit of the Spirit. They created divisions as they separated themselves and created their own followers. And they lived by their natural urges and impulses rather than by the mind of Christ. They were not led by the Spirit but by their sensual compulsions driven by their ungodly agenda.

### **Question! What characteristics suggest that a person does not have the Spirit? Offer supporting verses from Jude for your answer.**



## II. Perseverance (Jude 20-23)

Jude contrasted his readers with these ungodly mockers. While the ungodly mock the faith, believers build their lives on the faith. While the ungodly lack the Spirit, believers pray in the Spirit. While the ungodly scoff at the judgment that accompanies the coming of the “Lord Jesus Christ,” believers joyfully anticipate the mercy they will receive when Jesus comes again. Now, Jude addressed these believers as “dear friends,” and their identity was rooted in God’s love for them. It was not simply Jude’s love for his readers but also their relationship with God as people who are beloved of God. God loves them.

We are told that in the Greek text the main verb—and the only imperative or command—is “keep yourselves in God’s love” (Jude 21). This was a call to action. Jude thought believers ought to respond to perilous times of persevering in God’s love. Grounded in God’s love, these believers were called to pursue godly living by remembering that they were beloved.

But how are believers to continually pursue godly living in perilous times by remembering that they are beloved? Jude gave his readers three cues.

First, they can build on the foundation of the “faith.” The faith for which the Christian community was to contend (Jude 3) is also the foundation for remaining in the love of God. The “faith” refers to the work of God in Jesus by the Spirit to redeem and save the world from its ungodly lusts and practices. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers build on an authentic foundation secured by the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit rather than one imagined by the mockers who have stirred up trouble among the churches.

Second, they should pray “in the Holy Spirit.” We should note two things here. On the one hand, Jude thought prayer was a necessary response to perilous times. Prayer calls upon God to act and deliver. One of our Methodist bishops was asked by a pastor, “How do you blow off steam?” Without any hesitation, the bishop replied, “I worry God a lot!” And then the bishop said, “And I do. I talk to God continuously.” On the other hand, prayer was not simply wishful thinking but addressing God in the Spirit. The full meaning of prayer includes not only the work of the Spirit in hearts but also the function of the Spirit in communicating the prayers. We pray in the Spirit when we pray in accordance with God’s agenda, praying out of a heart sanctified by the Spirit and prayer by the power of the Spirit who writes us with God’s own heart (compare Romans 8:26; I Corinthians 14:15).

Third, believers should trust in the mercy of God! The faithful looked forward to the day when the fullness of God’s mercy would be poured out on believers, and this would usher them into eternal life. Here Jude provides the community the basis for eschatological hope—the imminent parousia when Christ will bestow the Messiah of eternal life upon the faithful (vv. 2, 21) and judgment upon the ungodly (vv.14-15).

**Important! These prior verses refer to the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Jude recognized the Triune God by naming the love of God, the mercy of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Jude’s language is similar to the final benediction of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:14).**

**Question! What do you do to keep yourself in God’s love?**

The remaining exhortations are to the faithful and to those who follow the false teachers (vv. 22-23). First, they should “Have mercy on some who are wavering” or who “doubt.” The faithful are to offer those who

have followed the false teachers the same mercy that they themselves expect to receive the second coming of Christ (vv. 2, 21), with the hope of saving them from judgment (v.23).

Second, that the faithful should “save others by snatching them out of the fire” (Zechariah 3:2) implies that the false teachers and their followers are in danger of the punishment of eternal fire (v.7), which will befall the ungodly at the second Coming of Christ (v.10).

Third, some were so entangled in the ungodly patterns of the mockers that Jude commanded believers to act with mercy but also with fear. Again, the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ is a quality Jude wanted shared with others. At the same time, it ought to be shared in a way that one does not become complicit in evil itself. Even as mercy and compassion are given, Jude’s language respected the danger of evil. **Point! The love of God rescues people from evil rather than joining them in their evil.** Jude commanded believers to keep themselves in the love of God and to show mercy to those caught up in the agenda of the mockers. The beloved are to love others because God has loved them.

Someone said of Mother Theresa, “She gave herself to Christ and through Him to her neighbor. This was the end of her biography and the beginning of her life.”

### **III. Contending (Jude 3; not in text)**

Those mentioned in verse 1 are the ones who Jude challenged to “contend earnestly for the faith”! Jude was not asking new or immature believers to take on the false teachers. However, he did expect that those who were strong and mature would not only confront false teachers but prevail in driving them from the church. It must be recognized that there are some tasks in the discipline of the church that are the direct responsibility of those who are spiritually mature, and we must be careful in asking immature believers to contend for the faith when they are not yet able to do so victoriously.

Keep in mind that this does not mean that new believers cannot engage in evangelization contending of the lost. They are some of the most excited witnesses. It does mean that new believers are not yet equipped by an understanding of the word or by experience in walking consistently with the Lord to take on those ungodly who have assumed leadership positions in the church.

The attribute of “mercy, peace, and love” are to mark the behavior of all Christians, especially the words and behaviors of those who contend for the faith. We are never to take on false teachers or evil influences with an attitude of anger or condemnation. At all times we are to seek to restore those who are wandering away from Christ, to bring back to the truth those who are pursuing a lie, and to bring about reconciliation in Christ with those who are aligning themselves with evil.

We are to contend earnestly—sincere, ardent, and unrelenting, but never with malice. Jude called the contenders to see the weaknesses of the false teachers and to address those weaknesses. Knowing the Word of God and the weaknesses of the false teachers is essential.

### **IV. Praise God (Jude 23-25)**

It is appropriate that Jude conclude his letter with a doxology (a praise to God) considering that the letter would probably have been read to the people gathered in worship. The doxology reminds the church of God and Christ and of the Christian’s future. It provides a perspective for the entire letter and motivation to respond as Jude has advised.

The doxology first identified what God is doing for us (Jude 24), and then it attributed to God what rightfully belongs to him (v.25).

While Jude stressed that believers are responsible for keeping themselves in the love of God, he also made it clear that it is God who empowers our perseverance in that love (v 24). Ultimately believers do not save themselves, nor do they generate their own awareness. Rather, God acts to keep us and causes us to stand in God's "glorious presence" without blemish.

Because of God's gracious mercy, Jude praised God's eternal "glory, majesty, power, and authority." These characteristics or attributes describe God's own capacity both to keep us from falling and present us without blemish.

Since this doxology is offered to "God through Jesus Christ," it constitutes a prayer of praise. As Jude has already shared with us, believers pray in the Spirit. So, Jude offered a triune prayer. God is praised through the Son in the Spirit. That is the most holy faith. God poured out mercy through the Son by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we joyfully return to God the Father our praise through the Son in the Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

We live in perilous times today, much like the church at the time when Jude was written. So, we should recognize and identify the danger. Then we should root ourselves in God's love for us, and then we pour that same love on all others.

### **Action Plan**

1. Explain who and what is involved in "contending for the faith" in Jude's perspective.
2. What do you do to keep yourself in God's love?
3. What practice could you begin or deepen to be more aware of God's helping you to stand faultless before him?

### **Resources For This Lesson**

1. "2023-2024 NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, International Sunday School Lessons," pages 233-240.
2. "The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XII" by Anne F. Watson, pages 496-500.
3. "Encounter God 1, 2, 3 John and Jude Small Group Study" by Blackaby (Henry, Richard Hemas, Melvin and Norman), pages 79-83.

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### **How much time do you give the enemy?**

By Anne Bosarge

I love M&M's these days. Not just because of the tiny bite of chocolate and the colorful hard candy shell, but because of what it has been revealing to me about how much time we give the enemy in our thoughts and conversations. I have the privilege to work with churches in our conference helping them revitalize and

realign around our mission. Lately I have been doing a simple activity that has revealed a lot about the tenor and topic of our conversations within the church. Here is what I have noticed.

In working with a group of church leaders (both clergy and laity), I pass around a bag of M&M candies and ask each person present to take two M&Ms of different colors. On a piece of chart paper, I write the following key:

Blue = The World  
Green = The Nation  
Red = Your Community  
Yellow = Your Church  
Brown = Your Family  
Orange = Yourself

Then I ask them to share where they see evidence of God at work in these various areas based on the color of M&M's they have chosen. Seems like a simple question, right? I have learned it's harder to answer than I first thought.

In our conversations around these little M&M's, we have discovered that it's easier for us to point out where the enemy is working in these places than where God is working. It's easier to talk about the problems than it is to state where God is already paving the way through the wilderness to create new paths for us to follow. The attacks of the enemy seem to be top of mind while the works of God take more effort for us to uncover.

At a church I worked with this weekend, we talked about how we see what we seek and how we are formed by what we follow. We realized that society is bombarding us with pictures, stories, and sound bites of the enemy in action and all of this is shaping us to think more about what the enemy is doing than what God is doing.

Think about your own thinking for a moment. Think about your church committee meetings or leadership conversations. How much time do you give the enemy on your agenda, talking about problems, roadblocks, challenges, and obstacles to accomplishing your mission of making disciples? How much time do you spend talking about how God is already working to bring about victory over the enemy and how you can join Him in His work? I think we might be giving the enemy too much space in our brains, meetings, and conversations.

How do we stop elevating the work of the enemy and begin to notice and recognize the work of God? Let's try the simple phrase, "But I see God..." The next time someone mentions an area where it seems like the enemy is gaining ground, follow up with a sentence that starts with, "But I see God...". State the work God is already doing to combat that evil. Some examples to get you started:

"People are just lazy these days. They don't want to come to church anymore because they can watch worship online in their pajamas."

"But I see God using online worship to bring faith to new people, meeting them right where they are and inviting them into a relationship with Himself and ultimately the church. What if we used digital platforms to disciple all people and moved people from thinking that their faith is a once-a-week occurrence to a daily commitment to discipleship?"

"These kids are too busy with sports activities. They aren't even making time for church anymore."

“But I see God giving families the opportunity to interact with people who have no faith as they spent time together at the ballfield. What would it look like if we equipped families to see themselves as missionaries on their child’s sports teams?”

“Social media has caused isolation among our young people, and they are filling their minds with garbage.”

“But I see God making a powerful way for people to share their faith with others. What would it look like if we showed people how to harness social media tools to let others know of the hope they have in Christ?”

What would it look like in our churches if we gave less time to the enemy and more time was spent recognizing what God is already doing to defeat the work of the enemy in the world? I think we would begin to see things we haven’t seen before. I think we would begin to be formed by the good news of this gospel-centered life we are called to live. I think we would be able to better make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world because we could follow the path the Father is paving for us. You see what you seek and you are formed by who you follow.

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## Conference Updates & Happenings

**Lay Servant Ministry:** [Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry dates & registration](#)

- Online Basic Lay Servant Ministries: August 13, 15, 20, 22
- Online Advanced Lay Servant Ministries: Sept 10, 12, 17, 19

**Confirmation Retreat – March 1-3:** The 23rd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat will take place March 1-3 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. 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 for the entire event! For more information and to register your group, [click here](#). Deadline is TODAY!

**Pre-General Conference clergy lunch gathering – March 5:** One more pre-General Conference clergy lunch gathering is set for March 5 at Richmond Hill UMC at 10 am ([register now](#)). This gathering is a time for Bishop Graves to check in with clergy, offer pastoral support, talk about the timeline for 2024, and provide General Conference and Jurisdictional updates to take back to share with local churches.

**United Women in Faith Retreat – March 8-10:** The South Georgia Conference United Methodist Women will host their annual Spiritual Growth Retreat March 8-10, 2024, at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. This year's theme is "Becoming More Loving." Retreat speaker will be Anne Bosarge, and Sara Fullerton will be the worship leader. [Learn more](#)

**Clergy Spouses Retreat – March 15-17:** The 2024 Clergy Spouses Retreat is set for March 15-17, 2024, at Epworth By The Sea. The retreat theme will be, "Embracing Christian Friendships," with the Scripture focus being from 1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." This will be a gathering with spouses from South Georgia, North Georgia, and the Alabama West-Florida conference. [Download the brochure for all the details](#) | [Register here](#)

**Leading Through Trauma - March 21:** This one-day retreat for South Georgia clergy will be held at Camp Tygart Pipkin Center in Ray City on March 21, 2024, from 9 am - 3 pm. Led by Cameron Bishop, we will talk about the trauma pastors experience in ministry and learn strategies for processing it so we can continue to lead well and thrive personally. The cost for this event is \$25 (lunch is included). [Click here to learn more and register.](#)

**Post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings**

The post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings are set for the following dates. These gatherings will be a time for Bishop Graves and members of the delegation to report factual information around any decisions made at General Conference. Registration will be available closer to the dates.

- **May 13** - Tifton First UMC in Tifton at 10 am
- **May 14** - St. Paul UMC in Columbus at 10 am
- **May 23** - Goshen UMC in Rincon at 10 am

**Post-General Conference Laity Webinar – May 14:** A laity webinar has been scheduled to provide local church lay members with information following General Conference. The date for this webinar is May 14, 2024, at 6 pm. Registration information will be available closer to the date. If this date is not convenient, South Georgia laity are invited to take part in the [Alabama West-Florida Laity Webinar](#) on May 20 at 6 pm EST.

**Summer Camp 2024:** Registration is now open for Camp Connect! There is 1 week of senior high camp, 2 weeks of junior high camp, and 2 weeks of elementary camp. [Find out more information and sign up today!](#)

**Summer Camp Connect Leadership Team:** Now hiring for Summer 2024! Do you know a college student who loves Jesus and has a heart to serve kids? If you know of any in your circle or local church, let them know about this opportunity to serve! [Learn more.](#)

**Annual Conference – June 2-5:** Hotel Room blocks are now open for the 2024 Annual Conference Session set for June 2-5 in Tifton. [View list here](#)

[View Full Conference Calendar](#)

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**Book Review: ‘White Too Long’**

By Rev. J. Michael Culbreth

White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity, written by Robert P. Jones, the founder and CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, is an appeal for the church, particularly white Christians, to address white supremacy that had its origins in the church and continues to prevail in the church. The book’s title stems from the words of James Baldwin who wrote: “They have been white...too long; they have been married to the lie of white supremacy too long.”

Jones argues that white Christianity has played a central role in maintaining racial attitudes in America. Jones notes that “despite the official proclamations of churches at the national and institutional level in favor of racial justice, the theology of American Christianity provides the foundation for white supremacist attitudes.” Through deep research Jones points out that active religious affiliation correlates to racial bias.

The research data reveals that heightened racial bias is found to be prevalent among white Catholics in the Northeast and white Protestants in the South.

White Too Long is a historical, theological and a personal account about how Jones has dealt with racism throughout his life. Jones, who grew up in the Southern Baptist Convention, does a great job of defining terms, tracing historical events, evaluating theological concepts and revealing the significance of racist symbols. Throughout the book Jones provides personal stories about growing up in the racist deep South.

Jones points out that the term white supremacy for many “evokes images from a bygone era.” Jones adds that, “the phrase white supremacy conjures images of bad men in hooded robes who believe in white power, burn crosses and scream the word nigger. But that’s not quite what I mean here. On a broader level, white supremacy involves the way a society organizes itself, and what and whom it chooses to value.” Jones stresses that the bottom line of white supremacy is that it is a, “set of practices informed by the fundamental belief that white people are valued more than others.”

Jones traces how the Southern Baptist Church was entangled with the Confederacy and how leaders in the Southern Baptist Church supported racial segregation. Jones also carefully notes how other denominations such as Methodist, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics also upheld white supremacy. Jones writes that, “American Christianity’s theological core has been thoroughly structured by an interest in protecting white supremacy.” He traces how Christianity historically has been an institution that promoted harmful racial doctrines.

Jones dedicates an entire chapter - “Marking: Monuments to White Supremacy” - to tracing how the Confederate “Lost Cause” became enshrined in public symbols such as flags and monuments and even in the stained-glass windows of church sanctuaries. Today Americans continue to struggle with the role of Confederate monuments in our society.

White Too Long makes strong historical judgments and calls for the church to “cast off the shackles of its racial legacy.” In the book’s final chapter entitled “Reckoning,” Jones outlines how the church can go about breaking the chains of white supremacy. Jones challenges white Christians to “wrestle with the difficult truths of the intertwined histories of blacks and whites in America.” Jones adds that, “We white Christians must find the courage to face the fact that the version of Christianity that our ancestors built – the faith of our fathers, as the hymn celebrates it – was a cultural force that by design, protected and propagated white supremacy.” Jones offers hope that white Christians will take destroying white supremacy seriously. He notes some white denominations are making great strides to deal with white supremacy. He stresses that “reckoning with white supremacy for us, is now an unavoidable moral choice.”

In conclusion, while I realize that this book will make many people uncomfortable, it is a book that is a must read particularly for all white Christians including pastors and laity. I recommend it for small groups and Sunday School classes. I also challenge my ministry colleagues to use this book as a resource for teaching and preaching. The time is now for the white American church to face its troubling roots and experience repentance and transformation. Until this happens, America will never be the nation that God intended for her to become. When our nation seriously deals with white supremacy, then our nation can experience freedom and peace.

*Rev. J. Michael Culbreth is senior pastor of ConneXion Church in Savannah.*



## Confirmed in Racial Equity

What's Old Is New Again

By Anne Packard

February brings both confirmation studies and Black History Month to the forefront of the Methodist movement. Can these two seemingly unrelated topics be brought together for the benefit of the world? Yes, but only with the faith, hope, and love that God brings. Are we still confirmed to racial equity? What's old is new again.

How can Methodists use the sacrament of confirmation to advance racial equity in their community? Here are seven examples of people who did just that.

1. *Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin;*

Rev. Gil Caldwell, a Methodist minister, participated in the march on Washington in 1963, in the Mississippi Summer Voter Drives in 1964, in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, and in the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. Rev. Caldwell ministered in the Methodist church for over sixty years and in five different conferences. He intentionally renounced wickedness, rejected evil, and provided for repentance in the sin of segregation.

2. *Do you accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;*

Anna E. Hall, born in Bainbridge, Georgia in 1870, graduated from lower and high school, graduated from Clark University, taught in Florida, became a principal in Jesup, Georgia, graduated from the New England Deaconess Training School, and served at Lloyd Street Methodist Church in Atlanta. In 1907, Hall began her missionary work in Liberia growing a school, writing a hymnal in the native language, and growing the church from 200 to 500 members while battling gender inequality, cannibalism, and child sacrifice. Mama Hall, as she was affectionately known, accepted God's freedom and power to resist many forms of evil both in her home state of Georgia and abroad.

3. *Do you confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord:*

Bishop James R. King, Jr. was born in Alabama, graduated from Interdenominational Theological Center, served as an evangelist to the West Indies, and ministered in churches in Alabama, California, and Tennessee before serving as a district superintendent and senior pastor to a 4,500 member church. He was a five-time delegate to General Conference prior to being elected bishop in 2000 where he served the Louisville Conference and became the first African-American bishop of the South Georgia Conference. Bishop King put his whole trust in God and continues to serve Him as Lord and Savior.

4. *Will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world;*

Rev. Joseph Lowery graduated from Paine College and Payne Theological Seminary before earning a doctorate in Divinity from Chicago Ecumenical Institute. He ministered for ten years with the Warren Street Methodist Church, led the Montgomery bus boycott, led an organization focused on desegregating public spaces, and cofounded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Lowery also marched from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, created a forum protesting the existence of apartheid in South Africa, and advocated for LGBTQ and same sex marriage. Rev. Lowery remained a faithful member of the Methodist movement and the ministry of Jesus Christ.



5. *Will you be loyal to Christ through the United Methodist Church and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries;*

Leontine T. Kelly graduated Virginia Union University and North Texas State University, the University of Cincinnati, and the College of William and Mary. After teaching school, she completed her Masters of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, was ordained a deacon and elder, and served on the staff of the Virginia Conference Council on Ministries. Rev. Kelly served a church, became the Assistant General Secretary of the UM General Board of Discipleship, was elected bishop by the Western Jurisdiction and served as the first African-American female bishop in the UMC. Throughout her ministry, Bishop Kelly did all in her power to strengthen the Methodist Church and bring greater racial equity to the world.

6. *Will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness;*

Harry Hosier met Francis Asbury in 1780, delivered his first sermon to a black Methodist congregation in 1781, was the first black man to deliver a sermon to a white congregation in 1784, and attended the Christmas Conference with the leaders of Methodism in America. He was a circuit rider from South Carolina to Massachusetts with Asbury, toured New England with Freeborn Garrettson, and became a sensation in New York in 1786. Thomas Coke wrote in his journal, saying Hosier was “one of the best preachers in the world.” Despite often being the first person of color to participate in the ministries of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Hosier changed the movement through his prayers, presence, gifts, service and, witness.

7. *Will you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.*

Susan Angeline Collins became the first black student enrolled in the Iowa University for Normal Training, opened her own business in the Dakota Territory, and attended the Chicago Training School to become a missionary. Bishop William Taylor, the first American missionary bishop of the MEC church in Africa, recruited Collins to sail for the Congo in 1887. After two years, she traveled to Angola where she served for 13 years and opened a school for girls. Despite the fact that Collins was 50 years old and should not have been able to return to Angola, she returned to her missionary post and served another 18 years. Throughout her travels in the world, Missionary Collins professed her faith and devotion to the scriptures.

As we welcome more confirmands into membership in The United Methodist Church, may we also renew our devotion and dedication to the body of Christ, ensuring that all people may live out their mission to the world in peaceful, just communities.

*Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at [apackard@epworthbythesea.org](mailto:apackard@epworthbythesea.org).*



## **Resource Roundup – February 2024**

### **Craft a mission-focused social media calendar for your church**

TikTok. Facebook. Instagram. The social networking site formerly known as Twitter. Let's face it: Dealing with social media can seem like a game of Space Invaders. But it doesn't have to be this way. If you plan and schedule social media content with a clear purpose, you can ensure that your digital presence remains impactful and fully aligned with your church's mission. All you need to do is craft a mission-focused social media calendar. [Learn more](#)

**Maintaining and improving your sound booth**

OK, you’ve obtained some equipment and finally have your sound booth set up. Now what? Well, it’s not going to function on its own. Make room for training, upkeep and the occasional (we hope) need for troubleshooting. Now, let’s say you want to create quality videos for the web, livestream your services or venture into the world of podcasts. With a little more expertise and possibly some more equipment, the sky’s the limit. [Learn more](#)

**From consumer to collaborator — get your creative juices flowing**

Often when we get bogged down with tasks, it’s hard to get in a creative space. Fortunately, there is already a multitude of content at hand, but how do you make that switch from consumer to collaborator? Here are some tips for getting those creative juices. [Learn more](#)

**The importance of a plan-your-visit webpage**

To break the ice, you need a virtual welcome desk. Make potential visitors feel right at home with a well-organized plan-your-visit webpage that includes answers to all the questions a newcomer would likely have. Remember to inform, introduce and invite. It could be the start of a wonderful relationship. [Learn more](#)

**Twitter to X: What churches and church leaders need to consider**

If you’re still trying to make sense of Twitter’s rebranding to X, you’re not alone. The little blue bird with its 140-character tweets is undergoing a bit of a transformation. With all of the changes that have been made and are still forthcoming, it may be time for churches and church leaders to determine if X is still a “thunder bird” on the crowded social media highway. [Learn more](#)



**Retired Clergy Birthdays - February 2024**

- 2/01 – Rodney Body: 1205 North Palm Dr.; Plant City, FL 33563
- 2/03 – Eugene Barlow: 605 Victoria Circle; Warner Robins, GA 31088
- 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
- 2/09 – 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
- 2/12 – Tim Steffen: 4383 Old Harrodsburg Rd., Suite 130; Lexington, KY 40513
- 2/14 – Jim Jensen: 4323 15<sup>th</sup> St., East Beach; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 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
- 2/20 – 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
- 2/22 – 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



## **Obituary: Rev. Raymond L. "Ray" Bittner**

The Reverend Raymond Bittner passed away peacefully at Pine Shadows Manor in Sylvester Sunday afternoon on February 11, 2024 at the age of 100 1/2 years old.

The funeral service will be held at 2:00 PM on Saturday, February 17, 2024, at Poulan United Methodist Church, interment will follow in the Poulan Cemetery. The Rev. Dan Harper and Mr. Calvin Bittner will officiate.

Ray was born 07/18/1923 in Coloma, Michigan. He was the son of Otto and Florence (Umpfrey) Bittner. A very significant event happened in Ray's life, when at the age of 16 during Sunday school class at the Coloma Methodist Church, he realized he was not a believer, that he was a lost soul, and very deserving of God's wrath. Over the course of the next year, Ray diligently sought the Lord through Bible study, church, and fellowship with believers. Ray credits his Sunday school teacher, and their many interactions, with coming to a true saving faith at the age of 17 when one night in his basement bedroom he felt a peace come over him, that he did have saving faith and so he prayed for forgiveness and surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

After Ray graduated from high school in 1941, he attended Moody Bible Institute in nearby Chicago. During the next four years Ray's part-time ministry work on the weekends included a Chinese congregation in downtown Chicago and two small churches near Coloma.

Ray met the love of his life, Jeanette, in the summer of 1947 at her large and vibrant Calvary Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan during an evening service in which Ray gave his testimony. Six months later, Ray and Jeanette were married. Over the next 16 years they had five children. Ray finished college and seminary in 1957 at Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids and was ordained into the Presbyterian USA denomination. After serving five years as a Presbyterian pastor in two different churches in Michigan, a series of events led him to move his family to Savannah, Georgia in 1963. In 1964, Ray returned to his Methodist roots and became a Methodist pastor in the South Georgia Conference. Over the next 50 years, Ray pastored 30 different Methodist churches, mostly small rural churches with small congregations. These included Poulan, Sumner, Shingler, Warwick, Beulah and lastly Clements Chapel when he was in his late 80s. In 2019, at the age of 96, he was called out of retirement yet again to preach Sunday services at Oak Grove Baptist Church in Ashburn. At 98, after thoughtful prayer, he felt the Lord telling him to retire for good.

Ray was an avid handball player, and the YMCA was like a second home to him. In fact, Ray rented a room at the YMCA in Grand Rapids for over two years in the 1940s before marrying Jeanette. He won large city tournaments as a singles player. His last first place trophy was in a Savannah city tournament for doubles in 1992 at the age of 69. This was a general competition for all ages, and most of the participants were young men.

Ray is survived by his five children: Karen Woods (Donnie Basko), Linda Aultman (Bruce), Calvin Bittner (Renee), Deborah Hiles, and Janice Poston (Rick). Ray has 11 grandchildren and a bunch of great grandchildren. Ray was the oldest of five children and is survived by his youngest brother Larry Bittner (Roseanne) of Coloma, Michigan.



## Scripture Readings – February 20 edition

**February 25**

***Second Sunday in Lent, Year B***

- Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
- Psalm 22:23-31
- Romans 4:13-25
- Mark 8:31-38

**March 3**

***Third Sunday in Lent, Year B***

- Exodus 20:1-17
- Psalm 19
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
- John 2:13-22