

Of First Importance!



BY BISHOP MICHAEL LOWRY

I recall with exceptional clarity the first funeral service I ever presided over as a clergy. It was for a man who had committed suicide. As a young minister-in-training at First United Methodist Church in Austin, the funeral home had called and asked the senior pastor if someone could do a service for a man nobody wanted.

Under the senior pastor's tutelage, I volunteered. I called the man's adult son, who was verbally abusive and declared his undying hatred for his father. The service was held in a pauper's cemetery plot in east Austin. I stood over the grave conducting the service with a man from the funeral home and two grave diggers leaning on their shovels. When I went home that night to my empty apartment, I thought long and hard about this business of death.

Since then there have been many others. I have attended or performed funeral services for saints whose lives were an inspiration — two recent ones come to mind. The old theological term "glorification" best describes them. I have also presided over services for self-designated bad guys — one, a graveside service for a person murdered in a drug deal down in Corpus Christi even had the Sheriff's Department present taking pictures of those who attended. Others have been for children and adults of all ages and backgrounds.

What do you do about this business of death? Is it the end or the beginning? Is it something you choose to live in denial about, or do you face its reality for yourself and your loved ones head on?

The Christian faith has an answer. It comes from this morning, this day we call Easter. The Apostle Paul writes: "Now I would remind you, brother and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain." (I Corinthians 15:1-2)

Paul "can remember a time when the cross and resurrection did not form an inseparable unity, a time when the finality of Good Friday was a non-negotiable item in his religious package. He has experienced the nothingness of death without resurrection and desperately wishes to convey that futility." (Richard Lischer, "Resurrexit!: Something to Preach," *The Christian Century*, April 2, 1980, p. 373)

So Paul, great leader that he is, writes the infant church at Corinth: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the 12. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died." (I Corinthians 15:3-6)

Scholars are in virtual uniform agreement that this is the earliest written testimony of the resurrection. The words are strong and uncompromising. If the story we have heard, shared, celebrated this morning is untrue then "our proclamation [preaching] has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." (I Corinthians 15:14) If this story is untrue, then we are wasting our time and might just as well spend our morning in the woods or at the barbeque. If it is untrue, "we are even found to be misrepresenting God." (I Corinthians 15:15) This, says Paul, this day, this story, this resurrection experience, is "of first importance." (I Corinthians 15:3)

With passion, this leader of the early Christian movement writes to convey to the Corinthians and to us that Easter is more than a few nice words to remember at a funeral; that it is more than merely a recognition of eternal life; that it is more than a vague celebration of the pagan rite of spring. *This day is of first importance for Paul and for us, because Christ conquers the power of death and evil. Easter confirms Jesus is Lord. The resurrection changes indelibly our lives should we embrace this truth for more than a single day.*

NOTE: Bishop Lowry's *Wilderness Way* column will resume with the next issue.

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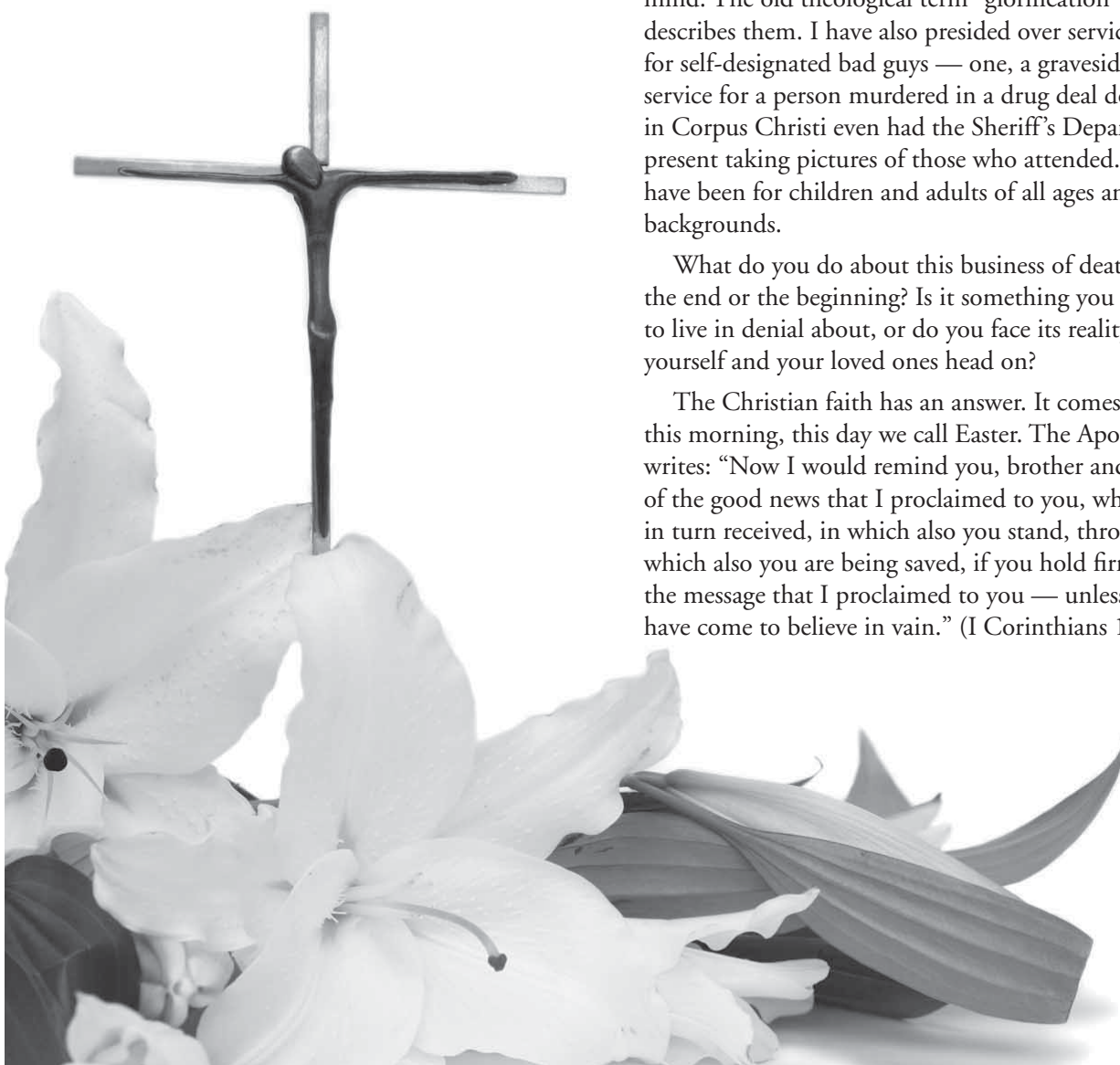
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ENERGIZING & EQUIPPING CHURCHES


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Central Texas Conference News

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Thang family faces persecution in homeland, then helpful hospitality at First Fort Worth

By KIM ISBELL
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH,
FORT WORTH REFUGEE MINISTRY
COMMITTEE

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." In 2009 a family of five from a country once known as Burma taught the congregation at First United Methodist Church of Fort Worth the true meaning of faith.

On their journey to become our neighbors, the Thang family literally risked their lives. Several years ago, Mr. Thang was captured by the Burmese government and placed into slavery. He was able to escape, taking his family out of the country and to a refugee camp.

Through the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and Refugee Services of Texas, the Thang family was able to come to the United States. Currently, the family cannot return to their homeland due to fear of persecution.

Although they are thankful to be in the U.S., their life here has not been easy. They don't qualify for many jobs due to the language

barrier. It is often a struggle for them to keep up financially — especially with three children.

Yet they endure because of their faith. They don't give up just because they can't see the "staircase." They have taught us a FUMC that faith is not simply something you have occasionally when things are bad. Faith is a continuous act.

Becoming a refugee-sponsoring

congregation has truly transformed the "11:11 congregation" of FUMC. 11:11 is the church's alternative more casual and contemplative worship service held every Sunday at 11:11 a.m.

We all worked together to donate or buy all the needed items for the initial apartment set up. We also helped with getting a car donated for work purposes. One member

continues to stop by and checks on the family and bring them food, firewood, books, etc.

My family keeps in regular contact with the Thang family. We have taken them to restaurants, and they have attended birthday parties. We talk on the phone and stop by occasionally to check on them.

Most likely, there is a refugee family living close by your congregation. Ask your congregation if this is one of the ways you can share the meaning of Christ.

Raphael Lemkin (1941) once asked the disturbing question: "If women, children and old people were being murdered a hundred miles from here, wouldn't you run to help? Then why do you stop when the distance is 3,000 miles instead of a hundred?"

What if these same people were dropped off on your doorstep? Wouldn't you reach out to assist them? The Thang family has truly taught us the meaning of faith.

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BUILDING FUTURE LEADERS

37 Central Texas students get TUMCA scholarships

Bishop Dan E. Solomon, president of the Texas United Methodist College Association, has announced that 37 students from the Central Texas Conference have received TUMCA scholarships for the current academic year to attend five United Methodist-related schools in the Texas.

"TUMCA links the giving of congregations with the striving of United Methodist students," Solomon said. Many TUMCA scholarship recipients are the first in their family to attend college, reinforcing the vital role of scholarships in enabling students to gain the benefits and the blessings of Christian higher education.

TUMCA funds, received from United Methodist congregations in the State of Texas, are "scholarship restricted" for tuition and fees. "As these students become lay and clergy leaders for our congregations, we

will discover that the 'bread' of our TUMCA giving, when cast upon the waters of our young adults' aspirations for education, will return to us sevenfold," Solomon said. Recognized are the following students, their home churches and schools:

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Southern Methodist University

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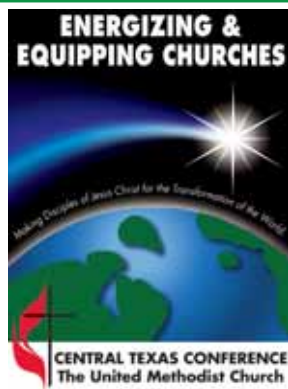
Samantha Belicek - First Round Rock

Texas Wesleyan University

Bradley Alexander - First Mansfield
Nancy Altaras - First Fort Worth
Melissa Bates - Polytechnic, Fort Worth
Carlos Careaga - Aldersgate, Arlington
Ray Cox - Arlington Heights, Fort Worth
Amy Craddock - First Joshua
Eva English - Campus Drive, Fort Worth
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The mission of Central Link edition of *The United Methodist Reporter* is to inform, enlighten, inspire and equip leaders for mission and ministry in our connectional church.

For circulation and/or advertising policy, contact Susan Briles 817.877.5222, 800.460.8622 or susan@ctcumc.org. Subscriptions: \$20/year.

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Research shows support for UMC's Four Focus Areas

Research conducted by United Methodist Communications on behalf of the denomination's Connectional Table reveals widespread denominational support for the church's four Areas of Focus, adopted by the 2008 General Conference.

"The research shows that most respondents believe that the Areas of Focus are very important for the church," said the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive of UMC. "But we also heard that knowledge about the areas is still somewhat limited."

Essential Ministry Areas

"General Conference affirmed the four Areas of Focus because they are essential areas of ministry most of our vital local churches are already doing," said Bishop John Hopkins, chair of the Connectional Table.

"It is more important that we do the work than know the language of the areas of focus. Our heartwarming response to the earthquakes in

Haiti and Chile demonstrates that United Methodists understand the importance of sharing the love of Jesus Christ to those who are poor and without adequate medical care."

Strong Support for Some

Support is uniformly strong for three of the four areas:

- engaging in ministry with the poor,
- developing principled Christian leaders, and
- creating new places for new people/revitalizing existing congregations.

Fewer people indicated that combating diseases of poverty is very important for the denomination, although many who indicated that initiatives are not important said they lacked enough information to have an opinion.

Although respondents reported limited knowledge of the four Areas of Focus, they indicated greater familiarity, however, with initiatives

affiliated with the areas, including the Nothing But Nets anti-malaria initiative and the Rethink Church advertising and welcoming campaign.

Survey participants reported that their local churches are active in many of the areas associated with the Areas of Focus, including 54 percent of pastors who said that their church had participated in Nothing But Nets during the last year.

Does Your Church Understand?

"This feedback reveals opportunities to align the messaging of the church more closely with the positive work it is doing," said Hollon.

Hollon points to a survey question that asked respondents if their church understands the concept of "connectionalism." Just 18 percent of pastors, 14 percent of leaders, and 12 percent of members agreed strongly that their church

understands connectionalism.

Connectional Church

"As a connectional church, we are united by a common mission and governance that allows us to reach into the world as the hands and feet of Christ," said Hollon. "This research points to the need to build understanding about the connection by communicating how it extends our reach and the scale of our abilities to create change as followers of Jesus.

"The connectional reach of The United Methodist Church empowers each of us to achieve more together than we could achieve individually or as a single congregation. It makes us much bigger than ourselves, able to do much greater work."

The study, conducted in December 2009, includes survey results from 2,895 pastors, 805 church leaders, and 1,416 members.



Conference Calendar

- April**
- 2: Conference Center closed in observance of Good Friday
 - 8-9: Cabinet meeting
 - 8: Conference Committee Nominations at First Fort Worth
 - 10: Great Day of Service at various sites
 - 10: Temple District YEAH Paint Day
 - 10-11: Excellence in Preaching training with Bob Farr at First Mansfield UMC
 - 13: Temple District Committee on Church Location & Building at Salado UMC
 - 17: CTCYM Leadership Training at Glen Rose UMC
 - 17: Student Leadership Team meeting at United Christian Fellowship, Hill College, Hillsboro
 - 18: Interfaith Worship of Help, Hope & Healing for Crime Victims, their families, friends and the community, 3:30 p.m. at Goodwill Industries (4005 Campus Drive, Fort Worth 76119)
 - 19: Board of Ministry meeting at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
 - 20-21: Board of Ministry spring interviews for clergy candidates at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
 - 21-25: National Rally for Central Texas Sojourners, Chapter 16, at River Country Campground, Gadsden, AL
 - 21-23: New Resident Orientation Retreat at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
 - 22: Cabinet meeting

Radical hospitality extends to Baptists too at First UMC in Temple

And the whole community has noticed!



The congregation of First Baptist Church of Temple worship under the sign of the flame and cross after their own church and so much of its contents were destroyed in a fire. First United Methodist Church of Temple opened their hearts and their doors to their neighbors and now the two churches are talking about a joint choir concert.

BY REV. JANE WOODWARD
ASSOCIATE PASTOR/MINISTER OF MUSIC
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
OF TEMPLE

Earlier this year — Tuesday, Jan. 19 to be exact — residents of Temple awoke to discover that First Baptist Church's sanctuary, offices and adult Sunday school classrooms were engulfed in flames.

In only a few hours, all was consumed — a total loss.

Also, within only a few hours, Rev. Tom Robbins, Sr., pastor of First United Methodist Church of Temple, extended the invitation to Rev. Martin Knox and the congregation of First Baptist Church

to make full use of First UMC's new Family Life & Worship Center for their 11 a.m. Sunday worship services.

They gratefully accepted and began worship under the flame and cross symbol Jan. 31 for an undetermined length of time. The two churches are only two blocks apart in downtown Temple. First UMC's 11 a.m. worship service is held in the sanctuary, located in a different building on campus.

The music ministry of First Baptist also suffered the loss of their entire music library and a five-octave set of handbells in the fire. Upon the invitation of Rev. Jane Woodward, associate pastor and minister of music at First UMC, the Chancel Choir from First Baptist now

rehearses on Wednesday evenings in a room only two doors down from the rehearsal of First UMC's Chancel Choir.

They have also been given full use of First UMC's music library and their set of handbells as needed. There have been some preliminary talks regarding a combined concert at some point in the future.

Since that time, there has been an abundance of expressions of gratitude and thanks from not only the people of First Baptist, but from all the people in the community.

Yet, it is the people of First UMC

who have experienced untold joy from having the opportunity to share space and be in ministry with a sister church of another denomination in their time of need. Such ecumenicity is not always the norm, so for the community at large, this is truly a witness for Christ.

Please remember First Baptist Church in Temple in your prayers as they make important decisions about their future, and pray for both of these congregations as they continue to be in ministry for the City of Temple.

For the latest updates on the conference and youth calendars, visit regularly www.ctcumc.org

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Since that time, there has been an abundance of expressions of gratitude and thanks from not only the people of First Baptist, but from all the people in the community.

Yet, it is the people of First UMC

who have experienced untold joy from having the opportunity to share space and be in ministry with a sister church of another denomination in their time of need. Such ecumenicity is not always the norm, so for the community at large, this is truly a witness for Christ.

Please remember First Baptist Church in Temple in your prayers as they make important decisions about their future, and pray for both of these congregations as they continue to be in ministry for the City of Temple.

April

- 2: Conference Center closed in observance of Good Friday
- 8-9: Cabinet meeting
- 8: Conference Committee Nominations at First Fort Worth
- 10: Great Day of Service at various sites
- 10: Temple District YEAH Paint Day
- 10-11: Excellence in Preaching training with Bob Farr at First Mansfield UMC
- 13: Temple District Committee on Church Location & Building at Salado UMC
- 17: CTCYM Leadership Training at Glen Rose UMC
- 17: Student Leadership Team meeting at United Christian Fellowship, Hill College, Hillsboro
- 18: Interfaith Worship of Help, Hope & Healing for Crime Victims, their families, friends and the community, 3:30 p.m. at Goodwill Industries (4005 Campus Drive, Fort Worth 76119)
- 19: Board of Ministry meeting at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
- 20-21: Board of Ministry spring interviews for clergy candidates at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
- 21-25: National Rally for Central Texas Sojourners, Chapter 16, at River Country Campground, Gadsden, AL
- 21-23: New Resident Orientation Retreat at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
- 22: Cabinet meeting



Conference Calendar

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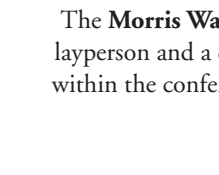
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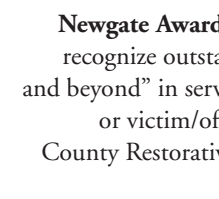
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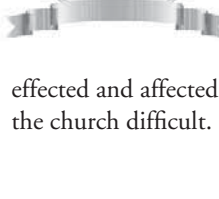
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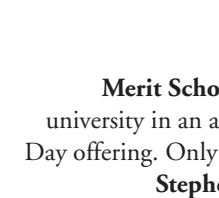
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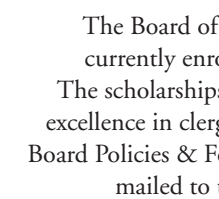
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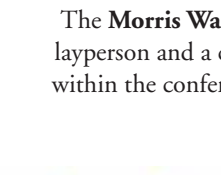
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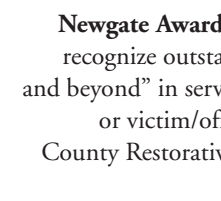
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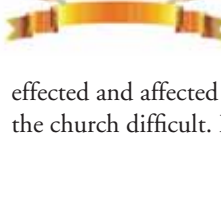
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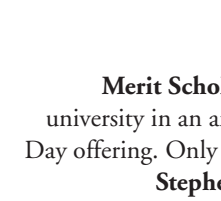
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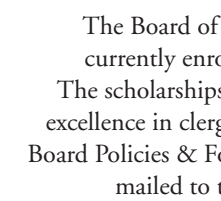
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