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New partnership breathes life into old, established church

An experiment in NeoConnectionalism

BY REV. JASON HAMILTON
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Late last spring, I received an e-mail from Dr. Todd Renner, teaching pastor and provost at White's Chapel United Methodist Church in Southlake.

He was writing to congratulate me on my new appointment to University United Methodist Church in Fort Worth, and to schedule a visit and tour of the church. This e-mail began a relationship between two churches that I believe holds one of the keys to the future success of United Methodism.

Like so many of our United Methodist congregations, University is an established congregation with a grand past that once was located in the heart of a thriving area of urban development that has transitioned into a modern-day inner city neighborhood.

As the area has transitioned, the congregation has declined from a membership numbering in the thousands to just above 200. With a feeling of hopelessness, the faithful have watched friends pass away or move on with very little influx of new congregants.

Throughout the past few decades, the church has attempted several different approaches to reach the changing community, but with little success. It is a familiar story — one that can be found in every large city in America, especially among United Methodist congregations.

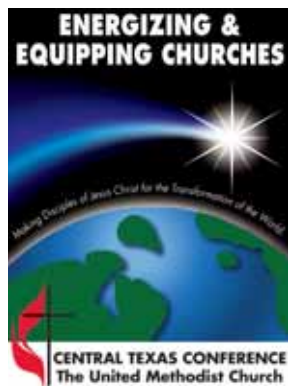
In spite of the many obstacles to growing a church in this environment, I felt called to ministry

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Photos by Carolyn Stephens

New doors at University United Methodist Church open to a world of new beginnings for this proud old church in southwest Fort Worth.



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The Wilderness Way

BY BISHOP MICHAEL LOWRY

51. In The Wilderness Way #50 I wrote about two key principles in making disciples. First, begin with yourself. Second, emphasize training over trying. Develop and employ the health habits of spiritual formation. There are a host of different studies across the theological and ideological spectrum that indicate Christians and non-Christians in the United States don't act very differently. Those findings are disturbing to any committed Christian.

If we begin with ourselves, it means we need to begin with repentance and engage in careful self-examination. If we are committed to training over trying, we need to study what actually helps people and churches follow Christ as true disciples (committed disciplined followers).

How do we personally and collectively grow in following the Lord (master and commander!)? How does the church, the body of Christ, effectively live the Great Commission of the risen Savior to "make disciples?" (Matthew 28:19-20)

Well over two decades ago I attended my first seminar at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill. It is one of the largest churches in the United States with an average weekend worship attendance in the five figures (20,000) is the number I vaguely remember). The point is – Willow Creek Community Church is a really, really large church. In fact, when you think of a mega church, Willow Creek is one of the mega, megas.

For 33 years they have lived with a simple, profound, deeply committed mission – to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. They are seriously serious about making disciples (not just pandering to size or simply baptizing pagans.) What impressed me greatly both then and now was not their size, but how well they had thought through what making disciples is about.

In my last three pastoral assignments, we worked hard on gaining clarity about the path of discipleship – a person's spiritual growth to maturity in Christ. Everyone who thinks deeply on the subject of how disciples are made understands that such growth and development is rarely linear. Counterintuitively, at the same time it cannot be articulated in clear delineated steps, a church hasn't really thought through how it is living the Great Commission in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

As senior pastor of Asbury United Methodist Church, we understood Asbury as a place where "people are loved, lives transformed and disciples made." We knew (and know) many of the elements of making disciples. Where we struggled was in putting all the pieces together.

In 2007 I read of a deep study launched by Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association (a loose knit association of churches across many denominational backgrounds) to answer just such a set of questions. Entitled *Reveal*, the initial study shared the disturbing results that church activities were not predictors of spiritual growth (deeper discipleship). Follow up studies have recently been published entitled, respectively, *Follow Me* and *Focus*. When you place the *Reveal* study (all three books) alongside coterminous research by the Hartford Seminary Foundation, The Pew Research and other data, great insight for making disciples emerge.

Think of spiritual formation (making disciples) as a four-step process: (1) Exploring Christ, (2) Growing in Christ, (3) Close to Christ, and (4) Christ centered (taken from the Willow Creek *Reveal* studies). In all elements involvement in spiritual practices is crucial, especially biblical reflection.

Biblical reflection means not only reading the Bible, but reflecting deeply on what is read. It is not knowledge about the Bible that is critical, but personal reflection on the application in one's life (regardless of where you are on the theological spectrum!). The implication for churches is clear. We need to major not just on biblical teaching, but on coaching people on biblical reflection that leads to engagement and application of the teaching.

A second catalytic insight naturally springs from the importance of biblical reflection and application. This insight is the central role of serving others, especially the hurting and hungry both physically and spiritually – those far from God. As the *Reveal* study puts it: "Consider the heart of the matter – the gap between the two attributes we use to define spiritual growth: love of God and love of others (Matthew 22:37-39)." *Reveal: Follow Me*, by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, p. 106)



Lay Speakers' 8th Annual Meeting convenes Feb. 25-27

Each year the Lay Speaker Ministries offers an introduction to lay speaking and opportunities for lay persons to further their education and to fulfill requirements for continuing certification.

This year's Lay Speaker Annual Meeting will be held Feb. 25-27 at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center in Glen Rose. The courses offered are designed to prepare lay

speakers for service with training courses and certification for areas of ministry such as:

- leading meetings,
- prayers and study programs,
- assisting in worship services,
- and providing support to care-giving ministries.

There are currently over 1,000 trained lay speakers in the Central Texas Conference who are active

in providing a wide range of services to their congregations, their districts and the conference.

For a downloadable flyer and more information on each of the many courses, registration and accommodations, visit the conference website at www.ctcumc.org and click on the Lay Speaker Meeting story. Please direct any questions to Melissa Osborne at oz2@txol.net.



Lay Leadership

Election of lay delegates to the 2012 General and Jurisdictional conferences begins now

If you, or someone you know, feel God's call to serve as a delegate to the denomination's 2012 General Conference and/or the 2012 South Central Jurisdictional Conference completing a Lay Delegate Information Form is the first step.

Completed forms must be submitted by each person who feels called to this special ministry of making decisions for the future of The United Methodist Church. They will be included on the ballot at the Central Texas Annual

Conference, which meets June 5-8, 2011 in Waco.

The Lay Delegate Information Form is available on the conference website at www.ctcumc.org. Click on the "2011 Annual Conference" tab on the left side of the home page.

A completed form may be submitted online or downloaded and printed to send a hard copy by mail. Please follow the instructions on the form.

Your basic information, your

sincere commitment to fully participate in all preparation and meetings, and your responses to the following questions will help lay members at Annual Conference to vote on their representatives to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences in 2012. The questions are:

- What I have learned serving in the local church, or at the district, conference, jurisdictional or general church levels, or through life experiences, that I believe would benefit someone serving as a

delegate to General or Jurisdictional Conference is ...

- I believe that what God is calling the United Methodist Church to do in the near future to more effectively carry out the mission of the church is ...

Clergy members of the Central Texas Conference will elect their clergy delegates to the two conferences from the entire body of clergy. There are no clergy forms to be submitted.



February:

- 19-20: Mid-Winters #1 at Glen Lake Camp, Glen Rose
- 19: Tasting Diversity (morning) & Human Trafficking (afternoon) Retreat at Stephenville First UMC
- 19: United Methodist Women Finance Committee meeting at Hillsboro First UMC
- 22-23: Appointive Cabinet
- 22-24: Children's Forum 2011 in San Antonio
- 23: United Methodist Women Realignment meeting, Conference Center
- 25-27: 8th Annual Lay Speakers Weekend at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center
- 26: Mid-Winters #2 at Glen Lake Camp, Glen Rose

March:

- 1: Extended Cabinet Leadership Training
- 2: Appointive Cabinet
- 3: Council of Finance & Administration at Conference Center
- 4-5: CTC United Methodist Women Spiritual Growth Retreat at Lakeview Camp & Conference Center
- 8-9: Appointive Cabinet
- 8: Extension Ministries Luncheon at First UMC, Fort Worth
- 11: Content deadline for Preliminary Report
- 23: United Methodist Women Realignment meeting at Conference Center
- 26: Board of Laity meeting at Glen Lake Camp & Retreat Center, Glen Rose

Scholarship and award applications and nominations now sought for 2011

Board of Ministry scholarships

The conference Board of Ministry is accepting applications for the several scholarships it administers. Qualified applicants must be certified candidates for clergy, currently enrolled in a seminary approved by The United Methodist Church's University Senate.

Incomplete applications will not be considered. Applications must be post-marked by midnight Thursday, March 31, or delivered to the BOM office on the Texas Wesleyan University campus in Fort Worth by 5 p.m. Thursday, March 31, to be eligible for consideration.

The application form is located at www.ctcbom.org on the "Board Policies" page. The form can be completed electronically or printed, signed and mailed. Scholarships will be awarded at Annual Conference in June 2011. Contact Gala Trimble in the BOM office at 817-795-7120 if you have problems or questions concerning the form.

Georgia Harkness Scholarship for women seeking elder's ordination

The Division of Ordained Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education & Ministry provides the Georgia Harkness Merit Awards to women seeking elder's ordination in The United Methodist Church in memory of the life and service of an outstanding teacher and theologian (1891-1974).

This \$5,000 scholarship can be applied to tuition, fees and room/board for the basic seminary degree leading to elder's ordination.

Applications and required documentation are due by March 1. Get application details at www.gbhem.org/site/c.IsKSL3POLvF/b.3876391/k.2F17/Georgia_Harkness_Scholarship_Award.htm.

College/seminary scholarships

Students researching scholarships, grants and loans may want to check the General Board of Higher Education & Ministry website (www.gbhem-umc.org) and click on "Loans & Scholarships."

Many of these funding opportunities comes through the generosity of individuals for whom the scholarships are named, and general funds that come from the Student Day Offering.

Task Force on Hunger seeks 2011 Thanksgiving offering applicants

Each year the Central Texas Conference Task Force on Hunger designates recipients for the Thanksgiving offering. The offering is split 90/10 with recipients rotating annually between local and global ministries. This year the offering will go to:

- 90% Central Texas Conference Hunger Ministries
- 10% Haitian Creole Pig Project, Advance #418002

To download a flyer with details about the grant, for a two-week Bible study to accompany the Thanksgiving offering (Hunger: The Enemy at the Table, A Bible Study on Hunger), and an application for the 2011 Hunger Ministry Grants, please visit the conference website at <http://ctcumc.org/pages/detail/902>. The application deadline is March 31.

Merit and Brown scholarships

Each year the Higher Education Task Force presents the Merit Scholarship(s) to a deserving first-year college student from this conference area. Funds for the scholarships come from the Student Day Offering, and only members of participating churches are eligible.

The Brown Ministerial Scholarship, given in honor of the late Dr. G. Alfred & Opal Brown, is given to a deserving student at a United Methodist Seminary and carries a \$5,000 scholarship. Selection is made by the Higher Education Task Force.

Application forms for the Merit and Brown Scholarships are on the conference website under "Ministries" - "Higher Education."

Harry Denman Evangelism Awards

Is there someone in your midst who should be lifted up for the incredible ministry he/she is doing in the area of evangelism? The Harry Denman Evangelism Awards were presented for the first time last year in the Central Texas Conference. Selection is made by the Evangelism Task Force.

Nominations are being accepted for this award for a clergy, lay and youth member in the conference. The forms can be found on the conference website at www.ctcumc.org under "Ministries - Evangelism." Last year two recipients were named for the clergy award, Dr. John McKellar of White's Chapel United Methodist Church and Rev. Leah Hidde-Gregory of Frost United Methodist Church, and Pat Stroman of Central United Methodist Church for the lay award. There were no nominations for the youth award.

New partnership, new life | Continued from page 1A

in this part of Fort Worth. I felt called here because as difficult as the past has been, University remains a viable congregation poised to be a unique agent of change within the Kingdom of God.

Situated between Paschal High School (Fort Worth ISD's largest campus) and Texas Christian University, University UMC straddles two communities that I believe God wants to get to know each other. My head spins when I begin to imagine the possibilities that lie before us as we attempt to bring an area of great resources and imagination in connection with an area of great human need.

Our obstacles are significant — an aging campus that was built for a congregation five times our current size, an aging congregation, and a budget that has been steadily declining along with worship attendance. On paper, this seems like the impossible dream. Working alone, this IS the impossible dream.

I was excited the day that Dr. John McKellar and Dr. Todd Renner pulled into the parking lot. I hadn't begun working at University yet, and my head was full of nothing but visions of grandeur.

As they entered the building I began telling them of the history. We discussed possibilities for the future, first steps, and potential roadblocks that would slow the process of transformation.

At lunch, as we mulled over the possibilities that lie ahead, a word entered the conversation that brought a new sense of hope for the nearly impossible future: neoconnectionalism — a new depth to the connection that we claim as United Methodists, a partnership that stresses accountability, a shared vision, and a cooperative planning.

That day began what I believe could be a new model for the connection that



After 30 years of darkness and silence, the tower lights and bells are back on at University UMC. Their neighbors say they are delighted.

John Wesley originally intended.

When we use the word “connection,” most of us think of the superficial rituals that we all participate in: district meetings, sitting together at Annual Conference, and paying apportionments. Most of us (especially the younger clergy) have developed an almost cynical view of the United Methodist connection because we realize that the meaning of the word “connection” stops far short of its original intent.

We participate in shared meetings, we read a shared vision statement, even support shared missions (Imagine No Malaria, for instance), but I think it is safe to say that when it comes to a true feeling of connection between congregations, competition and pride often get in the way of authentic connective relationships.

I believe it is time to imagine a new kind of connection!

The relationship between White's Chapel and University is an experiment in a new way of exercising the

Free online webinars are designed and scheduled for lay church leadership

The General Board of Discipleship's series of free online training sessions for local church leaders continues through the next couple months with a series of issues that face church council members.

“*Leading the Church Council: Administration IS Ministry*,” a live event, will begin at 6:30 p.m. (CST) on Feb. 24. It is hosted by Betsey Heavner, GBOD's director of con-gregational renewal. Participants can expect training that includes tips and examples from real churches, and a framework for everyone on the church leadership

team.

The other upcoming webinars, both at 6:30 p.m., are:

“*Trustees: Stewards of Church Property*” on March 24. The role of trustees is practical, legal and Biblical. Every trustee will benefit from this review of the responsibilities and reminder of effective ministry through this job.

“*Easter Living for Church Leaders: Prayer and Faith*” on April 28. Church leaders care deeply about their faith community so that sometimes the “doing” church

work overwhelms “being” the church. Several church leaders will tell about their own experiences to inspire easter renewal in leaders.

These training sessions provide by GBOD are made possible by support given to the World Service Fund. For more information about the webinars and free registration, go online at www.gbod.org/committee_resources.

In addition, previous webinars for the Paswtor Parish Relations Committee and for finance leaders are available for view at the website.



University straddles two communities, Texas Christian University and Fort Worth's largest high school, plus a revitalized business area.

connection that we hold so dear. It is an experiment in putting teeth on something that often exists only in our language. Together, University and White's Chapel are committed to the following:

- Developing a system of holding the lead pastors from each congregation accountable to one another.
- Participating in a joint mission project that connects members of both congregations through acts of service.
- Sharing resources as we team up to reach out to students at TCU.
- Leadership training on the part of White's Chapel for the purpose of sharing knowledge with University.
- Creating connection points between our leaders and worshippers as we plan, lead, and worship together.

It has only been a few months since this experiment began, but already the results have been tangible. University has benefitted immensely from the support, insight, and resources that have been offered by White's Chapel.

We have realized significant gains in attendance, financial support, and spiritual morale.

As the lead pastor, I have benefited from the accountability, wisdom, and encouragement provided by both John McKellar and Todd Renner. We have communicated and shared without fear of judgement — a true blessing rarely found in the church community. (A sad observation!)

The model is one that remains in progress as we learn and grow and tweak it together. Our common goal is to see both churches thrive in ministry together as we partner to build our unique corners of the Central Texas Conference.

I truly look forward to where our experiment in neoconnectionalism takes us. It is my expectation that we have an exciting story of shared success in ministry to tell someday soon. It is also my hope that what these two churches are beginning to experiment with today could become standard understanding of the United Methodist connection tomorrow.

Small Church Leadership Institute equips laity and clergy for success

The Small Church Leadership Institute equips laity and clergy with the knowledge and skills for leading their smaller-attendance churches into the future.

Mount Sequoyah, the South Central Jurisdictional retreat campus in Fayetteville, Ark., will host the institute March 20-24. Presenters and their topics include, but are not limited to:

- Asa Whitaker - a past president of the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders;
- Dr. Tim Reaves - evangelism resource person for the North Carolina Conference;
- Ron Crandall - ordained elder in the Kentucky Conference

focusing on smaller-membership churches and effective Christian witness;

- Andy Oden - “Stewardship Is Not a 4-Letter Word”;
- Amy Forbus - “Marketing for the Small Attendance Church”;
- Bisho Bruce Blake - “Self care, How Is It With Your Soul?” focusing on clergy burnout and conflict resolution;
- Tex Sample - former academic dean at Saint Paul School of Theology.

For the full agenda and registration information, visit www.mountsequoyah.org/Mount_Sequoyah/HOME.html.