



The Towel and Basin

A Ministry Newsletter

The Jackson District, The United Methodist Church

Joy Weathersbee, District Superintendent

John Middleton, Spiritual Formation and Congregational Life

February 2007

Dear Friends,

Last week's retreat at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama, was a time of rest and renewal, stillness and sharing, gracious hospitality from our hosts and deepening friendship among the participants.

We learned some unexpected lessons --

- Don't trust travel directions from MapQuest. County Road 770 is a dirt farm road, barely wide enough for a church bus.
- Those who snore during the period of meditation are truly relaxed and at peace with God.
- The Pottery Shop rule applies in monasteries: If you break it, you buy it.
- Catching a fish is a source of joy. Watching the fish flop out of your hands and back into the lake is no joy at all.

We also learned lessons of greater significance. We agreed on two periods of Centering Prayer daily, at 8:15am and 4:30pm. Shared silence kept us in harmony with our monastic environment and became an authentic experience of corporate worship.

For some of us, praying the Stations of the Cross, being led deeper into the mystery of Jesus' suffering and death, was the most meaningful part of the week.

Sister Mary McGehee reminded us that the word "rule," as in the Rule of St. Benedict, means "trellis." She also suggested that writing a personal Rule of Life provides a framework for balanced spiritual growth. As a place to begin, she identified four elements that should have a place in any personal Rule: prayer, community, mindfulness, and service.

The dates for next year's District Retreat at Sacred Heart are February 11-15. Perhaps monastic spirituality can expand your awareness of God's gracious presence in our midst.

Let us encourage one another. *John*

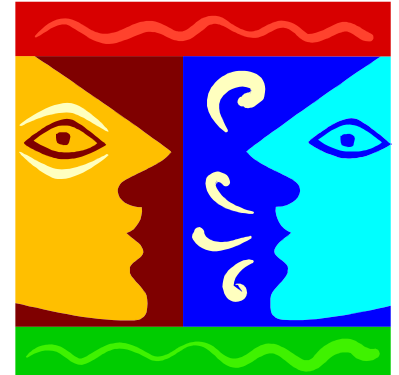
Though we live in “the information age,” it can be difficult to keep persons sufficiently informed about the life and ministries of their local church. Sometimes people receive inaccurate information. Sometimes the information is received too late to be helpful. Often information is shared selectively. And sometimes the leaders of a congregation simply assume that everyone else knows what the leaders know.

Communicating with persons beyond the church membership can be even more challenging. The larger community has no specific ties to the church or knowledge of the church’s life. It doesn’t understand the church’s special jargon. It may have outdated perceptions of your church that inhibit the community’s ability to hear and respond to your message.

The most costly mistake is to think of communications as no more than the sharing of information. Communications is a ministry, not an administrative function. For some people it is the bridge into a meaningful relationship with God and neighbor. For others it provides ongoing formation in discipleship. Good communications is a way in which the church nurtures, equips, and empowers disciples.

As with any ministry, communications must recognize and respect a variety of audiences. We respect an audience by asking, “What matters to these people?”

rather than beginning with the question, “What do we want to tell them?” Effective communications is not “all about us.” It is about the needs of people in a variety of audiences.



Writing in “Leading Ideas” from the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary, Ann Michel identifies four audiences for church communications: the core membership, the less active membership, nearby audiences, and the larger community.

She writes, “Because virtually all church communication emanates from the core groups, it tends to assume the mindset, language, and concerns of those already present in the church, and thus fails to connect effectively with those beyond the core.”

Abandoning the “inside-out” approach, let’s think “outside-in,” starting with the most distant audiences.

Community members are most likely to form an impression based on what they see of a church as they drive by or what they learn in the news media. Signage, banners, the appearance of the building and grounds, and publicly visible activities -- these should be treated as means of welcoming and informing persons beyond the

Continued on page 3

the church. A media plan and a welcoming, informative website are also important.

Nearby audiences include visitors, friends and family, and participants in groups that meet at the church. These people can be identified and named. Their opinions are formed by their experiences -- what they see inside the building, what they hear from church members, their interactions with members and staff. If these persons have experienced an authentically caring relationship, targeted invitational campaigns can be effective. The worship bulletin should also be designed with this audience in mind. Make it easy to participate in the flow of the service, and don't assume knowledge of traditional worship elements, such as The Apostles Creed and The Lord's Prayer.

Less active members may care a great deal about the church, but are not able to attend on a regular basis; or they may not care at all. Since the newsletter is the only tool that regularly reaches 100% of members, including

older adults, inactives, and infrequent worshipers, it remains an important means of communications. It may be "old news" to core members, but the newsletter can keep the door open and reinforce connections with less active members. It should be written with this audience in mind.

The core audience depends upon face-to-face communications and other forms of personal interaction -- phone calls, emails, announcements. Since active members account for the vast majority of congregational website hits, sites should be designed primarily for them, but also with an eye toward potential visitors.

Effective communication is required of every member. However, a communications plan that recognizes the variety of audiences and focuses the church's message accordingly can help make connections with the needs, desires, and yearnings of people within and beyond the church walls.

O God, you have spoken, and we are filled with the breath of life. You have touched us with fire and our tongues have been loosened to pray, praise, and proclaim. You have opened our ears and our hearts so that barriers to community have come tumbling down. Guide us now to deeper truth that we may hear all you wish to say to us. Send us forth as life-givers. Keep us patient in listening. Give courage to our witness. Restrain our hasty words and sharp tongues. May all gossip and rumor stop with us. As your Spirit-filled, fire-tinged people, may our words and deeds become instruments of your peace. Amen

BUILDING COMMUNITY ON COMMON GROUND
Exploring the Spirituality of Howard Thurman
Sponsored by Lambuth University and the Jackson District



Dr. Howard Thurman

Sunday, February 25, 6:00pm

"Community Beyond Our Dreams"

Lambuth University Chapel

Presented by Dr. Luther Smith, Candler School of Theology

This event is open to the public, especially the churches of the Jackson District. Because Dr. Smith is ordained in the CME Church, we expect to be joined by members of Mother Liberty and other CME congregations, as well as faculty and students from Lane College. Churches that have Sunday evening worship or Bible Study are encouraged to make this event their gathering for February 25. All churches are encouraged to make an intentional, organized effort to draw from this well of spiritual wisdom.

Monday, February 26, 9:30am

"The Pastor as Spiritual Subject"

The Hamilton Room, Wilder Student Building

Registration fee of \$10 includes lunch

Howard Thurman, in many ways a man ahead of his time, speaks with clarity to our time. People are yearning for genuine community, something more lively and sustaining than what is commonly accepted as "church fellowship." Having studied under Rufus Jones, the Quaker mystic, and visited with Mohandas Gandhi in India, Thurman pioneered the first interracial, intercultural, interfaith congregation in the nation - The Church for the Fellowship of All God's People. He began his leadership of Fellowship Church with "a profound conviction that meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them."

Is it not time that God's people in west Tennessee open themselves to the experience of "community beyond our dreams"? Howard Thurman - pastor, mystic, prophet - can be our guide.