

Charlotte District E-Connections

Electronic Newsletter: March 22, 2006

The seven visionary goals of the Western N. C. Annual Conference challenge each of our seventy-eight congregations to nurture a more faithful quality of discipleship. During the fall *Connections* highlighted several churches in the district that have exemplified a significant degree of authenticity by intentionally relating unchurched persons to Jesus Christ. In this first edition of our Charlotte District electronic communication of *Connections*, we are sharing the story of several congregations that are working diligently at another of these primary foci by **nurturing expressions of unity in Christ that value diversity**. Our district congregations indeed reflect the diversity of our culture in age, gender, racial identity, and ethnic origins. We come from a multiplicity of backgrounds in order to be the people called United Methodists in the Charlotte District. But regrettably we remain segregated in our places of worship, even though we are united by a common theology and Wesleyan heritage. *E-Connections* tells the story of four congregations that are intentionally striving to achieve a unity that affirms and values diversity. May these testimonies be a source of encouragement and inspiration to all our churches.

--George Thompson



Tou Her and family singing at Easter service, First Hmong

GOOD SHEPHERD: God's community on earth, like the heavenly fellowship

A guest entering the lobby of Good Shepherd Church's new Worship Center will immediately see a large mural (nine feet high and thirty-three feet long) with the map of the world on it. Superimposed on the map are the words from Philippians 2:11: Jesus Is Lord. Yet the words are not only in English. Over areas of Latin America the words are in Spanish: Jesus Es El Senor. Over Northern Europe the phrase is in German, Jezus is Heer. Asia Minor features the simple creed in Turkish: Isa Efendi. In all, that same phrase — Jesus Is Lord — appears seventeen times in seventeen languages. That mural captures Good Shepherd's understanding of diversity in unity. The church prays it will become full of all kinds of people from all over the world who gather together under the Lordship of Christ. We have no desire to be a white church or a black church or a Latino church or even an English speaking church. We want to be a Christian church, and a Christian church by definition is a diverse church. Our great desire is for worship here to look like worship in heaven — with every tribe, tongue, race, and culture gathered around the throne, giving glory to the Lamb of God. And by the grace of God, we have seen this happen at Good Shepherd.

In 2001, the church was virtually all-white. Since then, however, we have seen a steady influx of worshippers who are African-American, Asian, and Latino, as well as a startling number of international worshippers. Our church family includes people from Congo, Ghana, Sierra Leone, France, Ecuador, Columbia, Mexico, Germany, China, Korea, India, and the Dominican Republic among others. We often say that when it comes to racial and ethnic diversity, we have come a long way in a few years — but that only shows how much further we have to go. We have found some of these strategies helpful in making Good Shepherd a more diverse church:

- Convened a “Reflectors Team” of African-American worshippers already at Good Shepherd and asked them, “How can our church better ‘reflect’ our community?”
- Launched 2004 with a message series called *Let the Walls Fall Down* which used message, video, testimony, and stage décor to demonstrate that in Christ God has already torn down walls between races and cultures.
- Ensuring that our promotional material, visitation teams, and personnel on stage include people from various racial backgrounds.
- An electronic system that allows the sermon at the 11:15 service to be translated into Spanish through headphones — almost like the United Nations!
- Lively worship that includes a full praise band and occasional songs in Spanish. Sermon outlines and welcome cards are in both English and Spanish.
- Received mentoring in Ethnic Focus Ministry from SIM, an independent mission-sending agency with offices near our campus in southwest Charlotte.
- Intentional pursuit of diversity in church leadership. Adding this diversity to staff remains a major goal in 2006.

Comprehensive, lay-led ministry of English as a Second Language, Citizenship, and Spanish as a Second Language classes. Not long ago, a first-time guest entered into our worship space and, after “people-watching” for a time, remarked, “I can't believe all the different kinds of people you have coming here.” The church has also become home to a large number of bi-racial couples who have found the international feel of the congregation to be welcoming and

comfortable. Having said all that, there are two foundational beliefs that we believe give strength to our commitment to diversity:

1. There is no diversity in staff or leadership when it comes to the Lordship of Christ. Ours is not a doctrinal diversity. We have great unity when it comes to the core tenets of the faith — authority of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith, the reality of heaven and hell, and the ultimate return and victory of Christ over the powers of sin and death. Of course we have many people who attend the church who are still searching for their Christian faith; however, to serve on staff or in leadership involves faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ. We have found that bold doctrinal stands are a rallying point for diverse peoples.

2. A diverse church is a RESULT. A result of what? It is a result of people who are reconciled to God. If people come to faith in Christ and understand that Galatians 3:28 is true — **“for there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** — then they will want a diverse church. So our primary task is to help reconcile people to God; racial reconciliation will then follow.



On a recent Sunday at Good Shepherd, while singing **Magnify Jesus**, the praise band broke into Spanish: “alabe el Cristo, alabe el Señor . . .” After a brief hesitation, the Anglo and African-American worshippers joined with their Latin brothers and sisters in a new language of praise. It felt a bit like heaven on earth. Maybe it was.

Pastor Talbot Davis, Good Shepherd UMC

COKESBURY UMC: A Cross-Racial Appointment

We were very pleased at Cokesbury, Charlotte, to learn about our new pastor who would join us in July, 2004. We heard that he was multi-talented — a terrific preacher, a wonderful singer, and a lot of fun! We greatly anticipated his arrival. We were not disappointed. Everything we had heard was true. He was exceedingly dynamic in the pulpit. There was no sleeping when he was preaching! His singing voice was something to behold indeed — filling the sanctuary with richness without need of a microphone. He was personable — easy to talk to, fun to be around with a booming laughter. We were delighted . . . and still are!

It just so happens that our pastor is an African American — and appointed to a predominately white church. We wondered if it would work. HE wondered if it would work! But it has become easy to see that he was just exactly what Cokesbury needed. His gifts and talents fit us beautifully and our graces fit well with him. So, what’s the big deal about cross racial appointments? As chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee at Cokesbury this year, my experience has been that, when the pastor-church match is right and when both parties enter into the arrangement with open-mindedness and a spirit of excitement about the opportunity it brings, it’s bound to be successful, regardless of race. We love our pastor and are grateful to God for his

gifts, talents, leadership, and for the foresightedness of our District Superintendent and the Cabinet for sending him our way.

--Joyce Brooks, 2005 Chair Staff Parish Relations Committee, Cokesbury UMC, Charlotte

COVENANT UMC: God's Mission Found Us

In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke strongly about compassion for the stranger. This was evidenced in a powerful way during the past year, as Covenant got serious about offering hospitality and acceptance to all with whom we come in contact.

In July of 2004, two Montagnards came to my study prior to worship. They were looking for a place in which they and their community might worship. We opened our doors, our minds, and our hearts to these gracious and humble people who fled their homeland of Vietnam because of persecution and an ever-present threat of death.

Two months later, On September 19, 2004, 58 Montagnards united with our church upon profession of faith. Between 100 and 125 Montagnards meet regularly each Sunday for a service in their native language. Some attend out 11:00 AM service, as well.

Through a District Mission Society grant and a Congregational Development grant, we have been able to upgrade our facilities and purchase needed equipment. There is a strong sense of ownership in this mission, as together we have worked to recondition an old building that was not being used for program ministry or worship space. The Montagnard members took the initiative, asking if they might help with yard service and other maintenance needs. During the fall we purchased much needed equipment--musical instruments, hymnals, and Bibles. In February our district superintendent preached to a packed room of worshipers. All of these are eager to be an integral part of the United Methodist Church and in fellowship with the people of Covenant UMC. Some weeks ago the *Charlotte Observer* provided a feature article concerning this exciting ministry.

Attendance at fellowship meals and other gatherings is on the rise, and several of our church families have "adopted" Montagnard families, offering assistance and support. It is a glorious day in the life of Covenant, and we covet your prayers as we continue reaching out to others in the name of our Lord. Our church welcomes the partnership of other congregations in the district as we unite hand and heart with these brothers and sisters in Christ.

De Hillyer, Pastor



HARRISON UMC: People from every tribe, language and nation

There is a saying that, “when God is about to do something new he puts his people to praying.” At Harrison we are seeing something new taking place. I believe that it is a result of praying, preaching and the vision that has come through those avenues. Harrison is the oldest existing congregation of the United Methodist Church in the Charlotte district. The new thing that we are seeing is that people from around the world are becoming a part of the Harrison family. For many years Harrison has been a white, middle class church with almost no variation. Just a few years ago an awareness came that the church should be more like the kingdom of God, which includes people from all nations, races, languages, cultures and social groups.

Pastor Mark shared on Sunday mornings his dream of looking out over the congregation of Harrison and seeing that diversity. Seeing that diversity does make a difference. We proclaim a gospel that is for all people, where all are equal in God’s sight and yet in church on Sunday Morning our congregations are made up of people of only one race, one language, and of one social level. So how will people ever come to believe that the Love of Christ breaks down barriers if it doesn’t do so in the local church? People at Harrison began to pray about this vision and soon God began to open doors.

The English as a Second Language program (ESL) was developed to help meet the needs of the diverse immigrant population that has settled in the Charlotte area. The program started small but as the students became confident that their teachers were truly committed to helping them they began to tell their friends. We now have about 50 students who come out each Wednesday and Thursday evening for ESL. We constantly invite the ESL students to the other activities at Harrison Church and little by little they are coming. We tell them, “This Church is for you.” The International Celebration of Neighbors is an event that we hold early in the year. It is one evening of fellowship designed to bring together some of our church members with people from the International Community. We know that, as people from different cultures get to know each other, they will begin to understand and accept each other. So we plan an evening in the fellowship hall, we invite folks from the church and the community to come. We serve international food, we arrange for singers, dancers and speakers from various parts of the world to share with the group that evening. We know that walls will be broken down and that friendships will be formed.

We have a Bilingual Worship service each Saturday evening at 6:30pm. We use

Spanish and English in the singing, praying and preaching. We also have occasional bilingual healing services, one Christmas Eve bilingual service, and a bilingual Easter Eve service as well. Some of the things that we hope to begin in the future are the following:

- *Providing transportation for residents of the Charlotte Rescue mission to attend Sunday Worship;
- *Initiating a Spanish Language Sunday School Class;
- *Establishing an ESL Sunday School Class.

The reality is that no amount of human effort can achieve the purposes of God. First God puts the idea in the hearts of a few, then the vision is shared from the pulpit and people begin to pray. The result has been that people from the congregation have become committed to welcoming folks into Harrison and ministering to them. Our dream is that Harrison will be a sign of the coming Kingdom of God which will be made up of the redeemed from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9) And that Harrison will be a sign of the Love of God showing that there is nothing higher, wider or deeper than the Love of Christ. (Rom. 8:39)

Associate Pastor Tim Webster, Harrison UMC

NEWS FROM AROUND THE DISTRICT

CONFIRMATION CELEBRATION WITH THE BISHOP--March 25, 2006

Bishop J. Lawrence McCleskey will host a special event this spring just for Confirmands. The event will be on March 25th at Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory. It is for youth who have completed, or are in the process of confirmation studies. Youth from all around the Western N.C. Conference will celebrate faith in Christ and experience our connectedness as United Methodists.

This event acknowledges that Confirmation is an important milestone in the Christian journey. It is the time when a child or adult makes a commitment to serve Jesus Christ and His Church with one's presence, prayers, gifts and service. Each year, United Methodist Churches everywhere hold Confirmation Classes for their youth--usually those in middle high who are 11-13 years of age--for several weeks prior to Confirmation Sunday. Often, church members serve as mentors, and whole families are encouraged to participate in the process. For additional information about the Confirmation Celebration contact the WNC Conference Youth Ministries office at 704-535-2260, ext. 125 or 117.

District UMW Prayer Breakfast

Saturday, March 25th – 9:00 a.m.

Speaker: Mrs. Margaret McCleskey

Theme: Peace through Prayer

First UMC

501 N. Tryon Street

Charlotte, NC 28202

For additional details contact your local UMW president or Vernie Hollifield, Charlotte District UMW President at 704-536-5915.

The Western NC Conference Clergy Partners Fellowship Spring Retreat

This annual event will be held March 31-April 2, 2006 at the Catholic Conference Center in Hickory. Catherine Ritch Guess will lead this year's sessions with the theme, "Come unto the Potter." This retreat will provide a time to rest, rejuvenate and restructure your thoughts about being a clergy partner. Focus on accepting that it's okay if you don't play the piano, sing in the choir, teach Sunday school or do catering. And - shock! - it's okay to say "no." Registration information will be mailed to clergy partners by early February. If you have questions or need additional information, please contact Wanda Randolph at 704-752-7594.

PAUMCS

(Professional Association of UM Church Secretaries) will hold its 24th Annual Conference, April 20-22, 2006, in Pasadena, California. The theme "We're Coming up Roses," will set the tone for the continuing education seminars and activities. This year's seminars leaders include: Kathy Slamp (Vessel Ministries), Dr. Philip A. Amerson President and Professor of Church and Society of Claremont School of Theology), and Reverend Sara Armstrong (author of The Shattered Pearl). PAUMCS was adopted by the legislation of the 1988 General Conference which states that the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) has the authority and responsibility to provide guidance and consultation for continuing educations of church secretaries, including the establishment of training and certification programs.

If you would like to learn more about PAUMCS or obtain registration information for the April conference, please visit the website <http://www.paumcs.org/events.htm> or contact the district office at 704-525-3395/chardist@bellsouth.net.