

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – FEBRUARY 21 EDITION

South Georgia volunteers serve on Navajo reservation

By Kelly Roberson, Director of Conference Ministries/Communications

Volunteers from the South Georgia Annual Conference have a history of ministry in the 4 Corners area of the Navajo reservation. Rev. John Stephens, III, pastor serving Evelyn UMC and Pavo UMC, is now doing his part to ensure the ministry continues.

For the last five years Stephens has traveled to the 4 Corners area with other volunteers from Cairo First UMC and Climax UMC as well as volunteers from other denominations as part of Lifeline Ministries, a ministry led by lay people in the southwest area of Georgia.

Stephens now, however, finds himself in a different role. He has shifted from one of the many volunteers to the person leading the team of volunteers from South Georgia to be in ministry with the people on the reservation.

Finally back in action from a two year hiatus due to Covid shutting down the reservation to outsiders, Stephens was ready to get back to work.

Stephens made two trips in late 2022 to the 4 Corners area of the Navajo reservation – which is situated in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah and touching Colorado. Wayne Mitchell, a retired United Methodist local pastor from Ray City, traveled with him on one of these trips.

“Wayne and I went out to the Sawmill UMC and repaired a handicap ramp, replaced doors, and added a front door to the church. Ladies from the church painted the kitchen, and together we put down flooring in the kitchen,” said Stephens.

In addition to this type of hands-on work, Stephens says the biggest ministry he and others are involved with is the collection of shoeboxes for the people on the reservation.

Each December John returns with volunteers who carry three trucks pulling 14-foot box trailers. A typical team consists of nine members who drive 3,800 miles round trip in 7 days.

“We take approximately 3,000 gifts in shoeboxes as well as winter clothing,” said Stephens. “Many churches in the South Georgia Conference participate in (this initiative). We leave cargo at four different churches on the reservation that serve as distribution points.”

Last year’s trip began December 7. While the total expense to travel to and from Arizona is around \$7,000, the team from South Georgia received support from the South Georgia Conference through its Native American Special Sunday offering collection, from the Southwest District mission fund, and from local South Georgia churches.

“The Annual Conference is excited to be able to continue doing ministry with the Navajo nation,” said Rev. Garth Duke-Barton, pastor of Epworth UMC and Conference Secretary for Global Ministries. “Our Advance Mission Specials make ministry like this one possible.”

Stephens plans to take another team next year. For him, whether it’s a team working on repairs or delivering shoeboxes, it really is a true labor of love.

If you would like to participate in a mission trip to the Navajo nation, contact Rev. Stephens at jhstephens111@gmail.com. If you would like to support this ministry, you can give directly to the South Georgia Conference and mark it for Lifeline Ministries, Advance Special # 7781.



South Georgia Conference announces district leadership restructuring plan, proposed budget reductions

The South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church will be undergoing budget reductions to appropriately plan for financial implications as a result of local church disaffiliations. Based upon recent trends and detailed predictions, the annual conference is seeking to decrease its 2024 operating budget in order to maximize its sustainability and viability as an annual conference.

In the Fall, the South Georgia Conference’s Council on Finance and Administration (CFA) asked Bishop David Graves and the Leadership Forum, a representative group of conference leaders, to make budget reduction recommendations totaling \$1.6 million for the 2024 budget.

The Leadership Forum met in October to provide initial direction and feedback to a smaller subgroup of the Forum. This smaller group met in November, December, and January. They did budget analysis and had conversations with stakeholder groups throughout the conference. They presented their findings to the full Leadership Forum in January, who then voted to present recommendations to CFA at its Spring meetings in March.

The first step in budget reductions is a proposal to restructure district leadership. While the six districts will remain in place, there will be three regions with two districts in each region. One District Superintendent will oversee one region. The cost saving in reducing 3 district superintendent positions is approximately \$600,000. The six physical district offices will be eliminated as well as the district administrative assistant positions.

“This is the most difficult part of ministry leadership,” said Bishop David Graves. “We value people and talent, but we must prioritize what is needed in the conference and districts to achieve our goals. While it is painful to eliminate any positions, we must appropriately plan for the future of the conference.

“We celebrate faithful missional giving during these challenging times and acknowledge the many churches who have continued their commitment to the conference. A comprehensive district plan will ultimately allow more funding to remain in the local churches,” said Bishop Graves.

Each region will have a District Superintendent, and there will be a ministry and administrative team supporting the work of each district. The District Superintendents, the pairings of districts, and the structural plans for the support team will be announced in the coming weeks.

The restructuring of district leadership will take effect July 1, 2023.

Along with the savings from district leadership reduction, the Leadership Forum is proposing 2024 budget cuts to the following areas: Administrative Services Director position (sharing costs with Alabama-West Florida), Connectional Ministries, Hispanic Ministries, Higher Education and Ministry, Board of Ministry, Contingency Fund, Comprehensive Protection Plan, and the Annual Conference session.

“I want to express my appreciation to Bishop Graves and to the Leadership Forum for the work they did and the information they have provided CFA to help us make the best decisions for our Annual Conference,” said the Rev. Dr. Shane Green, CFA chairman. “We will use their recommendations as the basis of our work in March as we prepare the 2024 budget.”

Once approved by CFA at their April meeting a detailed budget will be presented to the conference to be voted on at the 2023 Annual Conference session. CFA will release the full budget recommendations following their March 24 meeting.

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Conference Witness Team plans for the next year

By Rev. Danita Poston Knowles

The Oxford dictionary defines witness as one who sees and gives evidence of personal experience or observation. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are all witnesses. We each have a story to share with others about the Messiah, who Jesus is as our Lord and Savior. We testify of Jesus’ loving sacrifice to forgive our sins and give us victorious life and eternal life in the heavenly Kingdom to come.

The goals of your Conference witness team are three-fold:

1. **Recognizing the ministry of evangelism.** The witness team wants to lift up those among us, both clergy and laity, both youth and adult, who embody the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8, “And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.” The Harry Denman Evangelism Award is given to a youth and an adult with an exceptional ministry of evangelism expressed in word, sign, and deed. His/her consistent commitment is evidenced by many who have been helped by him/her in their faith journey. If you know of such a person, please nominate them. [Click here for more information.](#)
2. **Instruct. Empower. Resource.** The witness team wants to instruct, empower, and resource every SGAUMC church to evangelize (share Jesus) within local contexts.

Your team is keenly aware that 2023 is unique in our South Georgia Conference history. Along with Conference leadership, we recognize there are souls who urgently need Jesus for help, hope, and healing. These are: a) United Methodist “refugees” from disaffiliated churches who need a church home, b) those who are hurt, disillusioned, and “done” with the traditional church, and c) the “nones” who will never enter church buildings, who think the church and Jesus have nothing relevant for their lives.

Your witness team is collaborating with Anne Bosarge, Director of Leadership Strategies and Local Church Resources, to learn more about establishing home churches and other Fresh Expressions of church that are non-traditional. We desire to be used by the Conference to empower all of you to go forth in Jesus’ name to evangelize your world by all means.

3. **Answering the questions.** Our team wants to help answer questions like: What does it mean to “evangelize”? How can we witness? We want to be a source of information and encouragement about witnessing and evangelism.

The Witness Team is excited about moving forward, diving in, and being strategic around the area of evangelism and outreach. Stay tuned to future articles.

Rev. Danita Poston Knowles is the pastor of Tabernacle UMC and Tennille UMC and serves as the chair of the South Georgia Conference Witness Team. Rev. Precious Hawkins, pastor of Asbury UMC in Savannah, also serves on the Witness Team.



Imagine It!

If you want to be part of the Fresh Expression movement here in South Georgia, make plans to join us for our Imagine Day April 15.

By Anne Bosarge

Imagine the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church expanding and growing in new ways to meet new people with the love and grace of the Gospel of Christ. Imagine seeing people coming to Christ where they work, in their homes, and in the places where they play. Imagine what it would look like to see new discipling communities popping up regularly across the conference as more and more people feel the call of God to lead others to faith in Him! Can you see it? I believe it's about to happen in South Georgia in 2023!

There has been a seismic shift in the last few years in how people live, work, play, and grow. Instead of having distinct places for work, personal life, play and spiritual growth, the walls between these spaces are coming down. People are realizing they can bring their whole selves to each of these spaces without having to go to a specific place at a specific time for a specific purpose. This shift has affected how people desire to engage with a church community as well.

Instead of "going to church" like many of us have done all our lives, some people are now looking to engage in "church" right where they are at the very moment they need it. People are working from home and merging their work life and home life. People are worshipping with their families at home and merging their church life and their personal life. People are bringing their work into "third spaces" where they like to relax and spend time. Walls are broken down and people are being invited to bring their whole integrated selves into each of these spaces. If this is where many people are, shouldn't the church be willing to meet them there?

Jesus did a lot of teaching and preaching outside the walls of the church/synagogue. He taught from boats and around water. He taught on the mountains and the plains. He taught on the roads and around the table. Jesus held "church" anywhere there were people who needed to hear the good news. So, what does that mean for those of us who desire to make disciples for the transformation of the world? What does that look like for churches who are seeking to make disciples the way Jesus made disciples?

It's time for the church to adopt an attitude of "go there" as well as "come here." It's important for us to be people who meet others where they are and point them to Jesus, not just pointing them to our churches. We need to show people they matter to God right where they are, and they can worship within their community in Spirit and truth; a specific location isn't required (John 4:21-24). We need to show them the church is alive and active outside the walls of our buildings, and Jesus is with us at all times, wherever we are.

If you can imagine this Fresh Expression of church and are ready to meet people right where they are, we invite you to join us in a movement to make South Georgia a conference of believers who aren't only

gathered in church buildings but are also scattered around in their communities bringing the Gospel of Jesus to people right where they live, work, and play. **If you want to be part of the Fresh Expression movement here in South Georgia, make plans to join us for our Imagine Day coming up on April 15 at Epworth By The Sea.** Dr. Michael Beck, Director of Re-Missioning for Fresh Expressions US and Cultivator of Fresh Expressions for the Florida Conference of the UMC, will be here to lead us in a one-day workshop from 9am-3pm. We will learn how to cultivate accessible, transformative, and connectional forms of church in a distinctly Wesleyan movement of Christian communities. Interested in joining this movement in South Georgia? Join us by registering here: <https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/ImagineDay>.

Anne Bosarge serves as the Director of Leadership Strategies and Local Church Resources. Email her at abosarge@sgaumc.com.



FROM THE BISHOP BISHOP DAVID GRAVES

I am thankful for you!

These are not easy days in our beloved church, and, yet, I find myself thanking God every day for the people He has called me to shepherd and lead. There are wonderful people who make up the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church. Nancy and I continually remark to one another that there is just such a sweet, sweet spirit here in South Georgia.

I am thankful for our South Georgia churches who are focusing on the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I am thankful for our clergy and laity who are not getting distracted by votes, divisive conversations, and misinformation.

I am thankful for churches who value our connection with one another and are choosing to stay at the table so we can move forward in ministry together.

Just last week, someone shared with me a [sermon by Rev. Dr. Jimmy Asbell](#), one of our own South Georgia clergy. In it, he talks about how some of these denominational conversations can be a distraction to our mission, and I couldn't agree with him more. He also reminds us of the wonderful strength of our connection right here in the South Georgia Conference.

I am excited about our [church planting and revitalization initiative](#). Each day I am told of something new springing up here in South Georgia. The Holy Spirit is surely moving among us. God has opened up new windows of opportunity to plant and revitalize churches. With a renewed sense of commitment, I believe God is calling the South Georgia Conference to a new and abundant life.

I want to remind you of [the resources we have on our website](#): “Why I Love Being a United Methodist,” FAQs, videos, and more. In addition, we have a newly created [“Moving Forward in Mission” page](#) that helps guide church members affected by disaffiliation in whatever direction God is calling them.

I want you to know my commitment is focusing on the people and churches of the great South Georgia Conference and moving forward in this next season of ministry together. God is at work in mighty ways, and

I look forward to how we, together as the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church, can change our corner of the world.

In Christ,

Bishop David Graves



2023 prayer emphasis: March prayer guide now available

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. March’s prayer guide, written by Revs. Josh Gale, Jon Brown, Sara Pugh Montgomery, and Teresa Edwards, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer. A bulletin insert is also available for local churches to use.

In addition to the prayer guides, four book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.](#)

Book One: “Prayer Changes Us” by Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry Street UMC
Book talk hosted by the author, Ted Goshorn, on Monday, Feb 27, noon-1pm

Book Two: “Praying with Our Feet” by Lindsey Krinks
Book talk hosted by Abra Lattany-Reed on Monday, May 22, noon-1pm

Book Three: “From Burned Out to Beloved” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser
Book talk hosted by Grace Guyton on Monday, Aug. 21, noon-1pm

Book Four: “Dynamite Prayer” by Rosario Picardo and Sue Nilson Kibbey
Book talk hosted by the author, Rosario Picardo, on Monday, Nov. 27, noon-1pm



Audio-visual interns sought

College students wanting to learn about the audio-video world are encouraged to apply for a summer internship with GNTV, a United Methodist-related ministry. Applicants should have a background in audio production, sound reinforcement, video image magnification, video capture, video editing or presentation graphics. Summer interns should expect a significant amount of travel. Deadline to apply is March 13. [Learn more and apply](#)



United Methodist Connectional FCU 2023 Annual College Scholarships

The United Methodist Federal Credit Union is offering four college scholarship - \$1,000 each – to its four conferences: Florida, North Georgia, South Georgia and Alabama-West Florida. If you are or you know is a member of the credit age 17-35 who is attending or planning to attend college and attend church in in one of the four conferences, let them know about this college scholarship program.

Applicants will need to meet the following requirements:

- Be a credit union member in good standing: Joining requires a \$5 initial deposit into a share/savings account, but once you're a member, you can easily open a checking account, get a debit card and enroll in online banking so you'll be all ready with the right financial tool kit.
- Submit a 500-Word Essay: Write an essay that answers the following question: Credit unions are not-for-profit financial institutions whose purpose is to serve its members. How can UMC FCU better appeal to and serve its college and young adult members?

The application and essay are due April 28, 2023. [Apply Today](#)

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February 26 Lesson: Results of the Call

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 3: God's Call

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 26, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-10

Key Verse

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Lesson Aims

- To retrace the journey we have taken this quarter and in this unit as our themes culminate
- To explore what nourishment we should be receiving, why, and for what purpose
- To recall the idea of a kingdom-wide priesthood from its earliest origins and apply it to the church
- To reflect on what it means to join ourselves to the stone the builders rejected
- To appreciate anew the journey we're on and recommit ourselves to bringing others along

Retracing Our Journey this Quarter

This lesson is the last one for this unit and this quarter. It brings our themes to a culmination point. The theme for this quarter has been "from darkness to light," and the theme for this unit has been "God's call." In each lesson, the invitation has been to understand the intersection between our own journey from darkness to light and the call God has placed on our lives in light of this journey.

The scripture for this lesson could not be more fitting to bring these two themes together in a way that culminates this journey for us and calls us to an active response. This is the purpose, is it not? We have been studying these lessons not just to add to our knowledge, but to bring about our own transformation so that we can love God more and bear more fruit in our service to God.

The Need for Nourishment

Our scripture lesson does not mind mixing metaphors. Meaningful metaphors abound. The first ones we encounter have to do with the way we are nourished for our spiritual journey.

¹ Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Malice is the intent or desire to do harm to another person. Guile is the attempt to outwit someone using slyness or deception. Insincerity is the opposite of being genuine and presenting our authentic selves. Envy cannot be satisfied with someone having more than we have or being more than we are. Slander is spreading false rumors about others in an attempt to bring them down. Not only should these behaviors be eliminated from our lives because of the obvious harm they inflict upon other people, but also because they spread throughout our being like a poison. Have you ever heard of the phrase: *garbage in, garbage out*? If you take garbage into your lives, then garbage will be what your life produces.

What we let into our lives should only be that which nourishes us for the most authentic life possible. Like newborn infants, we should long for the pure, spiritual milk that will nourish us. What we are growing into is no less than the full experience of the salvation God is offering us. The scripture tests us to see if this is what we want. It says, “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” This is an echo of what the psalmist talked about in Psalm 34:8 when he exclaimed, “O taste and see that the LORD is good!”

Let that imagery sink in. A person’s senses of taste and smell together bring so much delight. Did you get COVID and lose your sense of taste like I did? I truly missed it, and rejoiced when it returned. Tasting something means you have fed on something. Tasting something also points to something more to be experienced. There is the promise of something more. It is about a desire being awakened. If you have tasted something, there is more to come.

The scripture is asking us if we have tasted salvation. Is there an experience of something? Is there a recognition that, whatever we have experienced, there is more? In both questions, there is an invitation.

Once we have tasted salvation, we want more, and we will not be satisfied with the poison that people commonly let into their lives. If malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander do something for you, then be scared. And they probably will entice you at some point. The taste may tempt you to consume more, but the taste will turn bitter. Some people have never tasted salvation. They have never tasted love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They don’t know what they are missing. Once you have tasted the best, why would you want to taste anything else? This scripture should get us thinking.

Are there times when you realize you are allowing too much garbage in your life? To what behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes are you most susceptible? When you realize that you are allowing malice and envy into your life, what behaviors and practices do you engage in to bring yourself back to greater spiritual health?

This is about the nourishment we need for the journey that lies before us. But there’s more.

We’re Building a Kingdom of Priests for God to Inhabit

The next two verses present two powerful metaphors that are different from one another but in the same realm. There is the imagery of a spiritual house and the imagery of a holy priesthood.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵ like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The invitation is for believers 1) to come to Christ, the living stone, 2) to see themselves as living stones, and 3) to let themselves be built into a spiritual house. More will be said in the verses ahead concerning what the imagery of this stone says about Christ and about us. First, let's consider what it means to see ourselves as living stones and letting ourselves be built into a spiritual house. The emphasis is not on believers inhabiting this spiritual house. In this imagery, believers are the building materials used in building the house of worship. The emphasis therefore is God inhabiting this house—God inhabiting our life together.

This is why it is so important that we keep malice, guile, insincerity, envy, slander, and the like from entering our life together. This is why we are only allowing into our life together what is pure and beneficial for growing into the full experience of God's saving grace. We are building something through our collective existence that God himself could inhabit.

How do you think of your life together in your church home differently when you think of it as a vessel for God to inhabit? What does it mean for you to know that you are part of the building materials God is using to build his Church?

The scripture adds another metaphor—that of a holy priesthood. The origin of this idea goes back centuries to the time of Moses:

³ Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: ⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (Exodus 19:3-6)

It is moving to imagine a people that God bore on eagles' wings to deliver them from bondage. It is equally moving to imagine these people being called God's treasured possession. Perhaps the most provocative image is God's treasured possession, that is all Israelites, being made into a kingdom of priests. Let's unpack this image.

What is a priest? Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, and Episcopalians generally refer to their ministers as priests, and other denominations refer to them as ministers, pastors, and preachers. As one who is an ordained United Methodist minister, I know that I was trained and set apart to be minister, preacher, pastor, prophet, and priest for the congregations I have served. All these are vital functions that the shepherd of a congregation must live out to be faithful to his or her calling. Ministers serve, preachers preach, pastors care, and prophets speak God's timely word.

The role of priest is to be God's representative in the context of the worshiping congregation. A priest is God's representative who plays double duty, so to speak. A priest 1) represents God before the people, and 2) represents the people before God.

It is interesting to look at the careers of Moses and his brother Aaron. Moses surely played a priestly role, because we see him at times speaking to the people on behalf of God, and then we see him speaking to God on behalf of the people. Yet, Aaron is the one who would be identified as the priest, and wear the priestly vestments and conduct the rituals and ceremonies. Whatever vestments are worn, the heart of being a priest is being the bridge between God and the people. This is surely what God had in mind when God lifted up the ideal of all Israelites becoming a kingdom of priests.

In the same way that Moses and Aaron were set apart in their various ways to be bridges between God and the people, God was setting apart the whole nation of Israel, God's treasured possession, to be the bridge between God and the whole earth, which also belongs to God. The idea is that God uses one subset of what belongs to God to reach and claim all of what belongs to God.

So, in First Peter, God is claiming for the New Testament Church the role that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. God's ideal is that all believers serve as priests to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We will return to this big idea in the 9th verse and develop it more. We have been introduced to two metaphors that are intended to work together—a spiritual house God inhabits and a holy priesthood that God uses to reach the world. In the next three verses, we will lean into the image of the spiritual house and how its one-of-a-kind cornerstone determines the way the Church should be built.

Joining Ourselves to the Stone Others Reject

How a foundation and building will be situated is set by the way a cornerstone is placed. A series of three of Old Testament scriptures have been knit together to reveal thoughts about how Christ, the living stone, serves as the cornerstone for the spiritual community that God is building for God to inhabit.

⁶ For it stands in scripture:

**“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”**

⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

**“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”**

⁸ and

**“A stone that makes them stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”**

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

From Isaiah 28:16, we get the picture of God laying in Zion a cornerstone that is chosen and precious. We are promised that we will not be put to shame for believing in him. To us who believe, the stone is precious, but according to Psalm 118:22, those who do not believe are not the first to reject the stone. For, it was the stone that the builders originally rejected that was chosen to become the cornerstone. According to Isaiah 8:14, this stone that became the cornerstone has also been a stone that has caused people to stumble. Those who stumble do so by disobeying the word. It is said that they were destined to stumble because the story of Christ forces us to make a decision. Christ is either the stone over which people stumble or the stone which they build a life. We do have a choice, but we cannot avoid the choice. The stone is a stone of destiny. Avoiding the choice is itself the choice to reject.

This is the perennial theme running through the story of Christ—the very stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus was crucified on a cross, which represents the ultimate rejection. The great paradox is that the rejection of Jesus that put Jesus on the cross did not undo God's plan. It was on the cross of rejection that Christ perfectly carried out God's plan and created the means for our atonement and salvation. It was Christ's sacrificial love on the cross that conquered the power of sin and death and created the power of resurrection and new life.

Either Christ is the cornerstone of our faith and the cornerstone of our life together, or there is no faith or life together. The potency of the Church's faith and witness rests on the degree to which we proclaim Christ and him crucified and risen.

What does it look like when Christ serves as the cornerstone of your church, its life together, and its witness? What does it look like when your church may be occupied with matters that take the focus away from Christ and him crucified and risen?

The Priesthood of Believers and the Call to Bring Others Along on the Journey

Verse 9 resumes the thought from verse 5. In verse 5, we saw God's ideal in Exodus 19 being applied to the New Testament Church. God's ideal in Exodus 19 was for all of Israel to serve as a kingdom of priests to the whole earth. In verse 9, look for these hopes for God's people Israel being applied to the New Testament Church.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Notice the familiar Old Testament references to the covenant people Israel: 1) chosen people, 2) royal priesthood, 3) holy nation, and 4) God's own people. In verse 9, these names are being applied to the Church. God's ideal for the Church is that all believers serve as priests to offer, in the words of verse 5, "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

What are spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God? The whole Letter to the Hebrews is largely devoted to applying Old Testament illustrations to the Church. It recalls the constant, repetitious sacrificial offerings of animals in the Old Testament, and then tells how Christ, through the one sacrificial offering of himself, accomplished in one single act what all those animal sacrifices could never do—he atoned for our sins once and for all. There is no need for us to make ritual animal sacrifices ever again. What do we offer instead? We offer spiritual sacrifices. In the final chapter of Hebrews, we are given examples of what this looks like: "*Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*" (Hebrews 13:15-16) Believers—that is, all believers—are to witness and serve.

Paul stresses the same idea in the first two verses of his Letter to the Romans: "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (Romans 12:1-2) We are to offer ourselves continually as living sacrifices. We worship God daily (24-7) by the way we are renewing our minds, discerning the will of God, and resisting conformity with the world.

In the words of 1 Peter 2:9, we are making a spiritual offering of ourselves by proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. The mandate behind the priesthood of all believers is that the work of ministry is not to be limited only to those who are ordained or carry the title "Reverend."

Another way of referring to the "priesthood of all believers" is to talk of the "ministry of all Christians" or the "ministry of the laity." Clergy and laity are meant to be partners in ministry. Whenever there has been revival, reform, or renewal in the Church, a mobilization of the laity has been at the center of it. It is the way of the world to pay somebody to do all the work. It is too easy for congregations to adopt this same attitude. Question: "What do we pay you for, preacher?" Answer: "It is not to do all the ministry." The role of pastors is to help the laity find their gifts and become active participants in ministry. When this happens, the Church truly becomes the Body of Christ—the hands, feet, arms, and face of Jesus in the world.

Verse 9 is very direct: the priesthood of believers exists, so that through word, action, and sign, YOU may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called YOU out of darkness into his marvelous light. The emphasis is on you sharing with others what you have experienced and bringing others along with you in the journey from darkness to light. We are not to keep to ourselves the gift we have received. Holding on to what we have received and not sharing it flies in the face of our Savior who gave his all for us.

What is the participation level of the laity in your church? What is your participation level? Can you look back on a time when the participation level was greater? How could you take a step toward greater participation? What would it look like in your church if a much greater proportion of members became activated in the church's overall ministry? What would you be doing as a congregation? What joy and excitement would you be experiencing collectively?

We are given yet another image from the Old Testament to inform the New Testament Church. This comes from the Book of Hosea.

**¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.**

If you will recall the story of the Old Testament prophet Hosea, he was the one whom God caused to fall in love hopelessly with a woman named Gomer, who was a prostitute. He was not called to sample her services. He was called to love her, marry her, care for her, support her, give her the means to clean up her life, and take her out of the business. She would not have it. As much as he tried to woo her and love her, she did not return his affections in the same way. God called him to father the children born to them although it was doubtful that he was the father. All this heartbreak that Hosea experienced was to allow someone on earth to know how God felt when God's people rejected him. He became father to three children who were to be given names that conveyed the poor spiritual condition of God's people. Two names stand out: "Not-pitied" and "Not-my-people."

Throughout this saga, Hosea does learn about the heart of God. Hosea learns that despite all the ways he was wronged by Gomer he cannot help but love her. God says that it is the same way with God himself. God will never let his people go. God will do all God can to bring God's people back to himself. Through divine perseverance, God does bring God's people out of darkness into the light. The sign of the restoration of God's people is when Not-my-people becomes known as "children of the living God" and Not-pitied becomes known as "those who have received mercy."

Verse 10 recalls this image of God's people Israel and applies it to believers who make up the New Testament Church. Every one of us starts out either in darkness, or were headed there, until God intervenes and brings us into light. Every one of us starts out longing for a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, and then God intervenes and reveals that God has a plan for our lives. (That was my story.) Every one of us starts out in need of divine mercy—and, frankly, remains in need of divine mercy. The secret of life is to know where mercy is found. God's mercy, my identity in Christ, my belonging to God's family are all precious gifts I am bound to share. When I share them, not only do I not lose anything, but my experience of these gifts is multiplied a hundredfold.

In what ways have you journeyed from darkness to light in your life? What darkness do you think you may have avoided by coming to Christ? What are the mighty acts of God that you could point to in your life or your church? Has it been too long since you witnessed a mighty act of God? What renewal do you long for your church? Since many pastors feel a burden carrying the ministry of the church on their shoulders, how might you come alongside your pastor and join in the work of ministry?

Prayer

Covenant God, you created your people Israel to be a bridge between You and the world, and you gave the same vision to the Church. Grant that we would catch that vision, so that your people would be mobilized to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Ministerial Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.

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March 5 Lesson: The Prodigal Son

Spring Quarter 2023: Jesus Calls Us
Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Sunday School Lesson for the week of March 5, 2023
By Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Luke 15:11-24

Key Verse: Luke 15:21

Lesson Aims

1. Identify the younger son's choices and the outcome of each choice.
2. Identify who each figure in the parable represents in real life.

Today's lesson begins a new quarter of studies on the exciting theme of "Jesus Calls Us." According to the authors, the lessons this quarter explore some of the most basic principles of Christian faith: that Christ's invitation is open to all people, that his resurrection changed everything, and that those who put their faith in Jesus and anticipate their own resurrection are Jesus' chosen community. These truths spell out much of what it means to live in the kingdom of Heaven, both in the present and in our glorious anticipated future. Unit 1 of the study is labeled "Called from the Margins of Society" and highlights accounts in which Jesus disregarded artificial societal barriers, choosing instead to reach people on the margins. We begin with the parable of "The Prodigal Son" and the introduction to the lesson.

Introduction

Some families anticipate and look forward to family reunions. For them, these occasions are joyous as multiple generations get together for conversation, celebration, and recollection, frequently centered in a cherished meal.

On the other hand, some family reunions are not so anticipated and joyous. At best, these family occasions can drum up feelings of coldness, indifference, and only toleration. Then, at worse, these family relationships are characterized by cruelty, mean-spiritedness, or even worse. In truth, shame or selfishness is often at the root of broken families.

Question! What does Jesus' parable of "The Prodigal Son" have to do with any of this?

Lesson Context

The meaning and implications of parables have been much debated. The Greek word translated “parable” (Matthew 15:15, Mark 4:13, Luke 8:9, etc.) is also translated as “proverb” (Luke 4:23).

At any rate, at their core, biblical parables compare something familiar—like an object or experience—to a truth about God and his work. Parables function on two levels: their literal reference and their spiritual implications. Jesus taught with parables to challenge his audience to consider what assumptions or attitudes of theirs were at odds with God’s work (compare Matthew 13:10-15).

Today’s Scripture is frequently called the parable of the prodigal son. While moderns sometimes use the designation “prodigal” to speak of the rebellion of the younger son, the word in meaning is associated with reckless waste and spending.

This parable before us and the other two parables in Luke chapter 15 all have similar themes: concern for the lost—a lost sheep (3-7), a lost coin (8-10), and the lost son (our text). The similar themes include the following: (1) something valuable is lost, (2) the lost thing is found, and (3) celebration ensues.

Now, Jesus told these parables because some of the most respectable people of the day (Pharisees and teacher of the law) became quite concerned with the company that Jesus kept. As Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, he was breaking the social barriers of his day. Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with people whom the religious leaders considered unclean.

Those people included Jewish tax collectors who collected taxes for the ruling powers. Tax collectors were hated and considered traitors because they assisted the Roman Empire and acted corruptly (Luke 3:12-13). Another group that Jesus frequently associated with was “sinners” (Matthew 9:11, Luke 15:2). This title identified people who had failed to follow the Law of Moses as interpreted by the religious leaders of the day.

Of course, Jesus fellowshiping with these people was not limited to public gatherings. He shared meals with them before they had sought the proper means of forgiveness and restitution as prescribed by the law. His association with them was critical to his mission to seek those who are lost (note Luke 19:10) and bring repentance and salvation (5:29-31).

I. The Dishonorable Son **Luke 15:11-19**

We note at the outset that the characters in Jesus’ parables were generally left unnamed (examples Luke 14:16, 16:1 and contrast 16:20, 23). This practice hinted to the audience that he was teaching by way of a parable and not speaking of real individuals. Jesus’ introduction of “a man” and his “two sons” continues that trend. Today’s lesson, however, will only focus on the interactions between the younger son and the father. The story of the older son (15:25-32) will not be included.

In verse 12a, the younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” Now, children traditionally did not receive their father’s inheritance until the father’s death (see Numbers 27:8-11). The younger son’s request for his share of the inheritance was essentially saying, “Father, I wish you were dead.” 12b. “So, he divided his property between them.”

Jesus did not describe the measure by which the father divided the inheritance. But based on the Law of Moses, the oldest son would have received a double portion (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Either son’s portion could have included a house, land, or other items of wealth. The son’s request implied tremendous

dishonor toward the father and exhibited a rebellious attitude toward the family. Now the Law of Moses described harsh consequences for a son who displayed stubbornness and rebellion toward his family (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21). Rather than responding to the letter of the law, this father before us responded with mercy and grace. This father sought no retribution, despite his son's vile and dishonorable request.

Question! How should believers respond when they are insulted or dishonored?

We note in verse 13 that the younger son gathered all he had and set off for a distant land. For him to gather all he had and leave the land of his family added further insult to the situation. By leaving nothing behind as he left for his journey implied that he did not intend to return. By not mentioning the name of the "distant country" Jesus wants to keep the focus of the parable on the attitudes and actions of the son. Not only did the son want nothing to do with his father but he physically distanced himself through his own relocation. Next, we are told that the son "squandered his wealth in wild living." To be sure, the son did not lose the "wealth" of his inheritance through shrewd-but-failed investments. Instead, he "squandered" it through undisciplined behavior, when he "squandered (the) property with prostitutes" (Luke 15:30). The son piled shame upon shame thus bringing further disgrace to his father and family name—all for gluttonous, "wild" living (compare Proverbs 28:7).

But after the younger son had spent his whole inheritance there was a famine, and he was in need. Famines were frequent in biblical times, just as they are in parts of the world today. These famines would occur when crops failed because of drought or an infestation of insects or because of warfare where the fields went unharvested. The effect of the "severe" famine, not its cause, was most important for the teaching point of the parable (example, Joel 1:2-10).

During a famine, people relied on the generosity of their relatives, neighbors, and leaders (example, Genesis 45:9-11). But the younger son had no such social network to provide care during this crisis nor did he have any money.

The younger son's desperation led him to take degrading work as the hired hand of a "citizen" of the famine-inflicted county. "Pigs" were considered unclean by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 11:7,8). Jesus' Jewish audience would have considered this job to be humiliating. Because the "citizen" owned pigs, he was likely a Gentile non-Jew. The son's work would remind him of the extent of his abandonment of his family and their heritage.

Note here that the son suffered three levels of shame: he wasted his wealth, became a servant, and took a job feeding pigs. For Jesus' audience, the son had received the appropriate consequence for his dishonorable acts. He had brought shame to his father and household, and now multiple levels of shame rested on him. The parable seemed to fulfill an ancient proverb. "The righteous eat to their hearts content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry" (Proverbs 13:25).

In verse 17, the son becomes desperately hungry. However, any food provided (if at all) was so unappealing that it made the food that "the pigs" were eating seem desirable. The exact nature of the "pods" is unknown, but students have proposed that they come from the pods of a carob tree. The point is that the pigs received better care than the son. He was without support or hope—living up to the designation "prodigal."

In verse 17, we note that this young son came to his senses. He came to himself. In the son's case, he had to come to the place of desiring pig food to realize his foolishness; he had wasted the material blessings he had received. Though he had not repented at this point, the statement "he came to his senses" implied the first step of repentance. He recognized the sad direction of his life and felt sorrow as a result (see II Corinthians 7:10).

This younger son's sorrow and regret were based on his first hand knowledge of his father's generosity. While the son desired pig food, he remembered his father's lavish generosity—all in the father's house had more than enough to eat.

As a result, the son viewed his father's generosity from the perspective of the "hired servants." Servants worked on the estate and lived there. But "hired servants" were various kinds of tradesman and craftsmen who lived in local villages and earned a wage.

Many commentators believe that the son's strategy went something like this. The younger son had disgraced his family and therefore the whole community. He was "dead" to them, as the father describes it. We are told that the rabbis taught that if you had violated the community's standard an apology was not sufficient—you also had to make restitution. The son intends to say "Father, I know I don't have a right to come back into the family. But if you apprentice me to one of your hired men so I can learn a trade and earn a wage, then at least I could begin to pay off my debt." That was his plan, so he must have rehearsed that speech a thousand times.

In the son's repentance, the first step would be to leave the foreign land where he had squandered his wealth. The second step involved showing repentance for the ways that he had "sinned." Recognizing sin and confessing guilt are the initial steps of repentance (see Leviticus 5:5). The son acknowledged his sin: he had rebelled against his father, thus breaking the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). The son's rebellion was also directed against God since heaven is the place where God resides.

By confessing his sin, the son hoped to receive mercy from his father (see Proverbs 28:13). For sure the son did not expect to be restored to his former status in his father's household, but he did hope for pity and a place of service in that household, like one of the "hired servants." In this role, the son would at least receive wages for his work.

"I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants" v.19). Sounds good, "humble and appropriate," but it is actually "works righteousness," the root of pride and other problems. Suffice it to say that the father would have none of it. The son was still a long way from home when the father saw him.

What do you think?

- 1. How should believers respond when they are insulted or dishonored?**
- 2. How do feelings or shame or sorrow lead a person to repentance?**
- 3. How would you explain the prodigal son's "works righteousness?"**

II. The Compassionate Father **Luke 15:20-24**

When the younger son comes within sight of the house, his father runs—"runs" to him. Regardless of the son's disrespect, at the very least, the father had been scanning the horizon hoping the prodigal would return. Back to the father's running! As a general rule, distinguished middle eastern patriarchs did not run. As the owners of the great estates, they would not pick up their robes and bare their legs like some boy. But this father does. He runs to his son and, showing his emotions openly, falls upon him and kisses him. Physical displays of affection, such as how the father wrapped his arms around his son and "kissed" him, were not uncommon (see examples Genesis 27:26, 27; 33:4). The father's response revealed his heart of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus intended that the father's forgiveness reveal the "compassion" of God. When God's people rebel, he responds with mercy (example, Nehemiah 9:17-18). His compassion is like a loving father toward his children (Psalm 103:13). But we realize at the same time that God's mercy has limits; he will not tolerate unrepentant, unending rebellion (example 2 Kings 22:10-17).

Undoubtedly, the father's response takes the younger son by surprise. This son tried to roll out his business plan for restitution. However, the father interrupts him, pays no attention to his rehearsed speech, but directly contradicts it.

Immediately the father gives instructions to his servants. He calls for a robe—the best robe in the house would have been the father's own robe, the certain sign of restored standing in the family. He calls for a ring for his son's finger and sandals for his feet.

The lavishness of the father can yet be seen again in his action to bring the fatted calf and kill it. Meat was not a part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special festivals. The son's return, however, is an occasion for celebration. But no meat was more expensive than the fatted calf.

As one scholar put it, "what the father is saying to the son is, 'I'm not going to wait until you've paid off your debt; I'm not going to wait until you've duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family. I am going to simply take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with the robes of my office and honor.'"

An author named Ray Anderson has written a book called "The Gospel According to Judas." The book is based on some words that Ray saw in a man's restroom in a San Francisco restaurant. The words were, "Judas, come home. All is forgiven." So much like the father's forgiveness in the parable!

The "son" had previously treated his father as if he were dead to him. And by abandoning his family, the son had effectively become "dead" to his father. Despite the son's previously selfish actions, he was restored and considered "alive" to the father—a reason for the father to be merry and "celebrate."

The other parables in Luke 15 depict celebrations that occurred after the recovery of something lost (Luke 15:5-6,9). These celebrations were intended to teach Jesus' audience of heavenly celebration that follow repentance (15:7,10).

In this parable before us, Jesus' audience of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law (Luke 15:1,2) heard echoes of God's promise. To obey God leads to life, but to rebel against him leads to destruction (Deuteronomy 30:15-18). The implications are profound. For the tax collector and sinners, the promise is one of renewed acceptance upon this repentance. For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the promise is one of warning made more explicit in Matthew 21:28-32, another parable of two sons. However, God promised to be generous and patient; celebration with joy and gladness would come when the people returned to him (see Isaiah 35:9-11; Ephesians 2:1-10).

Today's parable invites all people to embrace the upside-down nature of the family of God. In this family, God offers and desires reunion where broken relationships exist. We may feel shamefully unworthy, as the parable's younger son felt. However, like the parable's father, God is generous and merciful. He simply welcomes all people to become his beloved children in his family.

In conclusion, the late Henri Nouwen said, "Though I am both the younger and the elder son, I am not to remain those. I am to become the father." So, the real challenge of this parable, "Do I want to be like the father?"

Action Plan

1. In what ways is biblical repentance more than saying “I’m sorry”?
2. How can you be sure that future repentance will be followed by appropriate action (Matthew 3:8; Acts 26:20).
3. What do you think about Henri Nouwen’s quote?

Resources For This Lesson

1. “2022-2023 NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Series, International Sunday School Lessons,” pages 225-240.
2. “The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 9 Luke John”, pages 301-304.
3. “The Prodigal God” by Timothy Keller, pages 17-22.

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com).



EBTS provides storage for South Georgia Conference archives

**WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN
ANNE PACKARD**

The South Georgia Conference archives is housed at the Moore Methodist Museum and is responsible for collecting, preserving, and making accessible the historical records and artifacts of the Methodist movement in this area. After 157 years of ministry, there are many wonderful collections in the archives from local churches, conference ministries, and Methodist leaders but available storage space has become quite scarce.

Joel Willis, the CEO and President of Epworth By The Sea and a strong supporter of the Ministry of Memory, saw this problem and solved it with both labor and funding. After having donated a storage space located above the Museum, Epworth both paid for and provided the labor to repaint and refloor the space. Then, the conference center donated twelve wall shelving units, a dehumidifier, and replaced the heating and air conditioning.

This new storage area houses 144 square feet of historical records and artifacts and is large enough to keep the entire South Georgia Conference Ministries and Business Collection in one place. We are grateful for the strong ties between the Moore Methodist Museum, the South Georgia Conference archives, and Epworth By The Sea Conference Center, which keep the Ministry of Memory a vital resource for the South Georgia Conference.

Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at director@mooremuseum.org.



Obituary: Mrs. Nona Foster

Nona Mae Hodges Foster, age 95, of Statesboro died Saturday, February 18, 2023, at Ogeechee Area Hospice Inpatient Facility, of natural causes.

A native of Savannah, she was born Oct. 18, 1927, to William Asburn and Naomi Frances Smith Hodges of Statesboro. She was reared on the family farm across the road from New Hope United Methodist Church, where her ancestors had been members for more than 150 years, she became a lifelong member of the United Methodist Church. A 1944 graduate of Statesboro High School, she was a 1948 alumni of Wesleyan College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in music. She was a keypunch operator at Union Camp, Savannah, and a librarian at the Statesboro Library, who drove the book mobile to nearby rural counties. A lifelong learner, she traveled abroad extensively, and learned to fly a plane, acquiring her Pilot's Certificate.

After retirement, she attended Pittman Park United Methodist Church in Statesboro. As a minister's wife, she retained an active membership in the United Methodist Church South Georgia Conference, teaching Sunday School and taking part in church activities. An accomplished pianist and chorist, she played for church services and sang in the church choir until her 90s.

Beginning in the 1990s, she was a long-time volunteer at the Ogeechee Area Hospice. Also a gifted cellist, she performed in community music groups until well into her 80s. During this time became interested in learning the strategies of football and enjoyed watching Falcons games. She loved her family. She also adored animals, especially her cats. One in particular, Nikki, lived to be 22 years old, and was featured in the Statesboro News. She enjoyed baking, cross stitching, coffee and chocolate, and always wanted to own a convertible.

She was preceded in death by her parents and husband, the late Rev. S. Vaughn Foster of Statesboro.

Survivors include her step-daughter, Susan F. Kersey of Marietta; a step-son, Stephen L. (Joni) Foster of San Antonio, Texas; a step-grandson, Tom William "Will" Kersey of Marietta; and a number of cousins from Statesboro and Monticello.

The family will receive visitors on Thursday from 1:00pm until the funeral hour at Pittman Park United Methodist Church in Statesboro.

Funeral services will follow at 2:00pm in the sanctuary of Pittman Park with Rev. Dr. Jonathan Smith officiating.

Following the service, interment will be at New Hope United Methodist Church Cemetery.

Honorary pallbearers will be the members of the Henderson Sunday School class.

While Nona loved flowers, the family requests that memorial contributions be made to Ogeechee Area Hospice, PO Box 531, Statesboro, GA 30459, or to Pittman Park United Methodist Church, 1102 Fair Rd, Statesboro, GA 30458.



Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

Check out the [dates & registration for the 2023 classes](#).

Confirmation Retreat – March 3-5

The 2023 South Georgia Conference Confirmation retreat will take place March 3-5 at Epworth By The Sea.

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 to kick off the event! For more information, [click here](#).

Clergy Ethics Training – March 16, April 11, April 20

Every three years, according to the South Georgia Conference Sexual Ethics policy, persons serving under appointment by the bishop (clergy, local pastors, extension ministers, appointed lay speakers) are required to attend a Sexual Ethics Workshop. Under the guidance of the Office of Ministerial Services, the South Georgia Conference will offer Clergy Ethics trainings in March and April 2023. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Clergy Spouses Retreat – March 17-19

The 2023 Clergy Spouses retreat is set for March 17-19 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Meeting under the theme “Let’s Be Real: Being Authentic as Clergy Spouses,” this weekend promises to be a great time together worshipping, learning, sharing, and having fun. Rev. Laurel Griffith, Associate Pastor at Albany First UMC, will be the speaker. Contact Cindy Rollins, retreat chair, at 706-326-4862 if you have any questions. For more information and to register, visit www.sgaumc.org/clergyspouses.

United Women in Faith Spiritual Growth Retreat – March 24-26

The 2023 United Women in Faith Spiritual Growth Retreat is set for March 24-25 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. This will be a weekend of worship, growth, connection, and fun. Meeting under the theme "Fully Rely on God," this year's retreat features speaker Sue Owens. For more information and to register, visit www.sgaumc.org/umw.

ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety Training – March 25

An ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety Training is set for Saturday, March 25, 2023. The training will take place at Pierce Chapel UMC (5122 Pierce Chapel Road, Midland GA 31820). The basic ERT class will begin at 8am with the chainsaw safety to follow. Lunch is included. This training is a collaborative effort of the United Methodist Committee on Relief and United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. Mac Woodridge from Pierce Chapel will serve as the host. [Register now](#) For more information, contact Mac Woodridge at macdaddy1977@gmail.com or Glenn Martin, Northwest District Coordinator, at Gmartin0704@gmail.com or 912-312-6341.

Eagles Fish Fry – April 13

The South Georgia Conference Eagles After-Easter Fish Fry is set for April 13, 2023, at 12:00 noon at McRae UMC in McRae, Ga. All retired pastors and spouses are invited to attend. The McRae United Methodist Men will cook fish, grits, fries, hush puppies, and provide the tea. Attendees are asked to bring salads, vegetables, and desserts. To RSVP or if you have any questions, please email me Rev. David Tart, Eagles President, at revdtart@bellsouth.net.

Men's Spiritual Life Retreat – April 21-22

A Men's Spiritual Life Retreat is set for April 21-22, 2023, at Epworth By The Sea on St Simons Island. This in-person event is sponsored by the United Methodist Men of South Georgia and is open to all Christian men of South Georgia to attend. The retreat will be a time of spiritual renewal through: solid biblical teaching by Rev Tommy Mason, dynamic and uplifting music led by the Goshen Travelers Band, shared fresh testimonies of God's Grace, worship, prayer & fellowship, and a brief annual business session of the South Georgia United Methodist Men. [Click here for more details](#).

Called Annual Conference Session – May 21

A special called session of the annual conference has been set for Sunday, May 21, 2023. The meeting will begin at 4 pm using the Zoom Webinar platform in conjunction with an online voting system. The sole

purpose of the special called session of the Annual Conference is to complete the process of ratifying the current requests for disaffiliation of local churches who have met the requirements outlined in ¶2553 of the Book of Discipline and who have met the published South Georgia Conference deadlines. [Click here for more information.](#)

Annual Conference Session – June 4-6

The 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference session will be held Sunday, June 4, 2023, through Tuesday, June 6, 2023. The conference theme will be: *When They Prayed*, based on Act 4:31. [Click here for full Annual Conference details.](#)

2023 Summer Camps

Don't let your kids miss out on this summer's Camp Connect - the South Georgia Conference Camping Ministry at Epworth By The Sea. These week-long residential camps are offered for elementary, middle and high school students in June and July. For more information, [click here.](#)

2023 Georgia Pastors School – July 17-20

Georgia Pastors School is set for July 17-20, 2023, at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island. This spiritual formation event for pastors will feature Rev. Juanita Rasmus, co-pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, and Johnny Sears from The Upper Room as this year's teachers. To register and for more information, visit www.georgiapastorsschool.org.



Resource Roundup – February 2023

29 ways you can participate in Black History Month

Black History Month is an opportunity for all of us to celebrate and reflect upon the remarkable contributions African Americans have made to American history. No matter who we are or what our background is, Black history is a part of our history. Through its R2 Hub, The General Commission on Religion and Race has provided 29 unique ways to participate in Black History Month and make a difference in your community.

[Learn more](#)

Find 2023 Lenten worship resources

Want to explore Lent with your congregation but need some resources to get you started? Discipleship Ministries has compiled a fantastic worship series complete with preaching notes, graphics, youth lessons, suggested hymns and more. Discover how Lent can be the perfect time to journey inward and move outward as you learn to share Christ with the world. [Learn more](#)

Local church grants available for outreach

The Foundation for Evangelism has opened the 2023 Equipping the Local Church grant cycle. A total of \$350,000 is available for grants of \$5,000 or \$10,000 to small and medium-size congregations, or clusters of churches working together, in a Wesleyan-tradition denomination. [Learn more](#)

Get that video on your website

When exporting videos for the web, the trick is to reduce the file size without compromising the quality. In this tutorial by UM Communications, discover the best way to optimize videos that you can upload to your website and make them play in the most efficient way possible. [Learn more](#)

The church website still matters!

It is important to regularly review your church's website and ensure that it offers what viewers want and expect. Following a few basic guidelines will help you get the most out of your site and you can increase your ability to spread God's love and grace in your community. [Update your website today](#)

The top 10 free services your church may be missing

You can't beat free. Are you taking advantage of the pro-level services and tools from United Methodist Communications to reach out into your community? This list is a result of a conversation and request from a group of them. [Learn more](#)

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Retired Clergy Birthdays – February 2023

- 2/01 – Rodney Body: 1205 North Palm Dr.; Plant City, FL 33563
- 2/03 – Eugene Barlow: 605 Victoria Circle; Warner Robins, GA 31088
- 2/03 – David Barton: PO Box 497; Talbotton, GA 31827
- 2/03 – Gary Page: 136 Altamaha School Rd.; Baxley, GA 31513
- 2/04 – John Bagwell: 5300 Zebulon Rd., Apt. 2226; Macon, GA 31210
- 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
- 2/07 – Bill Brown: 109 Woodlawn Dr.; Statesboro, GA 30458
- 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
- 2/10 – Tommy Veal: 340 Pine Hill Rd.; Dublin, GA 31021
- 2/12 – Tim Steffen: 4383 Old Harrodsburg Rd., Suite 130; Lexington, KY 40513
- 2/14 – Jim Jensen: 4323 15th St., East Beach; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 2/15 – Mark Carter: 903 Upper River Rd., Americus, GA 31709
- 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
- 2/19 – Don Proctor: 106 Ingham St.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 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
- 2/21 – Jim Duvall: 10502 Regal View Loop; Clermont, FL 34711
- 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

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Scripture Readings – February 21 edition

February 22

Ash Wednesday, Year A

- [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
- [Psalms 51:1-17](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

- Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

February 26

First Sunday in Lent, Year A

- Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
- Psalm 32
- Romans 5:12-19
- Matthew 4:1-11

March 5

Second Sunday in Lent, Year A

- Genesis 12:1-4
- Psalm 121
- Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
- John 3:1-17