



CONNECTICUT DISTRICT NEWS

SEPTEMBER 2017

The Connecticut District Office of the United Methodist Church
20 Broadfield Road, Hamden, CT 06517

“In Connecticut, After God, We Put People First”

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Volume 34, Issue September

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“IN THE *HEART* OF THE D.S.”

We must get to know them – The Lost Sheep

Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd: the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. But he that is a hireling, and not the shepherd whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catches them, and scattered the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.”¹

The parable of the Good Shepherd underscores a biblical and theological rationale for pursuing an understanding of Jesus’ role in leading and caring for his sheep. It models his expectation as to how his disciples must reach out for the least of these. Biblical scholars posit that the imagery presented by the metaphor of a shepherd is a common Old and New Testament biblical theme. It exemplifies certain “heart qualifications,” that is, of a Godly leader who demonstrates tender, sincere, intimate, loving attentiveness to their flock. They guide, correct, protect and feed their flock. The Good Shepherd is contrasted to a hireling who receives pay for his job but has no heart for the flock. His dedication to the flock is only up to the point that it benefits him. The hireling never takes time to care for them, to love them, far less to know them.

The Biblical narrative shows the Good Shepherd engages the sheep out of a labor of love and in spite of himself. He gives his life for the sheep and leads them wisely. Unlike the Hireling

¹ (John 10:2 – 13, [Kings James Version])

who leaves when the process of care becomes taxing, troublesome and demands understanding and mercy, the Good Shepherd stays committed to the sheep.

The Bible speaks of the Good Shepherd through the lens of John's gospel as a leader that knows them. They know him by virtue of his commitment to them. The shepherd has the simplest but most intimate connection to the sheep. He has voice recognition among the sheep. He is authenticated and knows of them by his actions. He is the door; he gives them life and will give his life for them. This is the shepherd who envisions that all sheep, even those that "are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." They all shall be engrafted into his fold (Jn. 10:16).

The gospel of Matthew² corroborates John's acclaim of the importance of this imagery as we consider pastoral care to the beloved community. Jesus obviously sees the sheep metaphor as associated with the nation of Israel.³ Through the lens of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' mission in life is primarily to this nation. He makes no effort to hide his commitment and passion to "Jewish nationalism;" he laments that his people are lost. He warns that we should "beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Sheep appear to be passive and gentle. They are not monolithic in appearance or mannerism. Individuals that are mal-intended see the assumption of the sheep's identity as the best disguise to infiltrate and destroy the beloved community.

In light of this information, Jesus asks this question in response to his critics: "What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep?"⁴

What man of you having an hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he finds it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, rejoice with me. For I have found my sheep which was lost (Lk 15: 4-6).

It is in the light of these narratives and Jesus' question that we could suggest that every sheep is important to Jesus. We, as leaders among the beloved community are mandated by Jesus to protect, guide and seek out his sheep as we nurture them. Responsibility to our task

² (Matt. 7:15, [KJV])

³ (Matt.10:6 [KJV])

⁴ (Matt. 12:11–12a, [KJV])

transcends our own biases. Jesus expects that we engraft the sheep into the beloved community understanding that his directive is not a request but a command. It starts with our knowledge of Jesus the Master, and seeing the sheep through his eyes, in spite of their flaws. To that end, Jesus says to the apostle Peter:

Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, feed my Lambs. He saith unto him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, feed my sheep. He saith unto him again the third time, Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, feed my sheep.⁵

The frustration of Peter's response is fully commensurate with the intentionality of Jesus' question and his command. In theological circles the fact that Jesus questions Peter's love three times is important and merits exploration. It is generally accepted that the love Jesus spoke of is known as "Agape love;" this love is unemotional and unconditional. Jesus' question of Peter's love to the sheep was to correct Peter's response which indicated that his love, as professed of them to Jesus, was out of common interest, an emotional association as to a brother (*phileo*). Jesus, through what appeared to be the insistency of his questions, was provoking Peter to embrace a higher ideal of a love that was loving unconditionally. That's obviously what it will take to love those that are on the fringes; those that do not subscribe to the established ideals, norms or mores of society as we know it. It is a perfect picture of "the others" that we are endeavoring to understand.

Having established the type of love that is imparted unemotionally but logically and dispassionately, Jesus instructed Peter to feed the lamb. The Lambs are obviously defenseless and totally dependent on the shepherd. The negative colloquial expression that sheep are dumb is amplified, as if on steroids, when young ones (lambs) are factored into the equation. Feeding the lambs requires a degree of humility and a pastoral heart that looks beyond their fault. Their fractured nature, abnormal habits and incessant drive to violate all established boundaries requires patience as one provides them care. Jesus' mandate is to feed them! To be effective in this job, one must get to know them.

⁵ (John 21:15-17, [KJV])

Jesus' second iteration to Peter, to feed his sheep, reinforces his mandate with detailed precision. The word "feed" emerges from the Greek lexicon as the word *Poimaino*; it means to shepherd and implies "the whole office of the shepherd, guiding, guarding, folding of the flock as well as leading it to nourishment."⁶The flock is not limited to the sheep who are usually obedient but also include the lambs, the goats, the dogs and the hirelings. Evidently, Jesus' mandate to Peter is that his responsibility is to all living creatures within the flock, regardless of their peculiar foibles or behaviors. Peter had to be dispassionate and unbiased as he mastered the art of knowing his flock. It is in Peter's knowing the flock that a true expression of Jesus' love for his sheep is revealed; so too, it is in us getting to know "the others" that we would mirror Jesus' mandate and better understand how to reconnect them to the believing and beloved community.

*-From my Heart to your Heart -
Getting to know your D.S. through these written narratives!
More to be said in the next issue.*

⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D. *The Hebrew–Greek Key Study Bible, Lexical aids to the New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1991), 1750.

**Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton
New York Annual Conference
Cordially Invites You To**

**The Celebration of
Appointment**

– for –

**Rev. Dr. Alpher K. Sylvester
as Superintendent of the Connecticut District
Sunday, September 10, 2017 at 4:00 PM**

– at –

**Nichols United Methodist Church
35 Shelton Road, Trumbull, CT 06611**

**Pre-Service Concert: 3:15 pm
Clergy Robed: 3:45 PM (White Robe / Red Stole)
Reception at Nichols Fellowship Hall**

R.S.V.P. BY SEPT. 6, 2017

ctdistrict@nyac-umc.com or 203-288-0286

“In Connecticut, After God, We Put People First”

HOW IS YOUR CHURCH ATTRACTING MILLENNIALS?

By Rev. Herron Gaston

I was attending a ministry leadership conference recently in Arlington, Virginia where I served as the conference speaker. At the conclusion of the three-day conference, a young man who had served as the conference moderator, approached me and said “thank you for being a relevant pastor who speaks to the heart of the issues that millennials face in today’s world.” At first blush, I smiled and enthusiastically pat-myself on the back for being considered a “relevant” preacher. But as I drove from Arlington back to Connecticut, I revisited his comments, and begin to think to myself, is today’s church not effectively reaching this demographic? Has the church become too antediluvian?

Being a pastor of a mainline denomination that is experiencing a rapid decline in membership, makes the task of revitalizing the church an arduous one, especially considering the fact that most pastors in mainline traditions must adhere to the often malignant hierarchical structure that exist within the organization. While having structure is not a bad concept, the reality is that often times it is restricting and does not allow a (reformist) pastor’s vision to be fully executed.

Often times, the older members of the congregation are unwilling to try something different. Hence, any real attempt towards change and progress, is met with sheer resistance not just from everyday parishioners, but also from those who sit at the helm of leadership within the organization. As a millennial, I understand the complex realities of why some millennials find traditional church spaces to be unattractive.

The church must get on board with technology. It must connect to the virtual world, and get outside of the individual parish. Being situated in a local community does not mean that the church cannot make a global impact. Most folks nowadays—are connecting to churches through virtual means, which means, that churches must not miss the opportunity to reach people online. Yes, people also pay their tithes and offerings online to churches they feel connected to. People are now searching for inspirational messages anywhere they can find them—which includes Facebook, twitter, snapchat,

How Is Your Church Attracting Millennials continued

and other relevant cyber-tools. The church must see itself as belonging to a wider cyber-faith community.

Faith communities can be formed on iPhones, androids, tablets, iPads, and other digitized means. This means that churches must be willing to invest in high-quality technologies in order to compete for this generation's attention, and churches cannot be afraid to step outside of their comfort zone and think (progressively) different about its role in helping to reshape the idea and conversation of doing church in the 21st century.

All in all, the church must be relevant. Today, believe it or not, there are still churches who function as if they are in the 16th, 17th, and 18th century. Yet, they are asking the question: where are the millennials? There are still pastors who preach from lofty pulpits, (which gives the impression that they are untouchable), and who preach dull and uninspiring messages. Nonetheless, there is nothing wrong with sticking to tradition, but one must be willing to be flexible and fluid enough to modify the process when it's appropriate. There must be a balanced blend of new school and old school.

Furthermore, the church must be willing to provide intelligent answers for questioning millennials. This generation do not automatically accept doctrine and ideologies without asking the tough questions, as to why we do what we do, and why we believe what we believe? They are thinkers, they are inquisitive, they are theorist, and they often philosophize and intellectualize about everything and anything.

Moreover, they are seekers of authenticity. They almost have a sixth-sense when it comes to genuineness. They can spot phony spectators a mile away, and tend to judge people by the "fruit that they bear." In other words, they are watching the words and the actions of an individual. It is not merely enough to regularly attend church, but millennials want to know that you are a living embodiment of the church with respect to how you live out your passions and commitments. Put simply, be the scripture you want people to read. They are seeking a leader that reflects their reality, and who does not present themselves as "holier than thou," possessing a moral superiority complex. But, one who is not afraid to be vulnerable and share their blemishes. The leader does not have to be perfect, but the leader must be open, honest, and transparent.

How Is Your Church Attracting Millennials continued

Next, millennials want a place that feels welcoming, accepting, and affirming. They tend to shy away from spaces that are condemning, judging, and reproachful. They truly believe in the old proverb: “treat people the way you want to be treated.” This means they are looking for an open-arms ministry, one that respects the individual dignity and difference of a person, and that stretches its hands towards the marginalized.

This group is looking for opportunities to get involved and to make a tangible difference in the world. Millennials want to get outside of the four walls of the church and get their hands dirty. They want to engage ministry with their head, hand, and heart. This generation is looking for an experience where they can feel, see, and touch the hands of God by engaging with humanity.

Many are leery about the churches future. However, I am optimistic enough to believe that the church has not lost its moral voice. The church is indeed still relevant—and faith is still essential and continues to speak to the human experience. As the church evolves, as faith evolves, and as passions and commitments evolve, will your church evolve or dissolve?

Hurricane Harvey Response

From Tom Vencuss, NYAC Disaster Response Coordinator

In response to the overwhelming effects of Hurricane Harvey, and in very typical United Methodist fashion, churches and individuals have already placed calls asking, “What can we do to help?” The NYAC Disaster Response Office has been in contact with UMCOR, Bishop Bickerton has spoken with Bishops from Texas, and we have received updated information from on-site Coordinators in Texas and Louisiana. A call-up for supplies and volunteers has already begun. Even as we approach the fifth anniversary of Superstorm Sandy, and as so many came to help us in our recovery effort, this is our opportunity to respond in a like fashion. All updates and information, including an NYAC volunteer response, is on our [website](#).

Reminiscent of Katrina, Sandy, and other storm events, this will be a very long-term response; and, as we have seen from these events, the volunteer community and our network of churches are crucial to the overall recovery effort. Even now, recovery efforts continue in West Virginia, North Carolina, and other locations throughout the country. Our prayers are with the people of Texas and Louisiana, the first responders, and all volunteers who are serving in disaster response capacities.

Be a “Ready Church” for the Right Time

In the world of disaster response we no longer say “if” but “when.” We also say all response is local. The visible presence of the church in a community is essential in any time of disaster. Disaster response is an effective ministry through which we become instruments of God’s healing and hope.

“Connecting Neighbors—Ready Church” is an UMCOR/NYAC program designed to assist churches in their preparation for, and response to, the “when.”

All churches are encouraged to attend one of the Saturday training events being offered through our Disaster Response Ministry. All the fall sessions are from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., unless otherwise indicated. For more information, and to register, please visit the [missions/disaster response page](#) on the NYAC web site.

- **October 21:** Seymour UMC, 225 Great Hill Rd., Seymour, Conn.
- **October 28:** Grace, UMC, 121 Pleasant St, Southington, Conn.
- **November 4:** Simsbury UMC, 799 Hopmeadow St, Simsbury, Conn.

God is good, all the time.

from Mitch Underwood

Just a note to say thank you for all of your prayers and let you know the power of those prayers.

Back in February our daughter, Laurel, was diagnosed with Small Cell Ovarian Cancer. This is a very rare type of cancer (only slightly more than 500 cases ever reported). This is also a rather aggressive form of cancer which had already spread to several lymph nodes. As bad as this might sound, "**God is good, all the time**". If this had happened just 18 months earlier, there would have been no effective treatment.

Laurel started a six month series of chemotherapy sessions. Six powerful agents were administered over the course of 3 days in the hospital each month. These left her exhausted and often without an immune system. You can imagine how frightening this was for my wife and I, let alone for Laurel.

God is good and God provides. During this time we received countless cards, letters, emails, church bulletins, and phone calls from churches and individuals from Florida to Maine. All reaching out to Laurel and us, offering caring and love. All letting us know that you were praying for us. These acts of love were coming from every denomination. They came from Christians, Jews and Muslims. All of these acts of love brought tears to our eyes. People who did not even know us were reaching out and praying for us. These acts brought us great hope because if so much love was coming our way, we knew that God had to be there.

Well, I want you to know the results. It is Wednesday August 23rd and we have just returned from the oncologist's office. The results of Laurel's CT-scan are in and there is **NO SIGN OF CANCER.**

GOD IS GOOD, ALL THE TIME!

Over these six months the three of us have had countless opportunities to gaze into the face of God. In every case what we saw was all of you who live in love and allow God to live in and through you.

Thank you, may God bless you and stay in love with God,

Mitch, Sue and Laurel Underwood

"How Can I Be The Wise, Resilient Leader My Church Needs?"

Leading a church in these tumultuous times isn't easy, yet it's never been more important. Clergy who attend *Tending the Fire* become better leaders: less worried, more engaged, renewed in their call and ministry. They learn how to lead deep change that lasts.

Rev. Barbara Lemmel, an elder in the New England Conference, has been leading *Tending the Fire* in UMC and UCC conferences since 2003. "No one has to tell you that this is a hard time to lead the church: congregations are worried; money is tight; leaders are stretched thin," Rev. Lemmel notes. "The old ways don't work, and the best new practices aren't clear. Even in these times of deep change, when you lead by staying true to core principles and flexible in your approach, it makes all the difference."

Here's what one participant had to say:

"Tending the Fire's spirit-filled retreats are personally and professionally transformative: coaching for effective leadership and invitation to self-discovery all rolled into one. Don't miss this!" – the Rev. Alison Patton, pastor of Saugatuck Congregational Church, Westport, CT.

***Tending the Fire* will be offered at the Trinity UMC in Springfield MA, starting in late September 2017. See www.tending-the-fire.com/events for registration information.**

For more information, visit www.tending-the-fire.com or contact Rev. Lemmel at barblemmel@mac.com or (802) 881-3267.

Do You Wanna See A Show?
AMAZING GRACE
January 19, 2018
2 p.m.
Shubert Theater in New Haven, CT

Join the Connecticut District for a matinee performance of *Amazing Grace* on Saturday, January 19 at 2 p.m. at the Shubert Theater in New Haven

This sweeping musical-- centering on the life of repentant former slave trader John Newton, the hymn's 18th century author-- tells the inspiring story of how the beloved song came to be.

The Connecticut District has reserved a block of discounted tickets for \$46 each. To reserve your seat(s), **please make out a check to:**

Connecticut District Council on Ministries

Please mail it to:

**Rev. Paul Fleck
Hamden Plains United Methodist Church
15 Church Street, Hamden, CT 06514.**

AMONG OURSELVES

Please keep in your Prayers:

The family of Reverend Brian Bodt, pastor at Mary Taylor UMC in Milford, whose father, Milfred A. Bodt died on July 24, 2017 at the age of 94.

The family of Reverend David Arthur Stevens who died on July 26, 2017 at the age of 81. In our District, Reverend Stevens was pastor at Wethersfield UMC and Seymour UMC.

RETIREES' LUNCHEON

Please note: The Retired Ministers monthly luncheon will NOT meet in September as originally planned but will resume on Thursday, October 19, 2017.

Watch for details!

DATES TO REMEMBER

**FALL CLERGY MEETING
SEPTEMBER 21, 2017
10 - 12**

**MERIDEN FIRST UMC
15 Pleasant Street, Meriden, CT 06450**

**TRI DISTRICT RETREAT
OCTOBER 2-3, 2017
Stony Point**

**CONNECTICUT DISTRICT IS ON
FACEBOOK!**

**CHECK US OUT AT:
nyacconnecticut district**

**DEADLINE FOR THE OCTOBER DISTRICT NEWS
IS SEPTEMBER 20, 2017**