

# Soggy start, but Annual Conference kicks off with high expectations

The rain didn't stop people from renewing old friendships, and this year's later schedule didn't stop people from coming early to register.

As showers drizzled off and on, the 2005 session of the Holston Annual Conference began on Sunday, June 12, with the usual rush for registration, and hugs and handshakes outside Harrell Center.

Although the opening session didn't begin until much later this year – at 7 p.m. with worship – a line had already formed when registration officially began at 2 p.m.

The first to walk inside the registration doors were Jim and Barb Dotson of Keith Memorial United Methodist Church, Cleveland District.

Meanwhile, people didn't seem to let the rain dampen their expectations of this year's Annual Conference, as they were leaving Harrell Center.

"I always look forward to seeing people that we don't see but once a year," said the Rev. Kenneth Conner, pastor at Wharf Hill/Elizabeth UMC, Abingdon District. Conner is attending his 12<sup>th</sup> conference. "It's going to be even more interesting this year, with a new bishop."

Attending Annual Conference for the first time, Caleb Frazier said he is also looking forward to seeing Bishop James Swanson in action.

"I heard he was a great preacher. This sounds like it will be a great experience," said Frazier, age 20, representing Embreeville UMC, Johnson City District.

In the Terrace's second-floor lobby, the Williamson family played cards as

they waited for the evening activities to begin. Happy Williamson is attending Annual Conference for the first time with her husband, Brian Williamson, who is projected for his first appointment at Riceville/Piney Grove UMC, Cleveland District. Their daughters, Megan, 14, and Krystal, 15, are also attending.

"We heard Bishop Swanson speak at our church," said Happy Williamson, currently a member at Ooltewah UMC, Cleveland District. "He's a breath of fresh air. I think things will really start hopping in this conference because he is so interested in evangelism."

In the exhibit area located on Terrace's second and third floors, Steve Hodges busied himself with laying out brochures for the Outreach Advocacy Team as well as for Jubilee Project. Hodges is executive director of Jubilee Project, located in Sneedville, Tenn.

As he worked, Hodges talked about recent developments with TennCare, which concerns him because he has been nominated to chair a Holston Conference task force on TennCare in the coming year.



Missionary Steve Hodges (above, right) chats with Kimberly Boyd, director of archives and history for the Southeastern Jurisdiction, at the exhibits in the Terrace.

This past week, TennCare enrollees began receiving letters about changes that will affect their families, he said. The letters have to be responded to within 30 days, or enrollees will lose their coverage.

"There's a real role here for churches, to help people fill out their forms," Hodges said. "Whether you think the state should be doing this or not, we have a real shot at helping people who should not be disqualified."

Later in the evening, Bishop Michael Watson preached during open

worship, using the story of Samuel and Eli to show that God uses unlikely people for his work. He said that this Holston Annual Conference is an opportunity to hear God speak.

"When we hear God's voice, God does miraculous things," Watson said to applause.

"We must move from low expectancy, to high expectancy, all the way up to miraculous expectancy. Because it is God we serve, and God can do miraculous things." ■



RIGHT: Bishop Michael Watson of the South Georgia Conference leads opening worship with the story of Samuel and Eli.



LEFT: In the Terrace lobby, the Williamson family takes time for recreation as they wait for the evening activities. From left to right are Happy, Megan, and Krystal Williamson of the Cleveland District.

RIGHT: The Rev. Bob Copeland, retired pastor from Big Stone Gap District, assists conference staff member Kathy Parker with unloading her car. The boxes contain favors for today's Retirees Luncheon.



## Ed Eldridge: 68 Annual Conferences, and still counting

He was released from the hospital on Tuesday, just in time to attend his 68<sup>th</sup> Holston Annual Conference, at the age of 88.

The Rev. Ed Eldridge is a retired clergy member from the Knoxville District who has served in a variety of appointments: on circuits, in small and large churches, as a district superintendent, and on the conference staff. He has attended every Holston Annual Conference since he became a member in 1937, with the exception of the four years that he attended Boston University School of Theology from 1939 to 1943.

When he was released from the hospital for treatment of a carotid artery last week, the doctor told him to "go on and live your life." Eldridge asked if he could attend Annual Conference.

"He said, 'I don't see why not,'" said Eldridge, "and here I am."

The yearly gatherings of Holston clergy and laity have obviously changed a lot, said Eldridge, but the most pronounced change is the way clergy are informed of their projected appointments weeks ahead of time, rather than at the Sending Forth Service. "There was no consultation. We just waited for our names to be called," he says.

If he has any regrets, it is that "our younger clergy never knew the church when it was growing," Eldridge says. In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Methodist membership was at more than 10 million. "We were not only reflecting



Rev. Ed Eldridge

culture, but the Methodist Church was changing culture everyday."

If younger clergy could have experienced that time, "they would have more belief that [the church] could be changed. They would have more determination to make it change.

"Jesus said, 'According to your faith be unto you,'" he added. "A lot of people don't expect much, and they don't get much."

Eldridge had one more thing to say before heading off to the worship service last night. "Please don't neglect to say that I am still walking two miles every day. I'm still clicking. All along my ministry, I've had a good life, and I'm still living it." ■