

Nation & World



News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference

Table cards remind restaurant patrons To Give Thanks



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▲ **Bless This Food:** Richard (left) and Shawna Grimes and their children eat lunch at the Chimneyville Smokehouse restaurant in Jackson, Miss., where reminders to “say the blessing” are on each table.

Church allows homeless to sleep on steps

(RNS) A prominent New York City church has asked a federal judge to prohibit police from removing several dozen homeless people who sleep on the church’s steps each night.

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, in a suit co-filed with the American Civil Liberties Union, said recent overnight police raids violated the right to “free association” of the church and the homeless people and constituted trespassing on private property.

Beginning on Dec. 4, police made three overnight raids, telling the 40 or so homeless that they needed to leave, go to a city shelter or face arrest. The church’s pastor, the Rev. Thomas K. Tewell, wrote Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik to express his “extreme disappointment,” according to *The New York Times*.

The imposing church in the heart of New York’s premier shopping district has run a 10-person homeless shelter since 1986, but has offered sanctuary and a hot cup of coffee to the several dozen who sleep on the steps on Fifth Avenue and West 55th Street.

According to the church’s Web site, church members “have made an intentional effort to get to know these church visitors.” A recent study found that most stay only a few nights and some for several months. With the church’s help, the Web site says, 14 have found permanent housing, three have been reunited with families and six have received needed medical attention. ■

By Woody Woodrick

JACKSON, Miss. (UMNS) – Many folks pause before eating at home to thank God for their food, but it happens less often in restaurants.

In Jackson, patrons of three popular restaurants have a reminder to say the “blessing.” Chimneyville Smokehouse, BoDon’s and George’s Cafeteria feature laminated cards on their tables with a brief blessing. The cards were placed by Epworth United Methodist Church.

The cards have drawn a positive response since being placed on the tables four months ago. In fact, Deborah Kees of BoDon’s credits the blessings with improving business.

“We’re Christians and believe in praying over a meal,” she said. “Our business has picked up since we started putting the blessings on the tables.”

The table blessings are an idea that the Rev. Tom Sorrell, pastor at Epworth, has wanted to try for several years. “This has been my idea since I was down on the (Gulf Coast), and it just never got instituted,” he said. “I had written most of the prayers down there. One of the problems was we couldn’t find a family restaurant that would do it. Chain restaurants won’t let you do it.”

Recently, he suggested Epworth try placing the blessings. The church leaders liked the idea.

Seven different non-sectarian prayers were written and printed on cards about the size of an index card. They were laminated and placed in small stands next to the salt, pepper and hot sauce.

The prayers were placed so each table has a different prayer from the ones nearby. Sorrell said one of the most exciting aspects of the outreach effort is its ecumenical nature. None of the restaurant owners involved is United Methodist. Yet, when approached with the idea, none hesitated to go along.

“After it was all said and done, we put them in restaurants where the ownership was not even Methodist,” Sorrell said.

Public Prayer “This makes it an ecumenical effort, and that’s very special to me.”

“There are going to be all denominations in heaven,” said Kees, who attends First Pentecostal Holiness Church in Crystal Springs.

Sorrell said another goal of the blessings is to help people of faith be more open about praying in public. The table blessings are designed to promote thankfulness to God first, he said. They don’t push a Methodist philosophy, but Sorrell hopes they do help put Epworth United Methodist Church in people’s minds.

“With the way things have changed with communication and publicity, we have to find new ways to get (our) name out there,” he said. “If you’re not Methodist, you haven’t ever heard of Epworth. It’s a foreign word tonon-United Methodists.” ■

► Woodrick is editor of the Advocate, the newspaper of the United Methodist Church’s Mississippi Area.