

Conversation & Celebration

Clergywomen share memories, disappointment, dreams

While May 2006 will mark the 50th anniversary of full clergy rights for women in the United Methodist Church, Holston clergywomen began their celebration early. On March 7 at First White Pine United Methodist Church, about 70 women gathered with Bishop James Swanson for “Conversation & Celebration” – a time to “remember the courageous past and look forward to the bold future,” organizers said. In preparation for the event, clergywomen were invited to write about past experiences as well as their hopes for the future. Here are excerpts from some of the personal stories shared on that day.



BELOW: The Rev. Alberta Clark serves Wells Chapel United Methodist Church in Jasper, Tenn.: “It is my hope that clergywomen in Holston will bind together and truly become that balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick souls.”

Rev. Alberta Clark

Randolph/Wells Chapel UMC / Chattanooga District

My deceased grandmother shared with me that, as a child, I would like to play church and be the preacher. I grew up in the church and was in the church all of my life. I knew that the call had become more real to me through some difficult experiences in my personal life – also, through dreams and definitely through a critical experience of battling cancer during the pregnancy of my firstborn child. I realized that God had cured my body so that I may be able to serve Him, be a pastor and shepherd of his flock.

Rev. Sandra Johnson

Hurst UMC / Chattanooga District

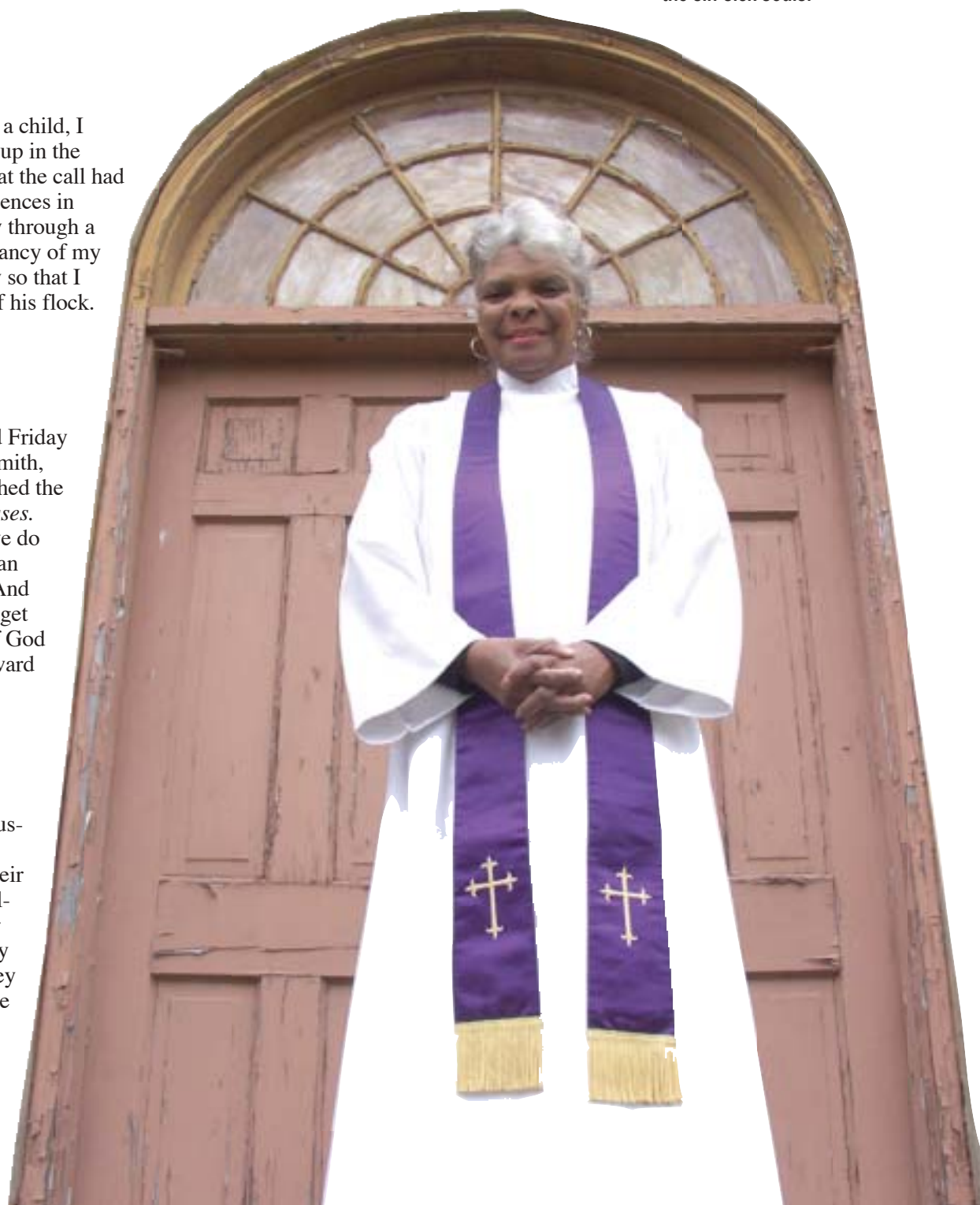
My first experience with a clergywoman was Good Friday at Hurst United Methodist Church. The Rev. Velma Smith, who was serving as pastor at the Stanley UMC, preached the noonday message. Her subject was *Unnecessary Crosses*. In her message she spoke of some of the things that we do that cause us to bear crosses unnecessarily. This woman of God spoke with such conviction and compassion. And it appeared that she was talking directly to me. (I still get chills when I think of that encounter with the Spirit of God on that day.) When she gave the invitation I went forward to rededicate myself to God.

Rev. Carole Martin

Emory UMC / Kingsport District

The greatest affirmation came from my father’s cousins. My father’s and their great-grandfather, Robert White, was a Methodist preacher, and his daughter, their grandmother, was so hopeful that one of her grandchildren would fulfill her “Papa’s” greatest wish for other family members to enter full-time ministry. When they found out that I was planning to enter the ministry, they could not have been more excited or supportive. While in seminary, I was able to research his life using his memoir, his Bible, family recollections and surviving letters. One of the letters contained a startling insight, showing him to be a man a little bit ahead of his time:

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Subway sandwiches & testimonies

Holston men gather in Morristown

By Annette Bender



Photo by Annette Bender, *The Call*

United Methodist Men enjoy lunchtime fellowship during their “Day With Bishop Swanson” on Feb. 26.

MORRISTOWN, Tenn. – In the largest conference gathering of United Methodist Men (UMM) in four years, 160 participated in the “Day With Bishop Swanson” at First Morristown United Methodist Church on Saturday, Feb. 26.

Men representing all 12 districts shared testimonies, worshipped, completed business, and ate Subway sandwiches at the all-day event.

Organizers said they were pleased with the turnout, noting that many men can no longer commit to week-end retreats as in past years.

“We might need to try more of these single-day settings,” said Darrell Edmondson, conference UMM treasurer and member of Trinity UMC, Oak Ridge District.

A prevailing theme of the day was the nature of men, and how they are not always comfortable in or drawn to the church.

“A lot of men hide their feelings,” said Jason Lowder, member at West End UMC, Wytheville District. At age 22, Lowder was one of the youngest participants in the UMM gathering. “It’s good to get a lot of men together to talk like this.”

“Men are more likely to be involved in projects



than they are to witness,” Edmondson said. “But it’s time that men stood up and gave testimony and showed leadership.”

During his message, Bishop James Swanson acknowledged that many men don’t view Jesus as a masculine figure.

“But I don’t see Jesus as being soft,” he said. “I see Jesus as being a man’s man. A carpenter? Come on, he had rough hands. Walking for miles? Please. When he pulled his sandals off at the end of the day, you know they stunk like a man,” Swanson said to laughter.

Noting that many men fear becoming emotional during worship services, Swanson said, “There are very few places where a man can be thought of as a man and let tears descend ... But remember, you have the right to cry because you worship a risen savior ... There’s nothing wrong with letting some tears stream down your cheeks.”

Before closing, Swanson challenged participants to reverse declining male memberships in their congregations. “You find a way to get the men back into your church,” he said.

Following Swanson’s message, 20 clergy members assisted him with Holy Communion. Among the clergy in attendance were District Superintendents Richard Patterson of Morristown, Al Bowles of Chattanooga, and Don Nation of Tazewell. ■

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I rather believe in woman preachers or any whose labours God owns. The clearest credentials that we can have that we are where God would have us be and doing the work appointed us is that souls are being converted to God – I wish someone that I love was a woman preacher that by her heaven might be peopled with precious souls ... I feel more than ever that I could die in this great and glorious work. I am very well better than usual – God strengthens me for my work. – Rev. Robert White to his wife Sarah, 1871

I felt a connection with him, and an affirmation he wrote over 100 years ago, as if it was just for me – yet also, for all women called to ministry.

Rev. Meg Taylor Poister

Daisy UMC / Cleveland District

Here is an example of opposition that I received at a small rural circuit church. I’d been there about two months when the pump at the well broke, and the church had no water. The well was down the hill in a field, on a church member’s property. This family refused to allow the church to get a repairman to fix the well, “until that woman preacher leaves our church.” I called the district superintendent, and he said that the church would probably have to dig its own well. But the church had no money for a well.

This went on for a few weeks, and the few families that we had and some of the elderly folks stopped coming to church, because we had no bathroom. A

second call to the district superintendent got the same response as before.

Then the Lord gave me an idea: Call the 15 to 20 people who are still coming to church and ask them to bring a gallon jug of water every Sunday for the toilets. We stacked the water up on the front porch of the church so everyone could see our water! By Wednesday of that first week, the family gave in and let us fix the pump!”

Rev. RuthAnne Henley

Ceres Circuit / Wytheville District

Life on the buckle of the Bible Belt in the 1960s was much less liberated than it was elsewhere in the nation. As a teen, I answered an altar call at a district revival in a little Pentecostal church on a hill when the evangelist asked “Who among us is willing to answer God’s call to spread the Gospel?”

I remember the stir I caused that evening. The evangelist ignored my presence altogether and prayed for anointing to fall on the boys on either side of me. My brother, standing next to me, tried to take my hand during the prayer, and was pulled away by one of the elders standing nearby. I felt the awful awkwardness that makes a virtual spotlight fall on the subject of ostracism. The suggestion was clear. God had called. I had answered, and God’s spokesmen had rejected my offer.

I took a deep breath, raised my head and my hands, and asked God himself to anoint me because his servants would not. The outpouring from the congregation surprised and encouraged me. While the clergy

focused their attention on the male responders, a wave of lay supporters flowed forward to surround me and pray for me. I heard a jumbled chorus of prayers for special anointing and grace.

As incredibly affirming as this incident was, it was the encounter that followed that locked that evening in my heart and mind as a touchstone for my calling. After the meeting, as the crowd dispersed, the district superintendent approached me. Pulling me aside, in full sight of the milling crowd but out of their hearing, he spoke words that my soul was starving for. “Ruth-Anne,” he whispered, “I see the hand of God on your life, and I expect great things from you.” That is all he said. That is all he had to say.

Rev. Janet Richardson

Madam Russell-Tate’s Chapel UMC / Abingdon District

My vision for women in Holston is that more churches would have the experience of having a woman pastor, particularly churches which are medium size (150-300). It seems women are either in small churches or serving as co-pastors in large churches.

I also wish that when there is a pastoral change, the district superintendent would say to the Pastor-Parish Committee that the cabinet will appoint the most qualified candidate – male or female, white, brown or black. Why should gender or color be an issue?

My greatest hope for Holston is that the number of women clergy will grow and we will be less of a minority group. Wouldn’t it be nice if United Methodists in Holston could say, “We have lots of talented clergywomen in our conference!” ■