

An attractive, fetching, and easy-to-read sign is one of our best opportunities to invite people to church. Who do you call to get the job done right?

The SIGN



Ministers

BY SUZANNE C. HICKERSON

Every Monday morning Carolyn Hale, of Three Springs United Methodist Church, can be found climbing a stepladder and arranging the letters that will form a message for Three Springs' sign.

Hale admits the wind gusts are strong at times while on the ladder, but she enjoys the outdoors and assisting her Abingdon District church.

On one occasion Hale was changing the message when a rainstorm moved in overhead. About that same time, the mailman came by and remarked what a terrible day it was for her to be working outside.

"Neither rain or snow will keep me from my job," she told him good-naturedly.

Sign ministries vary from church to church, but many rely on humorous and inspirational sayings to get the Christian message out to their communities. Many churches also use their signs as a way of informing members about upcoming activities and times of worship services.

Unlike other ministries, the results of a sign ministry can be difficult to measure, but that doesn't stop Hale and many others across the Holston Conference from braving adverse weather to provide their communities with thought-provoking and uplifting messages of love and encouragement. Many of the sign ministers said if one of their messages touches the heart of one person, then they have accomplished their mission.

"You never know who sees it and whether they come to church or not," said Paulette Phillips, of Clintwood UMC in Big Stone Gap District. "We may not know who it touches, but God does."

Phillips said the sign ministry gives her hope and enjoyment knowing that someone's life could be changed in a small or big way.

Most churches have signs that must be changed manually – one letter at a time. First Cleveland UMC in Cleveland District recently installed a digital sign, which can be operated from a computer in the church office.

The technological addition has generated a lot of interest in the community. The sign caught the attention of a college student who was driving by on his way to Wal-Mart. He started attending the church shortly afterwards, said Connie Wright, First Cleveland's director of Christian ministries.

Another woman, Tiana Hubbard, drove by the church in December and noticed the following message: "Looking for a church? Join us in 2004." She decided that she was looking for a church and later brought her husband and two children to worship. The Hubbards are now active members at First Cleveland.

"I think it's going to be a benefit to the community," Wright said of the new digital sign. "As a church, it gives us an opportunity to look outward and reach outward."

Mary Pergande, of Sneedville UMC in Morristown District, said she is not aware of an instance where a newcomer attended church because of her sign messages. Yet, she and her husband are an example of how signs and other forms of advertising do indeed reach people.

"My husband and I came to the United Methodist Church because of the church's commercial message, 'Open hearts, open doors.'"

Because of her own experience, Pergande believes signs are important because some people are more receptive to a visual invitation rather than a verbal invitation.

"A message is more readily accepted when it is coming from a neutral source like a sign," Pergande said.

Pergande tries to base her messages on what is happening in the community. For example, if something troubling has happened in the community, she tries to find an appropriate message for the church sign.

On one such occasion, Sneedville's sign read, "God is the only one in a position to look down on others."

People later approached Pergande to say that they appreciated the message and that it helped them consider both sides of the conflict, she explained.

She also enjoys using humorous and seasonal messages on the sign. Pergande keeps an ongoing list of sayings, often peruses the Internet for ideas, and never uses the same message twice.

"Friends all over the country know I'm doing this, so they e-mail sayings to me," she said. She also finds that during her quiet time of prayer she is inspired with ideas for the sign.

"Honestly, sometimes it is what God tells me to put up there," Pergande said.

The sign ministry is a family affair for Susan Roberts and her two daughters, Vanessa and Beth Hodge, who attend Bungalow UMC in Maryville District. Roberts says she enjoys the opportunity to "plant the seed" and encourage people to attend worship.

"I don't like to be pushy," she said, "but I want people to come to church. This is my way of getting my point across. We love our church. It's our way of helping out."

One day Roberts' sign ministry led to a direct

opportunity to reach out to someone.

"I was out fixing the sign one day and a lady walking by and said, 'I love looking at your sign,'" Roberts remembers. "I invited her to church."

Like many other sign ministers, Roberts also takes advantage of the holiday seasons to reach people. In January when people are likely to make New Year's resolutions to lose weight, Roberts placed a related message on the church sign: "Exercise daily – Walk with the Lord."

During Valentine's Day week, Dan Duggar, of Hardin's Chapel UMC in Morristown District, placed this message on the church sign: "Love looks through a telescope and envy looks through a microscope."

In the spring, the Van Demans, of Wheeler UMC in Kingsport District, have used the message, "Spring is God's greeting card."

Thelma and Bill Van Deman utilize a book for many of the sayings they use for Wheeler's church sign: "Roadside Church Signs Across America," by Mary Katherine and David Compton.

"We try to avoid sayings that point a finger at someone," said Bill Van Deman.

The Van Demans took on Wheeler's sign ministry about three years ago, after the sign had set idle for some time.

At many churches the sign minister duties are handled by one person or a family. At Hardin's Chapel, individuals, families and church groups share the responsibility by rotating the duties each month.

Duggar, of Hardin's Chapel, said on one occasion the sign messages were selected by a Wednesday night Bible study group. About 15 messages were placed on a ballot and the group was asked to select their favorites. The messages with the most votes were placed on the sign during that particular month.

"We're not above stealing someone's mes-

sage," Duggar said with a chuckle. "We don't think that breaks the Ten Commandments."

Because the church is located next to a cemetery, the sign is also used to place messages of condolences and memorials, Duggar said. "The families do not expect it, but they appreciate it."

As a sign minister, Duggar has also had to deal with adverse weather conditions. Because the Hardin's Chapel sign does not have a glass covering over the message board, rain and cold can cause the letters to freeze. Wind is also an enemy, sometimes causing the letters to blow away.

Despite the weather challenges, Duggar said the church sign has a special significance because a member designed it.

"We try to attract people by using our sign," he said. "Our hope is you throw out the bait and hope you catch one or two fish." ■

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Read Me

Several Holston sign ministers shared their favorite messages, used in the past to provide encouragement and love as well as spread God's message throughout their communities:

- A world of love makes a world of difference.
- I love you. I love you. I love you. – God
- A man is rich according to what he is, not what he has.
- Pure religion is love in action.
- When you see God's hand in everything, it is easy to leave everything in God's hands.
- Give Satan an inch and he will be a ruler.
- Give God what's right and not what's left.
- You think it's hot here?
- This church is prayer-conditioned.
- If God is your copilot, swap seats.
- He who kneels before God can stand before anyone.
- Sign broken. Message inside.
- Visitors welcome. Members expected.
- Talk is cheap because supply always exceeds demand.

– Suzanne C. Hickerson



CLEVELAND, Tenn. – The new digital sign at First Cleveland has already attracted at least two newcomers, according to Connie Wright.

Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

BRISTOL, Va. – Carolyn Hale climbs a ladder every week to change the sign at Three Springs United Methodist Church, in the Abingdon District.

Photos by John M. Bray, The Call