

The Big Stone Gap District has a big heart for feeding people through their food banks.

Letters from our readers about recent articles and the ordination of homosexuals

Teaching the sacrament and improving the practice of Holy Communion



# The Call

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HOLSTON CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Eastern Pennsylvania Conference will appeal Stroud decision

**By Linda Bloom**

(UMNS) An appeal of the recent decision to reinstate the credentials of a former United Methodist pastor will be filed with the denomination's top court.

Bishop Marcus Matthews, who presides over the church's Eastern Pennsylvania Annual (regional) Conference, announced May 3 that he was authorizing legal counsel "to proceed immediately with filing an appeal with the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church."

The appeal will be filed within the allotted 30-day period, by May 29. The Judicial Council's next regularly scheduled meeting is Oct. 26-29 in Houston.

Last December, a trial court of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference found Irene Elizabeth (Beth) Stroud guilty of violating the denomination's prohibition of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" in the ordained ministry. Stroud, who was associate pastor of First United Methodist Church of Germantown in Philadelphia, lost her clergy credentials but remained on staff of the church as a lay person.

On April 29, the Northeast Jurisdiction Committee on Appeals set aside the trial

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## Is someone missing from your congregation?

# HOLSTON CHURCHES OPEN DOORS TO THE DEAF



**BIG STONE GAP, Va.** – The Rev. Ronnie Mutter (above) offers sign language at Trinity UMC two Sundays each month.



**WYTHEVILLE, Va.** – John Anders (above, right), uses sign language while playing the role of Jesus in a Maundy Thursday reenactment of the Last Supper at West End UMC.

*Photos by Annette Bender, The Call*

**I**t's Maundy Thursday at West End United Methodist Church, and the mood is anything but solemn. At the refreshment table, people are laughing, talking, celebrating. Moments ago, the Wytheville District church did what it does every Maundy Thursday. Several men dressed as disciples and reenacted the Last Supper. Except this year, Jesus was deaf, and he used sign language to talk to his disciples.

**By Annette Bender**

It was a proud moment for a congregation that has opened its doors to a group of deaf people who drive as far as 25 miles to worship.

"How would you feel if you went to a foreign country, and no one ever spoke English to you?" says Gary Grubb, reflecting on his church's deaf ministry as he waits patiently for soda and cookies. Like some of his fellow parishioners, Grubb is learning sign language so that he can converse with deaf members and guests.

"Even though I don't sign well, they're very patient. It really tickles them when you try."

Through the efforts of the Rev. Steve Johnson, West End is one of a handful of Holston congregations and individuals reaching out to a segment of society that some say are being neglected.

Although there are 28 million people with hearing loss in the United States, less than 1 percent of them identify themselves as Christians, and even fewer attend church, according to the senior pastor of

Christ United Methodist Church for the Deaf in Baltimore. The Rev. Peggy Johnson has visited West End UMC and is familiar with Steve Johnson's ministry. She is a former consultant with the National Committee on Ministries with the Deaf, Late-Deafened, Hard of Hearing and Deaf-Blind People.

"When deaf people become part of the community, the Body of Christ is enriched," Peggy Johnson said, commenting on how a deaf young man at West End UMC played Jesus in the Last Supper drama. "Until then, they're just decorations, sitting on the front pew."

Steve Johnson became interested in deaf ministries while sitting on a plane next to Peggy Johnson on the way to Israel in 1990. "I do not like sitting in cramped spaces," Steve Johnson says with amusement, "so I kept asking her things about her ministry."

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