

John Ousley, harmonica man

By Lynn Hutton

Had he not been a musician first, John Ousley might never have been a minister.

Born into a musical family that already included three boys (the eldest is Larry, also an elder in Holston Conference) and one girl, Ousley's first instrument was his hands. He had a range of an octave and a half and became a virtuoso, learning to play an aria from "The Marriage of Figaro."

Ousley and I sat down with boxed lunches at Annual Conference. Clouds covered the sun, so we sat beside Lake Junaluska among other picnickers. The mallards and one white swan, holding one black foot like a shipped oar, glided past, hoping for handouts.

Ousley told me that he later graduated to trumpet, a more mainstream instrument, but when he discovered the harmonica and a man named Rupert Oysler, his whole life changed. Rupert taught him to play blues harmonica, a feat accomplished by "bending notes," notes that "aren't really there."

Ousley stuttered from age five, an experience that became excruciating. After college, he taught physical education at a Navajo boarding school in Pueblo Pintado, N.M., "sixty-five miles from good drinking water and 128 miles from shopping." He felt the Lord had called him to teach, but feared it would worsen his stuttering. Instead, his stuttering improved. He calls it "among the best experiences of my life," with "more blessings than you can imagine."

His last year at the school, he experienced clinical depression. He entered seminary at Candler School of Theology, seeking healing and direction. When he took preaching, professor Fred Craddock asked him, "Do you do anything musical?"

"Harmonica," Ousley volunteered.

Craddock said, "Well. We've never had

harmonica in Cannon Chapel. This will be great." The last song Ousley offered at chapel before graduating was Schubert's "Ave Maria" – without accompaniment because the chapel organist refused to accompany a "non-classical instrument."

"I found my voice with my harmonica," Ousley said, "I decided not to worry, not to focus on stuttering. I just talked, and if I stuttered, I stuttered." The healing process continued. Ousley now speaks with no trace of a stutter.

After his first appointment in the early 1990s as pastor of Salem-Arcadia UMC in Kingsport District, Ousley served for 12 years as director of Camp Dickenson. He was appointed at Annual Conference last month to return to the parish ministry at Oakland UMC in Wytheville District.

What about the transition from camp to parish? "In camp, your constituency changes every week. And children are more pliable than adults. But I found myself doing more administration than ministry at camp, orchestrating ministry rather than doing it. I'm ready for the challenges of a parish."

Besides harmonica and ministry, Ousley's other passion is bird dogs. He trains them professionally and is writing a book on the theological similarities between the training of dogs and God's molding us into disciples.

"First, you establish who is in charge. 'Jesus is Lord,' is the foundation of our faith. The trainer has to be the Alpha dog, to gain dominance over the dog in kind and consistent ways. I have to know the dog's body language, speak the dog's language, think like a dog. Become a dog."

"That's incarnation!" I said.

"Exactly." And he leaned back and smiled. ■

The Rev. Hutton is minister of music at Middlebrook Pike UMC, Knoxville District.

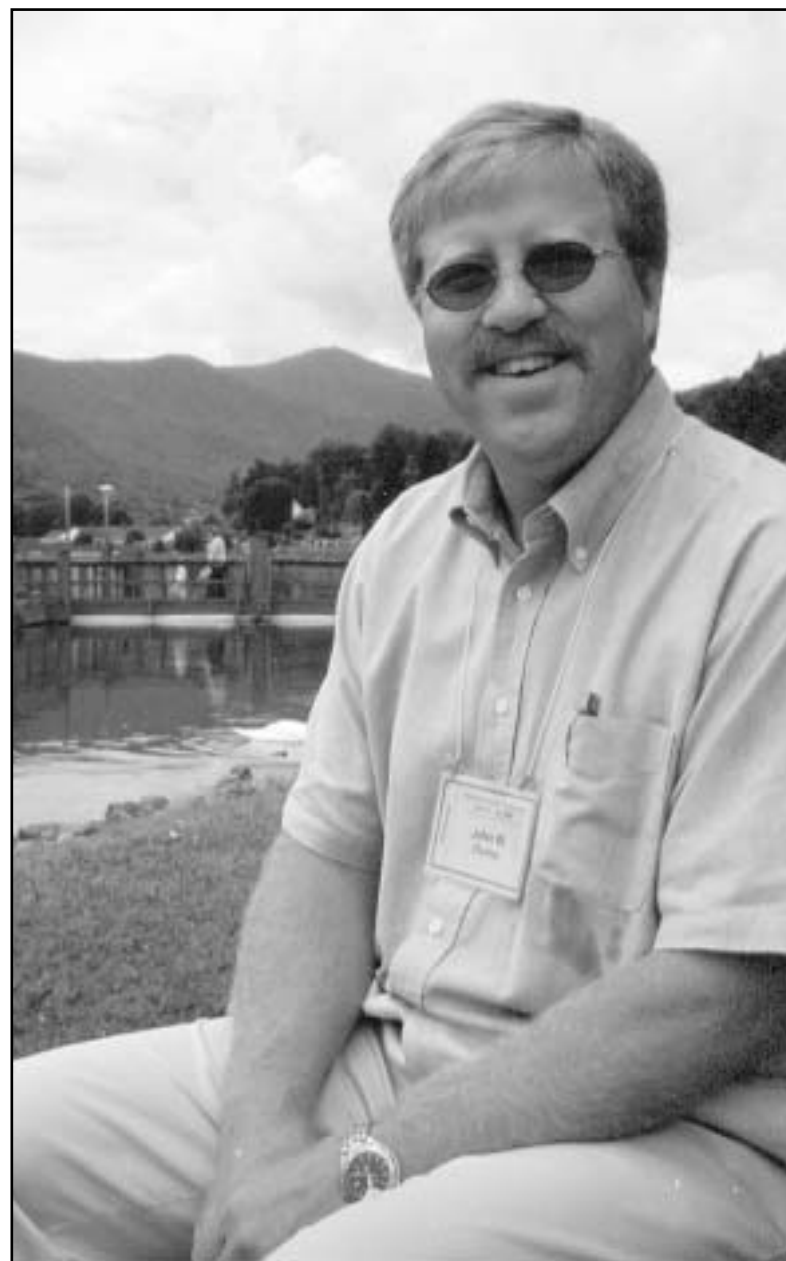


Photo by Lynn Hutton

The Rev. John Ousley relaxes after a boxed lunch at Lake Junaluska. Ousley is the new pastor at Oakland UMC in Wytheville District.

Clergy golf tourney raises \$600

Twenty-nine clergy members participated in the Second Annual Holston Conference Pastor's Scholarship Golf Tournament on June 16, raising \$600 for student pastors exhibiting strong financial need.

The tournament was held at Waynesville Country Club following adjournment of Annual Conference in Lake Junaluska, N.C. First-place winners of the two-man-select-shot contest were the Rev. David Graybeal and the Rev. Brad Hyde, with a net score of 66.

In second place were the Rev. Doug

Fairbanks and the Rev. Gordon Goodgame with a net score of 67. The Rev. Curt Schofield won the "Closest to Hole" competition. The Rev. Nathan Malone won the "Longest Drive" contest.



About \$600 in profit will be used to aid one or more student pastors, according to organizer Tom Seay, pastor at Bearden UMC, Knoxville District. Candidate selections are based on recommendations by district superintendents. ■

Numbers

707 Number of prayers written on paper doves at Annual Conference. The prayer doves were attached to netting and "lifted up to heaven" during the Sending Forth Service.

1,417 Number of children's handprints provided by churches to launch the "Grand Camp" reading program at Annual Conference. The handprints were attached to the backs of auditorium seats for members to take home and use as prayer incentives.

11 Number of times that "Amazing Grace" was presented in song during Annual Conference. ■

