



Ministry reaches out to the river's other side



UMNS photo by Cathy Farmer

Fay Hines, pilot of the towboat Jerry McNeil, guides his tow of barges along the Ohio River near Paducah, Ky.

By Cathy Farmer

United Methodist News Service

Another world exists on the other side of the floodwall in Paducah, Ky.

The muddy brown water swirling past the busy port city is home to thousands of inland waterway mariners who labor seven days a week, 24 hours a day, to deliver the materials that keep America working.

And they do it at the cost of being gone from home as much as a month at a time.

Ann Mills, coordinator of special projects for "Ministry on the River," a ministry of pastoral care and counseling to mariners and their families, says river people are just like anyone else.

"They have the same problems we have," said the Presbyterian lay pastor. "They get depressed, they have family problems. Sometimes their wives, left home alone much of the time, need help. We're a ministry of presence."

In Paducah, Broadway United Methodist, Concord United Methodist and St. Luke Aldersgate United Methodist churches take part in the special projects that Mills coordinates at Christmas and Easter.

"Our volunteers knit caps and scarves to be included in the Christmas boxes we prepare for the crews," Mills said. "They gather at churches like Broadway and Concord to pack the boxes with home-baked cookies, cards from children, a letter with a Christmas blessing, a non-denominational devotional and a small gift.

"The boxes mean the world to the crews," she said. "They especially appreciate the hand-made cards from children."

Bill Dyer, president of Tennessee Valley Towing Inc. and a member of the Broadway church, says the people in the congregation "get a kick out of making the hats and packing the bags."

"Our crew members shy away from much talk about church or religion. Most are kind of afraid of God; God requires a commitment," Dyer said. "But, this is a wonderful program. It's a unique ministry to an overlooked, a forgotten, group of people."

Recently, a young crewman suffered a massive coronary while he was home with his pregnant wife. Mills said they were in a hospital in Jonesboro, Ark., and requesting spiritual help.

"I told them we'd get someone there. We have a

river chaplain associate in Memphis. She's an Episcopal priest. She asked a friend in Jonesboro, another Episcopal priest, to visit with the couple. He found out they were Roman Catholic, so he contacted the local priest to minister to the family.

"That family's needs were met," Mills said. "Just like the river, our ministry sometimes curves and meanders, but it gets there."

The Rev. Greg Waldrop, pastor of the St. Luke Aldersgate United Methodist Church, is one of the river chaplain associates. He was trained for the position by the Seamen's Church Institute, a New York and New Jersey shore-based agency that serves the special needs of the world's merchant mariners and the maritime industry.

The president of West Kentucky Navigation, Dave Dewey, is also a member of Broadway United Methodist Church and a fervent supporter of the river ministry. He says his crewmembers love the boxes at Christmas and Easter.

"It's a nice, homey touch at a time that's hard to be away from home," said Dewey, the father of three daughters and a towboat captain.

Dewey said the grief counseling offered by the two staff chaplains and the network of river chaplain associates is very important. "It has a big impact," he said.

The "ministry in motion" of the chaplains reaches more than 30,000 mariners working along 2,200 miles of rivers. The towboats run from Pittsburgh, Ohio to Houston. The ministry reaches mariners on the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Tennessee, the Cumberland and the Tombigbee rivers.

Without those tows and barges and the men and women who work them, America's businesses would be hard-pressed to survive in a global economy. The River Friendly Churches and the Ministry on the River are providing pastoral care and hospitality to a group of people long overlooked by society.

For more information on River Friendly Churches, go to www.seamenschurch.org. ■

Clergywoman to face trial

(UMNS) A United Methodist clergywoman in Philadelphia faces a church trial as the result of an investigating committee decision. The Rev. Irene Elizabeth (Beth) Stroud, 34, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church of Germantown since 1999, talked about being a lesbian in an April 2003 sermon.

Church law forbids "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" from being ordained or appointed as clergy to churches. An investigating committee from the denomination's Eastern Pennsylvania Annual (regional) Conference met July 23 to review evidence on a complaint brought against Stroud. "The committee on investigation voted that reasonable grounds exist for a church trial as provided in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*," according to a statement from the annual conference.

A trial date will be set after Bishop Peter Weaver, who leads the denomination's Philadelphia area, has selected a retired bishop to preside over the trial. ■