

NEW GUY_{ON} CAMPUS



Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

A few weeks after his July 1 starting date, Stephen Condon buttons his coat in preparation for the work ahead. "The potential here is so great," he says.

IN THE LAST ISSUE, readers learned about Stephen Condon's past and events leading him to the helm of Tennessee Wesleyan College. In part 2 of this two-part series, the president talks about his search for a church home and the challenges that lie ahead.

By Annette Bender

STEPHEN CONDON is searching for a church home, and apparently, church members in the Athens area are anxious to have the new college president among them.

"The pressure is pretty good," says Condon, launching into one of his long, often humorous stories. "In all the places I've lived and all the stuff I've done, I've never felt pressure like this. They come to the house three or four times a week. They hang all kinds of fruits and vegetables on my back door. They leave business cards in the front door. They come by the office constantly.

"There hasn't been a day when I am not

recruited by four or five churches," the president continued.

"Now the good news is that everyone is genuinely nice. Everyone is sincere. None of them bad-mouth the other. But everyone loves their church to the point where they'll take a bullet for it if I'll just shake their hand and say, 'Yeah, I'll come.' And that's cool."

After visiting several churches, the former altar boy says he and his wife, Becky, have made a choice. But it wasn't the fruits and vegetables that swayed them. It was the pastor.

"It's always the leader that gets me," he admits. "I'll do the spaghetti dinners, I'll do anything if I've got the right leader."

And in this case, the Rev. Mike Hubble, senior pastor at Keith Memorial United Methodist Church in Cleveland District, has impressed him.

"He's humble," says Condon. "He is also deep and sincere, and I'll take that over flash anytime."

Born and raised in the Catholic faith, Condon went through a Baptist phase before embracing United Methodism. The woman he married was raised in a primitive Baptist church in Florida, and so the newlyweds tried attending a couple of Baptist churches for the first few years of their marriage.

Condon tells a funny story about preachers who kept coming to his home to pray with him, seemingly unconvinced that he was safe in his faith.

Then in 1979, when Becky and Stephen Condon were living in Chumuckla, Fla., a man who played on Condon's softball team invited him to Elizabeth Chapel UMC.

"Methodism just might be your cup of tea," the man said. Condon has been United Methodist ever since.

"I was just very comfortable in John Wesley," he explains. "The ability to find some neutrality was a real comfort to me. It was the roughest fit for me in the Baptist church."

Now, at the helm of TWC – his fourth post at a United Methodist college in his 27-year career – Condon has much to say about his feelings for the students and the challenges in store for him.

He knows that fundraising is a priority, and he's got ideas about how to add to the college endowment, address capital needs, and improve salaries. He tells a story about how an old friend gave him a tip on locating a potential benefactor.

He emphathizes with his Hiwassee College counterpart, President Jim Noseworthy, who is battling to reestablish Hiwassee's lost accreditation.

"That accreditation is a scary thing for everybody," he says. "Four years from now we also have to go in front of the SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools)."

Condon gets most fired up when asked about Holston Conference's relationship with the college. While the conference is currently providing \$82,000 annually for TWC's budget, Condon doesn't believe the conference exists to support the college.

"It's the other way he around," he says. "The college is the energy, the educational arm of the extended church. We're not beggars. We're not here to ask the conference for money. We're here to take our children and our faculty and our talents and help resource the conference."

That means making TWC students available to pastors who need volunteer help in their kitchens as well as helping the conference provide seminars, he said.

In his previous posts, Condon says he always found that students were more than willing to partner with the church on projects such as Habitat for Humanity. "The students eat it up. They love giving to the church." And he intends to draw from that energy and willingness – just as he draws from them on a daily basis.

"You can get all caught up in raising money, trying to pay the bills. Oh, my gosh, there's a hole in the roof. There's no AC in the dorm," he explains.

"Then you can spend 20 minutes with those students – anytime, any place, anywhere – and you will know why you do what you do. I know exactly why I am not selling insurance or coaching football, because this is where I'm supposed to be.

"They energize me. And I'm so fortunate that 775 of them have decided to come here this fall." ■