

Reading List

We asked these newly commissioned probationary members, "What book is lying on your nightstand?"

● Jason Brown

First Alcoa UMC
Maryville District
Seizing Your Divine Moment: Dare to Live a Life of Adventure,
by Erwin Raphael McManus

● Cheryl Caruso

Tasso UMC
Cleveland District
Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination, by Walter Wink

● Aaron Pierce

Ketron Memorial UMC
Kingsport District
The God You're Looking for,
by Bill Hybels

● Debbie Stokes

Broad Street UMC
Cleveland District
Gift From the Sea,
Anne Morrow Lindbergh



At lunch with Alta Raper: Fresh starter

By Lynn Hutton



Photo by Lynn Hutton

Rev. Alta Raper takes a visitor on a tour of her three churches before lunching on scones in Gatlinburg.

The Rev. Alta Raper is making up for lost time. For 19 years, while she worked in an insurance agency, she fought the call to ministry, believing she was not worthy. ("Who is?" one has to ask.)

Since her appointment to three small churches in Maryville District, she starts at 6 a.m., goes hard until 10:30 p.m., and prays at the end of the day, "Lord, couldn't you give me three or four more hours a day to do your work?"

She is petite and energetic, quick to smile and offer a hug. Her silver hair is the only clue to her age. Creamy skin and gray-blue eyes belie her 64 years. She grieves the wasted years, but acknowledges that she is a different pastor than she would have been in 1981. She admits that her life experience has made her more compassionate, capable and committed.

We sat down together at the Royal Tea Cup near Gatlinburg for lunch, but only after she had taken me on a tour of her churches. We shared a plate of scones slathered with lemon curd as she talked about her flocks.

Raper serves the Pittman Center Circuit, which includes Burnett Memorial, Webb's Creek, and Shults Grove United Methodist Churches. She went into churches where there were no existing membership records, no committee structure, no record of a past, and no hope for a future. "It was obvious they were dying churches," Raper said. That was in 2001.

In 2002, all three were Five-Star Churches and ranked as Churches of Excellence in Evangelism (Webb's Creek as a gold church, and Burnett Memorial and Shults Grove as silver).

The certificates are displayed proudly in each church. Worship attendance has doubled at two churches (Webb's from 37 to 70, Shults from seven to 14) and tripled at another (Burnett from 12 to 36).

Evidence of outreach is visible everywhere. Burnett Memorial has a bassinet sitting in Fellowship Hall, filled with baby blankets and diapers to be distributed to mothers in need. Webb's Creek collects good used clothing for a mission project in the area. Shults Grove hosts a community ladies' grief support group.

Pittman Center (today's population 478) began as a mission project of the Methodist Episcopal Board of Home Missions and Church Extension. John Burnett, who had grown up in North Carolina, approached the Board about building a community from scratch. Eli Pittman, superintendent of the Elmira District, Central New York Conference, was sent to East Tennessee to help plan the project, and in 1921, a village was born.

They built an elementary school, a high school, an infirmary (whose foundation now supports the parsonage where Raper lives), a shop, a home economics building, and a girl's dormitory. Some of those buildings were washed away in a 1938 flash flood.

"When I first came here," she says, smiling, "I thought I was in the middle of nowhere. Now I know that I am in a little bit of heaven on earth. I love this place – it is so beautiful – and I love these people. I came here determined to love them, and it has been easy to do."

It has been easy for them to love her, too. Retired pastor Rev. John Trundle, now one of Raper's parishioners, stopped us as we left Webb's Creek. "You can quote me on this," he said to me. "She's a good'n." ■

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

Calendar

Sept. 21: International prayer day

(UMNS) His Eminence, Sunday Mbang, Prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria and chairperson of the World Methodist Council, is calling on all Methodists to join the International Day of Prayer for Peace on Sept. 21.

The observance is the World Council of Churches' effort to coordinate with the International Day for Peace, established in 1981 by the United Nations. United Methodist Women also is calling upon its membership to participate in group and individual prayer vigils and services on Sept. 21. More information is available at www.overcomingviolence.org.

Sept. 25: Bishop Swanson ceremony

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. – Holston members are invited to a "Service Celebrating the Assignment of Bishop James Edward Swanson Sr." at Munsey Memorial UMC, Johnson City, Tenn. The ceremony begins at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 25.

Sept. 24-26: 'Conference on Ministry'

EMORY, Va. – The Wesley Institute and Emory & Henry College will present a conference with Neal Christie Sept. 24-26 on the

campus in Emory, Va. "Conference on the Ministry" includes two events: "When Sunday Meets Monday: The Practice of the Social Principles in the World" and "Bridging the Gap: Inter-Religious & Cross-Cultural Dialogue." Cost is \$20 for the "Sunday Meets Monday" event, free for "Bridging the Gap."

Christie is assistant general secretary with the General Board of Church & Society. The conference has been scheduled so as not to conflict with Bishop Swanson's ceremony on Sept. 25. For more information, call the Rev. Caryl Griffin at (423) 928-2156. Visit www.holstonconference.com/wesleyinst/events.html.

September: Pastoral care training

Holston's Pastoral Counseling Center is offering a new continuing education and training program beginning after Labor Day in September. The focus of the group will be on training and supervision in pastoral care and counseling of individuals, couples and families for all clergy.

The group will meet at Inskip UMC in Knoxville, Tenn. For more information, contact the Rev. Gary Mauldin, conference pastoral counselor, at (865) 805-9781 or GaryMauldin@comcast.net. ■