

Hispanic/Latino ministries:

Churches aim for moving targets

The United Methodist Church designates Sept. 15 through Oct. 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month. Here in Holston, at least six groups are finding that their year-round Hispanic/Latino ministries are affected by changes in funding and population.

By Annette Bender

The Rev. Ty Harrison, as chair of Holston's Hispanic Ministries Team, seems to be in a dilemma. The need for Hispanic/Latino ministries is stronger than ever as more Spanish speakers move into the Holston area. Yet, the conference's \$50,000 matching grant from the General Board of Global Ministries expired this year.

Leaders of existing ministries in Holston are scrambling to find funds through their districts and local churches. Meanwhile, Harrison and other conference leaders are trying to provide support by encouraging church members to give to Hispanic ministries. They're also hoping congregations won't back off in developing new ministries for the newcomers in their areas.

"Interest is building in each district for Hispanic ministries," says Harrison, pastor at First Hillsville UMC, Wytheville District. "So even if you don't have a ministry in your district, it's not a bad idea to give to your district. Then, if a faith community does start up, they'll have some seed money."

For congregations considering new ministries, Harrison recommends "Pentecost Journey: A Planning Guide for Hispanic Ministries." The book, accompanied with a video, is available through Cokesbury Bookstores for less than \$10 (www.cokesbury.com or 1-800-672-1879).

To learn more about supporting Hispanic/Latino ministries, contact your district office or Anne Travis, director of connectional ministries, at (865) 690-4080. In the meantime, here are updates on three Hispanic ministries in Holston. See the next issue of *The Call* for reports on ministries at First Pulaski UMC, Liberty Hill UMC, and Chattanooga District.

Galax: In May 2003, Holston's first chartered Hispanic congregation moved into its own building in Galax, Va. This summer, the Rev. Arturo Reyna, pastor of Door of Heaven UMC, is excited about a new soccer field on the church grounds. The Wytheville District gave \$6,000 for the field to be graded and seeded. Next spring, Reyna is going to offer the field to six or seven local Hispanic teams that need a place to practice.

"It's going to be awesome," Reyna says. "Of course, we want to invite [the soccer players] to church and talk to them about the Lord. We're expecting growth next year because of this ministry."



UNICOI, Tenn. – Aurelio Ocon, lay missionary at Unicoi UMC, distributes backpacks and school supplies to children at an apartment complex.



TOWNSEND, Tenn. – Karen Neff (above, right) accompanies a group of Maryville District children who are waiting their turns for canoe trips at Camp Wesley Woods.

Already, the newborn church houses 95 to 120 in Sunday worship. Concerned that his growing numbers receive proper Christian education, Reyna is having 13 Sunday school and Bible study teachers undergo several Saturday trainings with a Hispanic educator from North Carolina.

"When new people start coming, they're going to find out that we have trained teachers," he says, "and they're going to be more comfortable."

Unicoi: Led by the Rev. Dennis Loy, Unicoi UMC has seen its Saturday night Bible study attendance grow from 10 to 50 children in the past year. This month, 100 backpacks with school supplies were delivered to children in nearby apartment complexes. At Easter and Christmas, 45 children received toys, towels, blankets and hygiene items.

The goal, says Loy, is to serve families by

ministering to the children. "We're doing everything possible to integrate the children into the full life of the church," he says.

For example, after launching a new Rotation Model Sunday School program this summer, the Johnson City District congregation wants to start picking up children in the church van on Sunday mornings for breakfast, education and fun.

During the summer when migrant workers come to Unicoi, the church will continue to provide Vacation Bible School for their children. On rainy days when migrant workers can't work, members will offer them "mini courses" in English or shopping skills, Loy says.

This month, Unicoi hired a new children's director with a Spanish degree and interest in Hispanic ministries. Sarah Masker is the daughter of Holston Home for Children President Art Masker.

Maryville: As the Maryville District's part-time director of Hispanic ministries, Karen Neff's work place is a rented mobile home in a trailer park between Sweetwater and Vonore, Tenn. "I run it like a community center," Neff says. She works with 40 children from the trailer park, involving them in a traveling choir, getting them scholarships to attend summer camp, and providing after-school programs.

With six new babies in the trailer park, Neff attends WIC meetings with the parents and obtains their diapers and cameras through donations from First Sweetwater UMC. She's helping two families buy their first homes.

"Please help us get a home before winter," the child of one of the families asked her. Neff explains that the boy sleeps on a couch in the family room and

is concerned about the approaching cold nights.

Although Neff is already feeling the strain of a part-time ministry with full-time opportunities, she's ready to reach out to another Hispanic community three to four miles away.

"The ministry out there is just endless," says Neff. "It's just me and God out there, and he tells me what to do. I love it so much." ■

Summer camp wrap-up:

Numbers tell part of the story

By Annette Bender

On one hand, the statistics are revealing, says the Rev. Randy Pasqua. The total number of 2004 summer campers at the conference's four camps fell only slightly behind 2003 numbers: 2,836 compared with 2,905.

Camp Dickenson experienced an attendance decline in 2004, while Camp Lookout had an increase. Attendances at Buffalo Mountain Camp and Camp Wesley Woods remained about the same this year, compared with last.

Statistics also show that Wesley Foundations and the conference colleges are well represented among staff members. Nineteen of this year's counselors plan to enter the ministry.

"The statistics prove that camping is a significant ministry not only to campers but also to staff," says Pasqua, director of camp and retreat ministries. "We seem to be steady and stable in our ministry. It also seems that our efforts to meet the highest quality standards continue to be very important."

"When you think about it, there is no other ministry that deals with 3,000 children for a week at a time," says the Rev. Charles Maynard, camp development officer since April. "It's amazing."

On the other hand, numbers only tell part of the story, camp leaders say. Every summer, the stories roll out of camp like rain down the mountain trails.

At Dickenson, counselor Rachel Buchanan told about an experience she had with a camper at Celebration Camp – for children with mentally challenging conditions. "We were eating lunch and he asked me to pass the mayonnaise," says Buchanan. "I didn't realize that he didn't know when to stop putting mayonnaise on his hamburger until he had already put too much. At that moment I realized how much I take for granted everyday."

At Buffalo Mountain, Director Christina DowlingSoka told of the "smiling camper," a scholarship recipient, who stopped smiling when he developed a toothache. His family wasn't able to come get him, so DowlingSoka took him to a free dental clinic in his hometown of Bristol, Va. "He was a trooper," she said. "In the midst of a long night, I fell more in love with this little boy."

At Lookout, Director Don Washburn told of the boy whose Big Brother paid for him to attend camp over two summers. This year, the Big Brother died. But his grieving "little brother" was able to attend not just one week of camp, but two, thanks to a camp scholarship. "I know my Big Brother is in heaven, because he made sure I got to come back to camp," the boy told his counselors.

For information about giving to Holston Conference Camp and Retreat Ministries, call (423) 929-9037. ■

- Number of 2004 summer campers: **2,836**
- Number of 2003 summer campers: **2,905**
- Percentage from United Methodist churches: **66%**
- Percentage of returning campers: **56%**

- Number of camp-sponsored scholarships: **323**
- Number of local-church sponsored scholarships: **698**
- Number of district-sponsored scholarships (Abingdon, Big Stone Gap & Wytheville): **278**

- Number of summer staff & counselors: **170**
- Number attending conference colleges: **22**
- Number participating in Wesley Foundations: **22**
- Number preparing to enter the ministry: **19**



Above: Campers and counselors at Buffalo Mountain Camp brave a rainy day with rainbow-colored hoodies.



Right: Campers at Camp Lookout do the Wild West thing. Go ahead, make my day.