

# A day in the life of a Church and Community Worker



Harry Howe builds a bridge for four needy families near Nebo, Va. He has written a poem, "She Sits Alone," that captures his commitment to construction ministry. To read the poem, visit [www.holston.org/thecall](http://www.holston.org/thecall).

Story and photos by Annette Bender

**H**arry Howe builds handicap ramps and repairs roofs for needy people.

Nancy Hobbs oversees a clothes closet and collects seeds so that hungry families can plant their own gardens.

Randy Hildebrant takes underprivileged youth on hiking trips and runs a summer work camp.

Lisa Nichols helps inner-city working mothers with child care and runs a computer lab for community kids.

In four far-flung areas of the conference, Holston's Church and Community Workers are – quietly, daily – serving the needy in both rural and urban areas.

The United Methodist Church has 48 of these types of ministries, serving primarily in the United States. Only two other United Methodist conferences – Virginia and

West Virginia – support as many Church and Community Workers.

The fact that Holston has four such missionaries says a lot about this conference, according to Brenda Connelly, executive secretary of Church and Community Worker Ministry in the General Board of Global Ministries' New York City office.

"It says that Holston Conference is committed to serving the poor and marginalized, and it says that Holston is aware and understands the value of Church and Community Workers," Connelly said.

Church and Community Workers are supported by funding from the conference, districts, projects, and the General Board of Global Ministries, as well as covenant local churches.

Here's what happens on a typical day in the ministries of Holston's own Howe, Hobbs, Hildebrant and Nichols. ■

## Harry Howe

Abingdon District

The Rev. Harry Howe says to meet him at 8:30 a.m. in Marion, Va., where his ministry, Project Crossroads, is located. From there, he will drive to a remote area near Nebo, Va., where he is rebuilding a bridge that was washed out by a flood.

"How far are we driving?" Howe is asked.

"Not that far," he replies.

For the next 45 minutes, Howe drives up and down mountains; turns left, right and – whoa! – dramatic left again; until finally, he parks on a country road near a creek.

Here, Howe will spend the rest of the day traipsing around in cold water, building a bridge for four needy families. Some of the family members are sick and elderly. When they need groceries or medical care, they have to walk across the creek via a felled tree to reach their cars.

"I may be on a rooftop or in a septic tank or in a hole like this," Howe says, explaining the many facets of his job.

"Most of our ministry is in housing rehabilitation."

Serving three counties, Howe specializes in building ramps for the handicapped, rebuilding floors that are falling in, and replacing roofs. Work teams from all denominations help him complete his many projects.

As disaster-relief coordinator for the Abingdon District, Howe also has collected and delivered flood supplies. As an elder, he preaches in different churches on Sunday morning. He previously served as a pastor in the East Marion Circuit. He has led Project Crossroads for the last 11 1/2 years.

"To be honest, I've experienced the presence of Christ more by being with these people than from standing behind a pulpit on Sunday morning."

Howe is part of a well-known Holston ministry family. Danny Howe serves as mission director at First Broad Street UMC in Kingsport, Tenn. Freddy is custodian at First Broad Street. Ginger is pastor at George Street/Grant's Chapel UMC.

"Our parents instilled in us that we should not only serve the church, but be the church," he says. ■



Nancy Hobbs helps sort donated clothing in Duffield, Va. Her project is connected with two ministries that provide clothing for the needy.



## Nancy Hobbs

Big Stone District

The Rev. Nancy Tomlinson Hobbs has just returned from serving hot dogs for 600 at a community event for developmentally disabled children. Now she's stopping by her desk in the Big Stone Gap District office before visiting a clothes closet in Duffield, Va.

The Duffield closet is one of two connected with the Big Stone Gap District Church and Community Renewal Project. The other facility is in Gate City, Va.

On a typical day, Hobbs can not only be found sorting

and hanging donated clothing. She also organizes projects that serve hundreds of families with garden seeds in spring, camping experiences in summer, school supplies in fall, and gifts at Christmas.

Hobbs reads aloud a quote from a brochure describing Church and Community Workers: "It is a kaleidoscope ministry. Each worker's assignment is unique and ever changing, yet reflects the visions of hope that bring communities out of despair."

Now a deacon in the Holston Conference, Hobbs was established as a Church and Community worker four years ago, after 18 years as a program staff member at First Pennington Gap UMC.

Her ministry's biggest strength, she says, is the volunteers. The weakest link? The volunteers.

"Sometimes it gets frustrating, the lack of local church support," she admits. She's concerned about the aging volunteer base: "Most of our volunteers are in their 70s now. I don't see that many young people coming along."

One-third of her time is spent raising funds for her ministry, which Hobbs would prefer to spend serving her community.

But she is uplifted by the reaction she gets from families at the food pantry whenever she arrives with seeds.

"They're always so grateful," she says, smiling. "They say, 'We're so glad to see you. What did you bring us?'" ■

## Lisa Nichols

Chattanooga District

"You are going to see the cutest kids today," the Rev. Lisa Nichols announces, and she's right.

On Friday afternoons, Nichols rides a bus that transports children to and from school, child care or home. She snaps babies into car seats, chats with students about homework, and shares laughs with parents and childcare workers.

In Alton Park, she explains, 40 percent of the households don't have cars. That's why St. Elmo/Alton Park Partners started providing transportation for inner-city children for small fees.

As director of the project, Nichols also helps start and support home-based child-



Randy Hildebrant prepares a Jubilee Project teen for a backpacking trip. Outdoor recreation gets underprivileged youth "out of their environment" and teaches leadership, he says.

receive free or reduced lunch. He works with 50 to 60 youth at a time through Friday-night activities, counseling and work projects.

He recently helped start a county-wide football program and is trying to organize the building of a football stadium. In summer, Hildebrant organizes volunteer labor teams from all over the United States to build



## Randy Hildebrant

Morristown District

It's a chilly Thursday afternoon, and Randy Hildebrant is preparing to lead six youth on a 24-mile backpacking trip along the Appalachian Trail. He's helping the kids pack up gear and food, teasing them about how "nippy" it's going to get in the weekend to come.

Here at Jubilee Project in Sneedville, Tenn., young people benefit from "outdoor recreational teaching," Hildebrant explains later.

"It takes them out of their environment – you can get a lot of one-on-one time with them," he says. "The thing I like about it most is they have to rely on each other, and that's where you start teaching leadership."

For four years now, Hildebrant has served as Jubilee Project's youth coordinator and work-camp coordinator in a county where 83 percent of children and youth reportedly

homes for handicapped people in the area. Recently, he accompanied fellow missionary Harry Howe in delivering supplies collected by Holston churches to hurricane victims in North Carolina.

Originally from Oklahoma, Hildebrant grew up in a small, rural Free Methodist congregation where he said he "always wanted to have a youth director." After a career begun as athletic facility manager at Western Kentucky University, he was always told, "Randy, you're in the wrong business. You ought to be working with youth."

He answered that call 16 years ago, accepting youth lay pastor positions in Hendersonville, Ky., followed by Franklin, N.C.

Now the young people of Sneedville are benefiting from nippy nights and Hildebrant's life lessons taught under the stars. ■



Lisa Nichols helps transport inner-city children from school to child care.

care for working parents. She offers a computer lab, reading center, and other activities for community youth and children at St. Elmo UMC.

Recently, Nichols was enlisted as Christian education leader for Chattanooga District's Hispanic ministry.

The daughter of Holston clergy member Sullins Lamb, Nichols began her career as a kindergarten teacher in Big Stone Gap, Va. "Even though I wanted to work with people,

that wasn't what I felt called to do," she says.

She was commissioned as a Church and Community Worker 22 years ago, coordinating work teams, senior ministries, seed ministries and food programs in three states before returning to Holston in 1999.

Today, the deaconess lives and serves in a community where she's clearly a familiar face, and the kids light up when she arrives to escort them onto the cheerful white bus.

"Did you give your election speech today, Michael?" she asks a precocious four-year-old who is grasping an orange in one hand and Nichols' hand in the other.

The boy launches into the presentation he has obviously prepared as part of an election-week assignment, and Nichols beams. ■

