



## Small

*Continued from front page*

church can out-sing any church two to three times its size."

Both churches sponsor Al-Anon programs on alternating nights, providing coverage for the county and bringing new members in on profession of faith. And both congregations have Burkhart, a former chemical engineer, raised Roman Catholic in Martinsburg, W. Va., now beginning the third year of his first full-time appointment.

Holston members attending Annual Conference last June may remember him as the man who stood at the microphone to gleefully announce, "Hi, I'm Stephen Burkhart, and I'm just a 270-pound cheerleader for Jesus Christ."

"Steve's ministry is wonderful," said Janice Minchew, children's ministry worker at George Street. "God's message just bubbles right out of him."

### Mustard Seed facts

- 76 % of all Holston churches have fewer than 100 in average worship attendance or fewer than 200 members
- Small-membership churches comprise 53,321 or 31%, of the conference's total membership.
- Among Big Stone Gap District members, 57 percent attend small-membership churches, while only 11 percent of Knoxville District members attend small churches.
- The 11 applicants for this year's award showed a total increase of 7% in membership (57 new members), 11% increase in average worship attendance, a total of 60 professions of faith and 44 baptisms.
- Ten of 11 applicants paid 100% of conference apportionments.

Located within a 15-minute drive of each other, Grant's Chapel and George Street also have strong commitments to prayer. In 1995 the Holston Conference was on the verge of closing or merging George Street, averaging 15 in worship at the time. It was then that members got down on their knees to ask God about what to do.

Two of those members were retired clog dancers. "There were no children in the church," said Burkhart, "so they started driving around the neighborhood and inviting kids in on Wednesdays to learn clog dancing. "It became an infectious thing," he said. Because once the kids started coming to the church, other members offered to provide snacks, a Bible story or crafts. As the program grew, a Change for Children grant helped George Street buy a van to transport the children. Today, that same van also picks up children for a pre-Sunday School breakfast.

With the children came families and Carson-Newman College students to work with the kids, resulting in a diverse congregation that includes African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans of all ages among the "lifers."

"One of the best things to

**JEFFERSON CITY, Tenn. — George Street's Wednesday after-school program brings many children to the church on Sundays.**



happen to us was a lady minister," said George Street Lay Leader Joyce Morgan, referring to former Holston pastor Pam McMillan. By challenging members to accept a woman in the pulpit in the late 1990s, "it really helped us to be more open to accepting and welcoming different kinds of people in the church."

Grant's Chapel also had to change in order to grow. When the church decided last year to supplement George Street's Al-Anon program with its own, "it was a big stretch for them," Burkhart said. "They were used to opening up the church to family, but opening up to the outside was a big decision."

A whole year in prayer and discussion helped Grant's Chapel figure out what it needed to do to fulfill God's mission, the preacher said. Located at exit 417 off Interstate 40, Grant's Chapel used to call itself "the friendly little church on the hill." But it takes real effort to extend friendliness into the community, members realized, so they've been working at inviting new people in, going door-to-door, talking about their Sunday-morning gospel singing to anyone who will listen.

Within two years, average worship attendance has grown from 60 to 95.

When visitors come, they find a small church that's spilling over with musicians, musical equipment and lots of friendly people. During the greeting part of the worship service, Burkhart says he has to walk around the outside of the church just to greet someone in the rear of the tiny sanctuary.

"They come out of the pews and they swarm each other. Anybody who's new gets hugged or a handshake. It may take 10 or 12 minutes to get people calmed down again."

"I think it's because we have fallen in love with each other," says Grant's member Becky Case. "You know, faith works by love, and I'm seeing some great things happening."

Besides the obvious answer — prayer — Grant's Chapel members also attribute the revitalization to an inspirational lay-speaking revival last fall and a shepherding program resulting in several children being baptized.

Whatever it is, Burkhart cautions against giving him credit for the changeover or assuming the churches don't have problems or struggles. Losing potential members to other churches, for example, has been frustrating.

"People have told me they wouldn't have gone to church before coming to our Al-Anon program, and at first I wanted to ask them, 'Then why didn't you come here?'" he admitted. "But this isn't a counting deal. Many of these people are reestablishing relationships with their own churches. We've learned to rejoice in that."



Photos by A.S. Bender/The Call

**DANDRIDGE, Tenn. — Gospel music plays a central role in Grant's Chapel heritage and worship services.**

## Wild about Harry? So are they

*Like Holston's own Church Street UMC, this New York Catholic church is also attempting to reach children through best-selling books about a young wizard.*

**By Jerry Rosen  
The Syracuse Newspapers**

BALDWINVILLE, N.Y. — From the halls of Hogwarts to the Quidditch fields, the wizardry of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books have cast a spell over young and old alike.

The first four books of a planned seven-book series describing the coming of age and education of Potter, a young wizard, have sold well over 24 million copies.

But some groups, primarily fundamental Christians, have protested their use in schools. They claim the books promote witchcraft and the occult over Christian values.

Madeline Loiacono, religious educator at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Baldwinsville, N.Y., doesn't see that side of the books. What she sees are parallels between Harry Potter and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Beginning Monday, she will turn a good part of the church into a working replica of the Potter books' Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to help her teach the lessons of Christian religion.

During the week, teachers dressed like characters from the book will lead about 80 students in grades six through eight — about the same age as Potter — in discussion groups that will help the students draw connections between their hero's attributes and the church's precepts.

"There are so many tie-ins between the story and the church," Loiacono said.

One connection that stands out to her is the Parable of the Talents, whose moral supports the wise use of whatever gifts people receive.

"[Harry's] a wonderful character," Loiacono said. "He has a lot of strengths, and he's using them to help himself, his friends and his school."

The stories of Harry Potter's exploits during the sometimes dangerous Quidditch matches have dragged many young

people away from their computer screens and gotten them reading again.

Loiacono, who has been on the church's teaching staff for two years, and a youth minister for more than five, said the idea for the program first came to her when she was reading an article in "Catechism" magazine that advocated using the popularity of the books to reach young people.

She left the magazine open to the story, and the words "Harry Potter" caught the attention of the eldest of her three children, Nicholas, 12.

"He read the article and came running in and said, 'Mom, you've GOT to do something with this,'" she said.

His enthusiasm started a round of brainstorming among her, Nicholas and her other children, Kimberly, 8, and Benjamin, 9.

When she approached the church's pastor, the Rev. John P. Wagner, he did some investigation before he approved the idea.

"I consulted with several teachers in [local] school districts who teach reading and English, and who teach Harry Potter," he said. "By the time I was finished, I was convinced."

While he declined to discuss the dissenters' position, he said, "I have explicit confidence in my staff. It's very difficult to teach religion to youth, and I think this is a very creative way to approach it."

"Before the week is over, the children in this program will be exposed to all of the significant and major teachings of Christ, and the events and miracles in his life."

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