



SOUTH WEST DISTRICT NEWSLETTER

Rev. Dr. Rinaldo Hernandez, District Superintendent
Julie Bullerdick, Business Administrator
Sandy Voigt, Administrative Assistant

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February 2014

Dear Friends –

Some of you who were not able to attend our Connect to God & Community Event held at Faith UMC, Fort Myers on Saturday, January 25th, 2014 have asked me to share my presentation that day on connecting to God. So here it is! I hope you would have the chance to use this material in small groups, staff meetings and other discipleship settings.

“Connect 2 God”, Isaiah 55:1-3, 6

“Is anyone thirsty?

*Come and drink—
even if you have no money!*

*Come, take your choice of wine or milk—
it's all free!*

² Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength?

Why pay for food that does you no good?

Listen to me, and you will eat what is good.

You will enjoy the finest food.

³ “Come to me with your ears wide open.

Listen, and you will find life.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you.

I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.

⁶ Seek the LORD while you can find him.

Call on him now while he is near”

Dear friends, I come here today not to share something I learned in a book, but to share what has been an intrinsic part of my walk with Christ since the time I first gave my life to Christ in August of 1967 as I was attending my first summer camp in Matanzas, Cuba

I would like to communicate to you what is my deep conviction: THERE IS NO LIFE IN CHRIST, THERE IS NO SPIRITUAL GROWTH, THERE IS NO EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP WITHOUT A PERSONAL, DEEP, DAILY, CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

My personal experience is that I wouldn't have been able to endure so many hardships and difficult experiences without that relationship. On July 5th, 1967 our home was invaded by officers wearing olive-green uniforms, searching for documents, pictures, anything they could use to incriminate my father. He was taken to prison and sentenced to 6 years for "a crime against the homeland security". This was their code to typify very committed Christians, wholeheartedly serving the Lord Jesus Christ. I was 10 years old and my brothers were 4 and 2.

That experience impacted our lives in a very profound way. My father would often times share with us about the "secret worship" experiences within the prison, the opportunities he had there to witness Christ to others and the celebration of Holy Communion with crackers and orange juice. There is no way to live through an experience like that without having a strong connection to God. Not just my father grew in his relationship with God. My mother and I also were forced to "come to the waters" and seek the Lord.

Twenty three years later, on September 1980 all those experiences my father had helped me deal with my own experience of persecution. That day I was taken out of my Seminary classroom and sent to a forced labors camp to cut sugar cane for 2 years with other young people whom the government would consider to be "politically or morally defective" - Christians, homosexuals, hippies, thieves, or simply people who like to hear The Beatles or any American singer or band.

Then all the things I heard my father did in prison, I experienced myself. People asking questions about the Bible, Jesus, God and Bible studies happening in the evenings... without Bibles.

I remember explaining something to a group of people who had shown interest to know, and the Holy Spirit giving me the biblical texts in a way I wouldn't be able to repeat today if asked to do so. We celebrated Holy Communion at midnight, in the middle of a sugar cane field, using crackers saved from breakfast and sugar cane juice.

And again, there is absolutely no way to endure something like that, unless you are able to develop a strong sense of God's presence in your life and you are open to the operation of the Holy Spirit in your life in extraordinary ways.

I have come to believe that for extraordinary circumstances, God offers us an extraordinary, extravagant measure of His grace. Eleven months before being taken to the forced labors camp, while starting my second year at Seminary, an American professor was invited to the Seminary to teach us English so we would be able to read our Theology text books in that language.

During the week days we celebrated worship in the Chapel, and one day our English professor was invited to preach. Instead, she shared a powerful testimony of how God had healed her from terminal cancer through the power of prayer. We were very interested in what she shared, so Maggie and I invited her to come that evening to our home to share some more of her experience. Then we asked her for prayer. Maggie was having difficulty in getting pregnant and a doctor had said that she would never be able to have children.

It was the first time in my life I saw anointing oil. She anointed Maggie with the oil, prophesized about the beautiful girl that we will be having very soon, a girl with "fingers like a pianist, very healthy and who will be God's servant for all of her life". She anointed me and prayed God to reveal personally to me and to equip me for

the work of ministry. I found myself praying in a new tongue that was given to me, and I don't even know what was going on.

My reflection on that experience is that I had a personal encounter with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. I had never asked for anything like that. I never knew that such a thing could happen to somebody. Yes, I have read that in the Bible, but I didn't know it could be actually experienced by us Christians. My Christian journey experienced a complete turnaround from then on. I was one Christian before that night and a more devoted disciple of Jesus Christ after that night. God was preparing me for the experience I was about to have.

That experience was a key factor in keeping me closer to God through my time in that camp. In every one of my critical moments, as well as in my everyday life as a Christian leader, it is that strong faith tried through the fire that has kept me faithful.

It's that strong sense of God's presence with me and around me That makes me who I am. It is that familiarity with God, that need for the daily presence of the Holy Spirit what impacts and penetrates my whole being as a Christian leader. I believe Christ can be experienced in everyday life. I believe the Holy Spirit empowers us for effective leadership.

I also believe God has made Himself available to all of us, to all who seek for God and humbly recognize their need of Christ. In the words of **Psalm 145:18-19**, "The LORD is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth. ¹⁹He grants the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cries for help and rescues them"

Keys to understand our text on Isaiah 55

1. **Listening to God feeds us with the finest food** – Don't waste your money on food that "does no good"
 - Find time to HEAR God – quit talking so much
 - Quit things that "do no good" – behaviors, habits, making a conscious effort in living simple and avoiding the evils of materialism and consumerism
2. **Coming to God with a sense of urgency brings life to our days** – closeness to God "fixes our thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable", **Philippians 4:8**
 - We daily engage in so many activities that won't produce abundant life
 - We live in a world where "death" and "signs of death" are competing for our time and attention
 - Come to God with a sense that you urgently need Him in order to reject the seductions of "the things of this world"
3. **Experiencing daily the presence of God will make us strong leaders like David** – God used him to display His power among the peoples
 - Practicing the presence of God daily helps us understand our own weaknesses
 - Equip us with the right weapons to face and overcome the Goliaths
 - Enable us for faithful obedience in all of our relationships
4. **The presence of God makes us "glorious" – people we don't know would run to us**
 - When we practice the presence of God, people notice it. Our face glows with an inexplicable radiance (like Moses when he went to meet God on the mountain)
 - When we are close to God, people come to us for help, guidance, prayer, or even to offer their lives to Christ

- When we have the discipline of seeking and meeting God, people would know where to go when they are in need or facing a challenge, a trial or a crisis in life
5. **Seek God while we can find Him -while He is near**
 - Suggests that there will be a time when God won't be near
 - Now is the time to experience God's presence and sit at His feet to learn and be nurtured by Him
 6. **The presence of the Lord moves us to walk rightly before God** – growth in the sanctification process. And produces a hunger and thirst for justice and holy practices with each other
 - The presence of God produces changes in us: who could be in the presence of God and still be the same?
 - The presence of God helps us consider our actions, words and thoughts, and produces in us the desire to be more like Christ
 - The presence of God invites us to move beyond ourselves and to invest in the lives of others, to be more concerned about social justice issues and moves us to love actions towards those at the edges of society

Reasons why we should seek God

1. **Spending time with the Lord will help us be better connected with ourselves, will increase our self-awareness.** Prophet Isaiah had a deep personal experience with God, and at some point he was able to say: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"
 - We will be more conscious of our weakness and short-comings
 - We will be made more humble, recognizing our personal need for God
2. **Seeking God will improve our connections with others**
 - We see in the Bible Andrew meeting the Messiah and going back to find his brother Simon, so he could also meet Jesus
 - We read about the demon-possessed Gerasene, whom Jesus made free and sent back to his family
 - Connection with God has the power to transform us to be better sons and daughters, better parents, better spouses, better friends and better leaders
3. **Seeking God will make us more sensitive to the needs and brokenness of people, and will propel us to action**
 - Prophet Isaiah in the midst of his encounter with the divine told God: "Here I am – Send me"
 - Four men opened a hole in the roof of a house to connect a paralytic person with Jesus, so that he might be healed
 - Meeting with God will open our eyes to human misery and will make us active workers for healing, wholeness and justice for all human beings
4. **Seeking God with all of our heart will make us better leaders, more fruitful Kingdom workers**
 - The disciples experienced total transformation after Pentecost and the Holy Spirit equipped them to fulfill the Great Commission
 - John Wesley's ministry was exponentially transformed after his Aldersgate heart-warming experience
 - My Pentecost experience totally transformed who I was as a person, as a Christian leader and equipped me to face incredible challenges and hardships, and made me aware of my continued need for a deep relationship with God

Conclusion

1. *Sometimes as Christians we wonder why we are not experiencing sanctification as a continued process of growth and we are not becoming more like Christ – in order to experience that, we need to seek God*
2. *Sometimes we wonder why we are so shy to witness Christ to others – in order to experience boldness in our Christian witness, we need to seek God*
3. *Sometimes we wonder why we are so ineffective as Christian leaders, why what we do for Christ seems to bear no fruit – in order to experience fruitfulness and be effective as leaders, we need to seek God*
4. *Sometimes we wonder why our churches are not experiencing daily conversions, signs and wonders made by the powerful hand of God – in order to see God at work, transforming lives and bringing more people from darkness to light, we need to seek God*
5. *Sometimes we wonder why we are not impacting our communities, why we are not connecting to the younger generations, why we are not making a difference in the world – seeking God will produce in us creative ideas about reaching out, giving a visible place to younger leaders and doing Kingdom work in our communities*
6. *Sometimes we wonder why we are so vulnerable to the attacks of the devil, who has come “to steal and kill and destroy”, to create misunderstandings, fights and lack of unity even among God’s people – we need to seek God if we want to be able **“to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places”***
7. *We seek God by practicing spiritual disciplines: prayer, fasting, meditation, Scripture reading. And also be making ourselves available to the means of grace: attending Church, worshipping, participating in the Sacraments, and serving God in the world*

Rini



Dr. Sergei Nikolaev is a first generation Christian in Russia who graduated from the Methodist Seminary in Moscow. A stellar student, he was invited to pursue a Ph.D. at SMU with Dr. Billy Abraham. Currently Sergei is the President of the Methodist Seminary in Moscow and also the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism. Sergei was warmly received when he spoke at the Bishop's Gathering of clergy in Leesburg this past November. Several persons expressed interest in Sergei speaking at their Church or Wesley Foundation if/when he returned to the US. Here's the good news: Sergei will be here in Florida Feb. 23 - Mar. 2, and is very happy to speak as requested. Dan Johnson, Sr. Minister of Trinity UMC, Gainesville, FL, and member of the Board of Trustees of the Moscow Seminary, is handling requests for Sergei to speak. Please contact Dan's Adm. Asst. Tammy Karafa at tkarafa@trinitygnv.org if you are interested. We will arrange these on a first come basis.

Bishop Carter is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Seminary, and is eager for us in Florida to build spiritual and financial support for the seminary, which has a vital and strategic role to play in the area of Russia and surrounding countries.

Also, Dan, along with Michael Zdorow, is putting together a trip to visit St. Petersburg, Moscow and UM Churches and the Seminary this coming Oct 13 - 23. If you are interested in this, please contact Tammy.

Dan Johnson - Cell: 352-317-4409



LOCAL CHURCH ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS & BUSINESS MANAGERS

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT TO UPDATE YOUR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP ONLINE.
Call the District Office with any questions. We are happy to help!



YOUTH LEADERS

Report from Mike Edwards, SW District Youth Coordinator

The SW District youth retreat, Stoked, is scheduled for March 7-9, 2014 at the FLUM campground, Riverside Retreat. This retreat is a result of the many lunch meetings we have held over the last couple of years. We often heard the complaint that there was nothing for Methodist youth short of Warren Willis in Leesburg. So, we put together a design team last August and have been working very hard to make this event a reality. There are only 104 youth slots and 20 adult chaperone slots available for this retreat. The cost is \$75 each for youth and \$50 each for adults. The deadline for registrations is February 7. Last minute additions will be handled on an individual basis if there are open slots. The theme is all about keeping your faith alive and vibrant, , i.e. "Stoked." There will be worship, small and large group lessons, games, food, and lots of fun. We have been very blessed to have our SW District Superintendent, Rini Hernandez and the FLUM Youth Coordinator, Joel Pancoast agree to be a couple of our speakers. To register, contact Chelsy Hernandez at chernandez@umriversideretreat.org at Riverside Retreat or email me and I will send you the forms.

We will not be holding a regular district youth leader's meeting until after the Stoked Spring Retreat in March. We usually try to meet monthly for lunch and fellowship and alternate a north-district and south-district location. The Stoked Retreat design team will be meeting February 10, noon, at Riverside Retreat in Hendry County to iron out last minute details, assign small groups, etc. We welcome any SW District Methodist youth leader to this and all our meetings.

The FLUM youth leaders training session, Refuel Retreat, led by Leadertreks in January was a great success. This renewal type retreat for youth leaders was sorely needed. Our next FLUM Conference sponsored training opportunity will be in September.

If your youth group is having an outing, lock-in, or other event that you would like to invite other FLUM-SW District youth groups to join, please email me at medwards@faithum.com and I will forward the info. If you are a SW District youth leader and do NOT receive my email blasts, email me to get on the contact list.

Your servant in Christ,

Mike

Contact info: Mike Edwards, FLUM SW District Youth Coordinator
Youth Director, Faith UMC, 15690 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers FL 33908 -- medwards@faithum.com.



SW DISTRICT CUBA CONNECTION

By Dan Christopherson, South West District Cuba Coordinator

Hosting a Cuban Pastor

Last month I wrote about the experience of hosting a Cuban pastor for a month. It is an opportunity to bring together two countries and two churches. It is a once in a lifetime experience for the Cuban pastor. My wife and I have been blest to host numerous pastors and would not trade this experience for anything. But there are obligations and responsibilities the host church must understand when you make this decision. I would like to take this opportunity to give you some information on the steps and your obligation as a host church.

If you are wishing to invite you sister church pastor to come to the United States you must first select your dates. Now select another date because the procedure could take one year from start to finish. The first step is to make sure your pastor has a passport. If they do not they will need to apply, this could take six weeks to two months. If you are fortunate the pastor has a passport, which many do. From there we will need to send a "Letter of Invitation," signed by the host church pastor, to Bishop Pereira's office in Havana. Please understand the Letter of Invitation states the date of departure and return. The Bishop must approve the pastor and the travel dates before the interview with the Cuba Immigration Office. A Cuban pastor's visit is for thirty days. I like to hand deliver the Letter of Invitation and that could delay the process more.

The next step is a call to the Immigration Office for the pastor's interview; this procedure has improved significantly in the last couple years. I try to get the interview date six weeks to two months out from my call. This will give the candidate time to practice his or her interview questions with the District Superintendent. I can assist you on all the above so to this point your only obligation is financial support for the passport, interview and transportation to Havana. For ease of transportation on the Cuban pastor's part I have been planning their departure with my return from a trip. For a person that has never traveled Miami customs and airport can be very intimidating.

Once the pastor has arrived is when "your obligation and responsibilities kick in. Please beware your pastor will arrive with one small bag for his entire stay, but that is all he has. You will need to take him to Goodwill, Walmart or similar stores to enrich his wardrobe. This is not about you, it is totally about strengthening the relationship between your two churches. Your agenda should have been set six weeks to months earlier. Just some ideas for activities during his visit:

- Speak on Sunday morning before entire congregation
- Women's, Men's and Youth Groups.
- Bible studies
- Mission Conference
- Meeting with District Superintendent
- Speaking engagement at other churches
- Meeting with Mission Committee
- Meeting with other District Coordinator
- Hi-light Walmart and Publix

This is just a short list of endless activities available to all of us.

You are responsibly for all housing, transportation, entertainment, food cost and more. He will need transportation back to the airport and assistance through the check-in procedure and paying for the

YOU CAN VIEW ALL LOCAL CHURCH EVENTS ON THE CONFERENCE WEBSITE – SELECT “LOCAL CHURCH EVENTS” UNDER THE ‘QUICK LINKS’ SECTION

If you need help to submit an event, call Sandy in the District Office.



HELP WANTED & CLASSIFIEDS....

Don't forget to check the Conference website (www.flumc.org) to find job postings, items for sale, donations, etc. Just select "Classifieds" on the left side of the homepage.

CALENDAR NOTES:

Feb 6 – SW District NCD Meeting. Location: Nocatee UMC (9:30am-12:00pm)

Feb 8 – SW District Leadership Training, Cypress Lake UMC, Ft. Myers

Feb 11 – SW District Nominations Committee, District Office (10am-12noon)

Feb15 – SW District Leadership Training, Christ UMC, Venice

Feb 27 – SW Congregational Vitality Committee, First UMC, Punta Gorda (9am-5pm)

Mar 9 – Bishop preaching at First UMC, Cape Coral

Mar 13 – SW District dCOM Meeting, First UMC-Punta Gorda (9am-5pm)

March 25 – ALL DAY Clergy Team Meeting & Clergy Spouse Gathering, Riverside Retreat

Mar 27 – SW District Congregational Vitality Meeting, First UMC-Punta Gorda (9am-5pm)

May 27 – Clergy Team Meeting, Cleveland UMC

This newsletter gives an overview of some of the activities of the South West District and the Conference. Please make a note of these events and encourage your lay ministers and church members to participate.