



SOUTH WEST DISTRICT NEWSLETTER

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"Being transformed, transforming the world"

"About eight days later Jesus took Peter, John, and James up on a mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly, two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking with Jesus. ³¹ They were glorious to see. And they were speaking about his exodus from this world, which was about to be fulfilled in Jerusalem..."

³⁷ The next day, after they had come down the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. ³⁸ A man in the crowd called out to him, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, my only child. ³⁹ An evil spirit keeps seizing him, making him scream" (Luke 9:28-31, 37-39)

John Wesley was born in a Christian home. Both his father and grandfather were Anglican priests. His mother was an outstanding Christian educator and scholar who taught all of her 17 children how to read by using the Bible.

He went to a Christian school, college and university, was ordained first as a deacon and then as an elder in the Church of England, served as a missionary in America, spoke 7 languages AND STILL he was not a Christian. He was lacking the assurance of salvation and "the faith that saves", as he called it.

It wasn't until May 24th, 1738 when he attended a prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street in London when he had a personal experience of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and felt that his sins, his own, were forgiven and washed again by the blood of the Living Christ. Starting that day, his whole ministry was transform and he adopted the world to be his parish.

If not for this key personal experience of salvation, John Wesley would not have been the great leader he was, and particularly the person who exhibited that incredible passion for the least, the last and the lost.

That is why John Wesley made a personal experience one key ingredient of the Methodist understanding of salvation: because for long years he was just "a fan", but not a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

As all of you might already know, I'm a 5-generation Methodist. My ancestors came to Christ through the Missionary efforts of Florida Christians who went to Cuba in the 19th Century to share with us the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Church was essential to my whole being as I was born. I remember the first times when I participated in Christmas plays, or sang Christmas carols with the rest of the children in my Sunday school class. I remember reciting a poem to my mother in a Mother's Day Service when I was about 5-6 years old. I learned how to be faithful to Christ in the midst of persecution and oppression. I saw my father going to jail for 6 years because of Christ. But none of all those experiences made me a Christian.

I believe I became a Christian the day I was put in front of a classroom where there were about 30 other students and I was asked to declare if I was a Christian or not. I took my time, looked my professor in the eye and said: "Jesus is my Lord" while all the kids were laughing and making jokes.

A few weeks after that, I went to a Summer Camp that was put together by the Methodist Church in Cuba. Only about 50 children from all around the island were present. And while I was hearing the preaching of the Gospel by an awesome woman of God, I also felt my heart burn inside of me, and I came to the altar and offered my life to Jesus. I was 11 years old.

That experience was transformational and motivational in my life. I did not have any problem in telling everybody I was a Christian, even when that would be a dangerous acknowledgement in Communist Cuba.

That passion for Christ and His Kingdom was the spark that ignited the flame in my heart to become a minister when I was 20 years old, and has kept me in faithfulness to that call for the past 36 years of my life.

In the text I used to start this reflection, we can see how Jesus, Peter, John and James went up on a mountain to pray. On the top of that mountain, they experienced a moment of encounter with the divine: Jesus' face was transformed with the presence of God and his clothes became dazzling white.

I would argue that all followers of Jesus Christ, in order to be considered "Christians" need to live an experience or experiences like this: a moment of which the divine eternal touches and transforms humanness in its fragility and weakness into something different: an empowered, motivated and passionate follower of Jesus.

Through that encounter, we receive assurance of the presence of the Living God, we receive a transcendent word that is relevant to our own need and we are energized and empowered to tell the world that God is real, Jesus is Lord and the Holy Spirit has the power to transform the human being and the world around.

As Jesus and his disciples walked down the mountain, they were confronted with human brokenness, sickness and need for salvation and redemption. A father approaches Jesus to ask for deliverance and life for his demon-possessed son. The father asked the disciples to do something for him, but they couldn't.

To me that's a description of how good human efforts end without the empowerment and authority given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can do many good things, many merciful and compassionate actions which lack the power are no more than philanthropic, good will actions that do not provide personal transformation and life abundant in the lives of people who come our way.

Where human actions and good works end, there still is a possibility for God to act through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus rebukes the evil spirits and the child is returned to his father free and healed, transformed in his body, mind and soul. And the witnesses of this moment were amazed at such display of God's power.

A suffering son is made free to end the anguish, frustration and hopelessness of a suffering father, and a whole community is impacted in the process

We United Methodists are a body of believers with a purpose: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But there is no transformation of the world without personal transformation. It needs to begin with me.

Personal transformation, I believe, is not just a moment in life, a past experience without relevance for the present: it is a process that encompasses multiple moments of experiences and encounters with the divine.

Very often we want people in our churches to go to the world and touch the lives of suffering, needy people. And very often that does not happen, simply because the disciples entrusted with that commission are lacking the spiritual power that really enables them to do Jesus' work in the world.

We all need to go more often up to the mountain to pray and look for God's face, to experience an encounter with the Living God that would transform our faces, brighten our clothes and enable us to come down to touch the lives of others and to transform the world.

In this new year 2014, I would very much like to encourage my fellow coworkers in the SW District to be intentional in looking for moments of personal transformation. Those moments would happen generally through the practice of spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, in-depth connection with the Holy Scriptures, participation in worship and the Sacraments, and service in the world.

I would like to emphasize two initiatives in order to help us grow spiritually and in our commitment to be a blessing in the world:

- (1) The one-year Scripture's reading plan of Luke-Acts to which our Florida Resident Bishop Ken Carter has invited us to take. Read one chapter for a week and try to meditate in it and find clues for our daily living as Christians in this broken world that is in desperate need of Jesus through our witnessing in words and deeds.
- (2) Our SW District event "Connect to God and community" which will be held at Faith UMC, Fort Myers on Saturday, January 25th, 2014. The purpose of that event, through worshipping and teaching, is to help all of us understand our own need for deeper connections and relationships both with God and with this suffering world. Please, make every effort to attend and to be impacted by our time together as pastors and lay leaders in this, our mission field in SW Florida.

May God's grace fill your hearts with joy and hope!

Rini



South West District Staff (Rini, Julie & Sandy) would like to thank all of the pastors & churches that contributed to a special Christmas gift offering. Your gift was truly appreciated. We were deeply touched. We feel honored and blessed to be in ministry with all of you.



A Simple Plan for Reading Scripture in 2014

by Bishop Ken Carter

(Beginning Jan. 3, a quick link to the Bishop's scriptural reading web page is on the top left corner of the home page of the Conference website (www.flumc2.org): Bishop's Weekly Scripture Reading 2014.)

According to the Book of Discipline (2012), "The role of the bishop is to faithfully practice, model and lead the spiritual disciplines of our faith and to call and inspire the clergy and laity within the Church to practice the Christian disciplines in their individual lives through the tradition of personal holiness"(403.a).

As we enter into a new calendar year, I invite you to join me in this particular spiritual practice.

1. We will read a chapter of Luke, and then Acts, through the 2014 year, one chapter per week. There are 24 chapters in Luke and 28 chapters in Acts; this will take us through 52 weeks of the year. This will also allow us to spend more time, and to go in greater depth, with the scriptures. In the fall our cabinet met with Luke Timothy Johnson, a noted biblical scholar at Emory University. He remarked that the books of Luke and Acts were never intended to be read separately. He further stated that the life of Jesus and the life of the church cannot be understood apart from each other. While many in our culture wish to separate Jesus from the church ("They like Jesus, but not the church!"), this is not an option for those who take the Bible seriously. Luke faithfully reported on the life and ministry of Jesus, and how this life and ministry continued in the early church. We can read Luke and Acts within the framework of how the life and ministry of Jesus is among us to this day, and as a blueprint for what it means to make disciples for the transformation of the world.

If you undertake this spiritual practice, I invite you to begin with Luke 1 on January 5, Luke 2 on January 12, Luke 3 on January 19, and onward. We will note on our conference website the chapter being read each week. You might invite your persons attending worship on January 5 to consider this new beginning.

2. I want to ask you to invite one person to experience this spiritual practice with you. This person might be someone in your church or a friend in your community. We have talked a great deal about relationships across the generations and across racial divisions; you might seek out someone who has a different life experience than yours. If you read the scripture with another person, you might meet every week, or every other week, to talk about what God is saying to you through this exercise. Some of us are in covenant groups, Sunday School classes, life groups, or ongoing Bible Studies. You may certainly use this plan in those existing relationships. Some of you already have a spiritual plan for the coming year, and if so that is wonderful. This is intended for those who are seeking a more disciplined method (we are called "Methodists") for growing in our relationships with Christ and each other. And if this sparks your imagination in some way, feel free to adapt it as the Holy Spirit leads you.

Note: I will likely read the chapter each week in the NRSV, the Message and the CEB. Many churches also use the NIV and the NLT, and all of these translations are wonderful. There are a number of commentaries on Luke and Acts and I will leave those resources to you, if you wish a deeper background. I plan to journal once or twice a week. Additional resources will be placed on the conference website, and the annual conference themes will be taken from Luke and Acts.

I am trying to keep this simple. The renewal of the church has always arisen from a fresh and disciplined engagement with the scriptures. I pray that God will use our devotional lives in 2014 to bless the church, each other and the communities of Florida.



The Church Profile and Pastor Profile will be accessible by clicking the Profiles link under Forms and Reports in the bottom grey section of the Home Page of the Florida Conference website www.flumc.org. This link will open to detailed instructions for accessing both profiles. Follow the step by step instructions to access the appropriate profile.

www.connect2godandcommunity.com

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



It was twenty-five days of first time experiences. Many beautiful churches, Sunshine Skyway Bridge, well-kept communities, paved roads and the list continues. A factor that I had not thought of was, he said, “Christian and Christmas music on the radio, no, no in Cuba only in the church not public radio.” I attend a Christian men’s group that

The SW District youth retreat, Stoked, is scheduled for March 7-9, 2014 at the FLUM campground, Riverside Retreat, in Hendry County. 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. There will be worship, small and large group lessons, games, food, and lots of fun. To register, contact Chelsy Hernandez at chernandez@umriversideretreat.org at Riverside Retreat. This is the new email address for registrations. I have heard a rumor that the FLUM youth leaders training session, Refuel Retreat, led by Leadertreks on January 13-14, 2014 is full up. If you want in on this renewal opportunity, you can contact Joel Pancoast at

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.

Mike

CHURCH EVENTS IN THE SOUTH WEST DISTRICT

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



HELP WANTED & CLASSIFIEDS....

CALENDAR NOTES:

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.