

"Write the vision clearly on the tablets, that one may read it on the run." – Habakkuk

THE VISION



January 2018

Teams Sought for Puerto Rico Recovery

BY TOM VENCUSS

We have all seen the photos, read the statistics, and heard the concerns and cries of the people. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) has announced that volunteer teams are now being accepted for deployment to support the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico (MCPR) in their ongoing recovery efforts.

UMCOR has been working with Bishop Hector Ortiz and the MCPR leadership team to

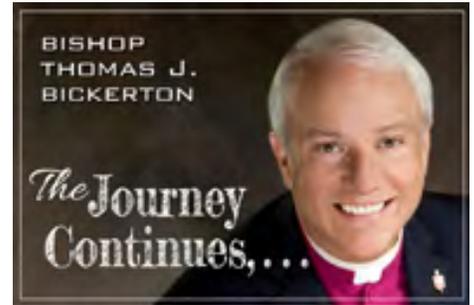
develop and fund a structure and program that will effectively address outstanding recovery needs in both the short and long-term. This will include volunteer coordination and hosting, construction, case management and material support.

On January 9, the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico (MCPR), in partnership with UMCOR and United Methodist Volunteers in mission (UMVIM), began receiving applications

for both early response (ERT) and rebuild/ construction teams.

All team requests are being handled through the disaster response coordinators in each conference. Please read the following basic information from UMCOR and if you are interested in leading a team or have addition questions please contact me via email at tvencuss@nyac.com.

Continued on page 3



Finding Warmth Of God's Love Despite the Cold

It has been cold and blustery outside these last few weeks. Perhaps we could say that it has been cold and blustery in the world a lot longer than that.

But this weekend, I found two places that were warm and inviting.

On a cold and windy Saturday, I discovered a place of warmth and comfort. I found myself in a room filled with people of purpose and passion. They came representing the mission projects that they support and facilitate for our first NYAC Mission Summit. They came representing places like Ecuador, the Caribbean, Puerto Rico, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. They came supporting victims of disasters, orphans, and the work of evangelism. They came ready to tell their story and advocate for their particular passion.

But what warmed my soul on this snowy

Continued on page 5

A gathering, above, to celebrate a new congregation, Herricks UM Mission Church, and at right, conversations during the NYAC mission summit.





For a full lineup of events, go to: www.nyac.com/conferencecalendar.

Ongoing Immigration Prayers

Join the NYAC Immigration Task Force for a time of prayer for our country and immigrant brothers and sisters on Monday nights from 7:30–8 p.m. until further notice. Call-in number: 641-715-3580; group code: 780843#. Contact Pastor [Ximena Varas](mailto:Ximena.Varas) for more information.

1/20 Safe Sanctuaries Workshop

Training on creating a Safe Sanctuaries policy will be held from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Plainville UMC, 56 Red Stone Hill, Plainville, Conn. For more information or to register, contact Cassandra Negri at childrensministry@nyac-umc.com.

1/27 Conversation About S.I. Churches

Join DS Denise Smartt Sears and Rev. David Gilmore, the director of Congregation Development and Revitalization, for a conversation about the vitality and realignment of the Staten Island congregations. The 10 a.m. to 12 noon discussion will be held at Christ UMC, 1890 Forest Ave., Staten Island. Please RSVP by January 23 to MetDistrict@nyac-umc.com.

2/5–7: Anti-Racism Training

The NYAC Commission on Religion and Race is sponsoring a session of “Effective Christian Leadership in a Multicultural World” training. This training is mandatory for all clergy, and members of district committees on ministry and the Board of Ordained Ministry. The training will be held at the Stony Point Center, 17 Cricketown Rd., Stony Point, NY 10980. Contact [Rev. Siobhan Sargent](mailto:Rev.Siobhan.Sargent) for registration information.

2/9 Lenten Preaching

Union Theological Seminary in New York City has revived its “Got Sermon?” series and offers a daylong workshop for those preaching during Lent and Easter. Instructors for the 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. event are Dr. Lisa Thompson, assistant professor of Homiletics, Dr. Aliou Niang, associate professor of New Testament, Dr. Andrea C. White, associate professor of Theology & Culture, and Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich professor of Jewish Studies and provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and visiting professor of Jewish interpretation. Registration info can be found on the [NYAC calendar](http://nyac.com).

2/17: Early Response Team Training

Training for ERT certification through UMCOR will run from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Snow date is February 24.) Participants must be 18 years of age and submit to a background check. The \$10 cost will cover the background check. Bring a bag lunch; coffee and tea will be provided. [Register](http://www.nyac.com) on the NYAC web site; call Warren Ferry at 631-875-5204 with any questions. The certification is valid for three years.

2/17–18: BMRC Weekend

The Black Methodists for Church Renewal will gather around the theme, “Moving to Higher Grounds: Organizing the Black Church to Prevail Against Injustice.” Rev. Dr. [Cedrick Bridgeforth](http://www.nyac.com) will be the guest preacher and presenter. Times for the weekend event are 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday, and 3:30–6:30 p.m. Sunday at St. John’s UMC, 2105 Stuart Ave., Valley Stream, N.Y. Contact Rev. Sheila Beckford via email at sheila.beckford@nyac-umc.com to register.

6/7–10 New York Annual Conference

In a schedule shift to include more youth and young adults, the annual conference will gather from Thursday through Sunday. The plans include:

- Ordination on Sunday, June 10.
- Special experience for confirmands during worship.
- Baptism for those who desire to receive the sacrament.
- Delegate voting for the Special 2109 General Conference Session.
- Simultaneous mission work in Nassau County.
- Reports/updates on disaster recovery in Puerto Rico from Bishop Hector Ortiz

10/14–25 “Journeys of Paul” Cruise

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton will host the nine-day journey aboard Royal Caribbean’s “Jewel of the Seas,” in conjunction with Educational Opportunities Tours. Beginning and ending in Rome, the trip includes stops in Taormina and Pompeii, Italy; Mykonos, Santorini, Athens, and Corinth, Greece; and Ephesus, Turkey. There is also an optional two-day tour of Vatican City on October 25–26. Find the [reservation information](http://www.nyac.com) online. If you have any questions, contact [Rev. Chuck Ferrara](mailto:Rev.Chuck.Ferrara), the regional representative for Educational Opportunities in our area.

Vision Deadlines for 2018

The Vision is a monthly online publication of the New York Conference. Deadlines are always the first Friday of the month, with posting to the web site about 10 days later. The deadlines for 2018 are February 2, March 2, April 6, May 4, June 1, July 6, August 3, September 7, October 5, November 2, and December 7. Please send any stories, photos, ideas, or questions directly to vision@nyac.com.

<p>The News of the New York Conference of the United Methodist Church</p>
<p>Bishop: Thomas J. Bickerton Editor: Joanne Utley New York Conference of The United Methodist Church 20 Soundview Avenue, White Plains, NY 10606 Phone (888) 696-6922 Fax (914) 615-2244; Website: www.nyac.com Vision e-mail: vision@nyac.com</p>

Bishop's Trip to PR: In Search of a Can of Paint

Read Thomas Kemper's [report](#). "Puerto Rican Methodists Find Strength in God Despite Massive Hurricane."

My first encounter with a significant natural disaster was in the fall of 1985. Two storm systems converged over West Virginia, with the end result a flood of devastating proportions. Although I was not personally affected by the tragedy, I had several colleagues who were. I mobilized volunteers from my local church, gathered canned food and cleaning supplies, and headed off to eastern West Virginia.

When we arrived in Parsons, W.Va., I observed in the hours and days to follow something altogether new and terrifying. The power of water was in full demonstration as we saw homes that had been washed downstream, empty spots where roads and bridges once existed, churches and businesses that could never be used again.

In each community, we noticed markings and letters on the sides of various homes, businesses, and bridges. They were put there by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as indications that those buildings and bridges were condemned. They would later be torn down.

I tried to imagine the feelings of sadness family members might have felt when that designated person took out the can of spray paint and wrote those letters on their home. I couldn't imagine the frustration that they must have felt when the assistance offered couldn't begin to match the value of what they had lost.

Still, the markings on the buildings and the offer of some kind of federal assistance was better than nothing.

Yet, fast forward to today, and that is what I recently experienced—nothing.

Just a few days ago, I returned from a trip to Puerto Rico with our Global Ministries General Secretary Thomas Kemper. We were there representing our United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) to



Bishop Thomas Bickerton prays with church members in Puerto Rico during a tour of the hurricane-ravaged island.

evaluate the devastating effects of hurricanes Irma and Maria, to set priorities for our church's response, and to bring a presence of hope to those who have been so severely affected.

In San Juan, we visited Villa Fontana Methodist Church. As it rained, water poured through the gaping holes in the roof of the sanctuary—meaning yet another cleanup would need to take place.

In the community of Playita Cortada, we helped distribute UMCOR cleaning buckets, water, and grocery bags of food to the people. Every

Continued on page 4

Teams Sought for Hurricane Recovery in PR

Continued from page 1

As part of an UMCOR Advance Team in November, I have been working with the MCPR in the development of their volunteer response effort.

Bishop Bickerton also recently visited Puerto Rico, meeting with Bishop Ortiz and the MCPR leadership, touring the island, and engaging with residents in some of the most-affected areas. Bishop Bickerton serves as the president of the UMCOR board of directors and was accompanied by Thomas Kemper, general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries. To view a video of Bishop Bickerton's reaction following the visit, click [here](#).

UMCOR Team Development & Deployment ACTIVITIES

- The first teams to be deployed will be called specialized early response teams (ERTs). These teams will address circumstances unique to this location and situation, and beyond the general scope of work for our more traditional ERTs.
- Work may include replacing or reinforcing trusses prior to tarping a home, the replacement or reinforcement of existing tarps, the installation of temporary hinged plywood doors and windows, and other concerns which will allow residents to "shelter in place" safely.
- An expanded ERT manual, including one in Spanish, has been developed for this very purpose.

- Early teams may be asked to do significant debris removal.
- The work of the specialized early response teams will also allow the MCPR to establish their base camps, develop their volunteer program, and begin to assemble the larger plan.

CONTEXT/SERVICE CRITERIA

- These initial teams may also require certain skills and physical capabilities. Early sites may, or may not, have clean running water or electricity—or access to generators. Working conditions may be difficult.
- It is strongly recommended that only those volunteers free of health issues consider traveling to Puerto Rico. Due to the environmental and technological challenges facing the island, including access to, and availability of, definitive medical care, volunteers should not be dealing with any mobility, respiratory or general health issues. They should also not rely on health assists powered by electricity or use medication requiring refrigeration.

COORDINATION

- Following this initial phase, the response will then be opened to more traditional ERTs and, beginning March 1, to volunteer (UMVIM) reconstruction teams. UMCOR has established a centralized volunteer coordination mechanism in cooperation with UMVIM for this purpose.

Bishop's Trip to PR: In Search of a Can of Paint

Continued from page 3

home we visited was affected. While there, I talked to Freddie. His garage business was destroyed by the hurricanes. He endured the night when the eye of Maria came on shore and showed me the watermark in his house where 10 feet of water rushed through. He cried when he told me that his wife is still being housed in a church evacuation center because of the unsafe conditions of their home and her fear of returning.

When we visited the Methodist Church in Palo Seco, La Iglesia Metodista Peña de Horeb, no one was there initially. But word spread through the community and before we knew it, a small congregation gathered to greet us. They told us the story of their pulpit Bible that was turned to Psalm 84 on the night of the hurricane and how, even though the roof was blown away, the Bible stayed on that same page. As I read that passage from the open Bible ("How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!"), the rain began to fall on us – a reminder of the presence of God and the work that lies ahead.

On the way to the Fred P. Corsen Camp, a site for future volunteer teams, we crossed a bridge that had only days before been constructed by the residents of that region so that they could access food and healthcare. We passed over more power lines than we passed under, demonstrating the reality that the vast majority of the residents of this island remain without power. Those who have makeshift power endure the constant hum of a nearby generator. We navigated our vehicle through mudslides that had been dug out by the residents. The devastation was not confined to any one place on the island and could easily be complicated by the next heavy rainfall.

We traveled north, south, east, and west on our journey. When I left, I had yet to see the first sign of any spray paint.

There were workers on bucket cranes working in some places. Yet, they were not from the government-run power company. They were cable TV workers restoring the lines in anticipation of the power returning someday. We saw no local, territorial, or FEMA workers clearing off mudslides, building bridges, or evaluating home safety. What we did see were live power lines in the road and on the roofs of homes, mudslides ready to break loose again at any moment, and a look of paralysis on the faces of people who didn't know where to start. What we heard was a consistent remark that the hurricanes passed by nearly three months ago.

Oh, make no mistake, there were construction workers and power company trucks working. We saw them repairing hotels along the oceanfront and power lines in the tourist areas. There was plenty of power to service the cruise ships in port and plenty of supplies to restore the damaged hotels. But beyond that strip of tourism, Puerto Rico is devastated and there is no sign that anyone really cares.

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is not a country. It is a United States territory. As such, fundamental rights apply as a matter of law while other constitutional rights are not available. Even so, we claim Puerto Rico as a part of the United States. Puerto Ricans pay into the Medicare system and vote in primary elections. The U.S. dollar is their currency and their passports look just like ours. Puerto Rico is us, and we are Puerto Rico.

But when you visit this island, you quickly notice that this land does not resemble the mainland of the United States. Puerto Rico looks more like a developing country. Poverty is evident in every small community as is the lack of healthcare and sustainable agriculture. And now that a natural disaster of epic proportions has passed through, there is also a lack of sustained governmental response. Yet, we claim that they are ours.



Bishop Thomas Bickerton gets a high five from a child during a stop at a Methodist church in Puerto Rico.

This stark inequity suggests otherwise.

I spent my time in Puerto Rico searching for a can of spray paint and a marking that would signal that someone had been there to provide some assessment and that someone would be there to rebuild the island infrastructure as its residents worked to rebuild their homes. I found no evidence that spray paint was being used.

The noticeable absence of emergency management, power companies, and road crews in Puerto Rico will make any church-related recovery effort more challenging. Yet, their absence makes our presence much more valuable and needed. What we provide every time a disaster hits are a sign of hope, a presence of grace, and a gentle reminder that someone, somewhere loves and prays and contributes so that the lives of those affected might get better. That presence, those prayers, and our contributions are needed more than ever to bridge the chasm that is so clearly present.

Any successful recovery effort is a partnership of local people who are complemented by others who join with them to rebuild spiritual hope and physical structures. The absence of one part makes the work of the other part more challenging.

I pray that, given the circumstances and the noticeable absence of some pieces of recovery, we will rise up as a church and do our part to fill the gap and help these our sisters and brothers once again find safe housing, clean water, consistent power, and a dry roof over their heads as they worship.

I went to Puerto Rico searching for a can of spray paint. Even though I found none, I came home with a spirit of determination, searching for a way to keep this recovery effort on the "front page" of our efforts to re-new, re-vive, and re-construct Puerto Rico.

Won't you join us?

The Journey Continues, ...

Thomas J. Bickerton
NYAC Resident Bishop and
President of the UMCOR Board of Directors

Finding Warmth of God's Love Despite the Cold

Continued from page 1

and blustery day was the manner in which each person actively listened to the story of others, and demonstrated a willingness to cooperate together in order to find a common focus and vision.

How often have you been in a room with persons of purpose and passion who cannot hear any perspective other than their own and who will not demonstrate any willingness to cooperate and compromise? Those meetings end up being rigid and tense. They are cold and windy.

I'm so glad that I found passionate mission workers who together created a spirit of warmth and possibility.

On a cold and windy Sunday, I discovered another place of warmth and comfort. I walked into a sanctuary filled with youth, young adults, children and young parents. It was a church filled with first generation Chinese immigrants who had gathered to celebrate the organization of the NYAC's latest new congregation: Herricks Chinese United Methodist Mission Church.

These young people, natives of a country that discourages and, at times, persecutes those who worship God, gathered with joy, enthusiasm and a clear sense of purpose and mission. They came praying for God's direction for their new church. They came voicing great hope for their future and great thanksgiving for this day of new beginning. In Chinese, Korean, and English, we declared together these words: "We have come together to form a new congregation of The United Methodist Church, which is a part of Christ's holy Church. Let us dedicate ourselves to this purpose."

How often have you gone to church and found little life and enthusiasm? How often have you left a church disappointed by the conflict that you encountered inside those walls? Those



Bishop Bickerton chats with participants at the NYAC mission summit.

church services and meetings leave you discouraged and wondering why the church even exists.

I'm so glad that I found passionate Christians excited and blessed to start a new congregation and build it with enthusiasm and a clear sense of vision. I'm so glad I found a place dedicated to this purpose

Quite often I find myself saying these words: It is a fine line between having it all and losing it all together. Every day is a gift and every opportunity we have to spread grace, joy, hope and love to others is a blessing from God. But every day we are tempted to let our opinions and biases take over and alienate others. And every day we are so easily lulled to sleep instead of eagerly anticipating how we can praise God and discover how fresh God's calling on our lives can be.

It is a fine line, this journey of life. But on days when it life seems nothing but cold and

blustery, let us cross the line and discover a world of warmth and vitality where God's grace is discovered and God's blessed Holy Spirit is at work touching and transforming broken lives into faithful disciples.

That's my prayer these days. When the world can't seem to do anything except project a cold and brutal forecast, may the church, our church, tell the story of the warmth of God's love and the possibility of new and fresh expressions of God's grace in our midst.

Cold and snowy outside? Come on in. It's nice and warm in God's house.

May it be so.

The Journey Continues, . . .

Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop

New Year's Greeting from Council of Bishops

To the People Called United Methodists:

Grace and peace to you as we embrace the New Year.

The joy of Christmas and the gift of Emmanuel—God with us—gives us the confidence to face the future with hope. This hope is born of our faith in the Living God. Thus, as we enter the New Year we affirm that God who started a good thing in us will see it to fruition.

As United Methodists, we are at a precipitous moment, uncertain about our denomination's future. Yet, we do know that

we have been raised up as a people to share in God's mission by spreading scriptural holiness across the globe. And, we know that God knows what form this mission will take in the future.

As a Council of Bishops, we have been in unceasing prayer, asking God to open our hearts and minds to discern what God would have us do to lead our global movement. We thank you for your earnest prayers and invite you to continue to pray for the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council as our work continues and we prepare for the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference.

Likewise, every part of the world where our United Methodist Connection is present is in the throes of dramatic upheaval, conflict, poverty, migrations or natural disasters. As we enter 2018, let us resolve to be tireless in our efforts to bring health, healing, recovery and transformation to a broken world.

Let us be unflagging in our commission to reach new people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us be fully available to grow in our love of God and neighbor. Let us renew our commitment to always and everywhere practice

Continued on page 11

NYAC Camps Seeking Your Input, Ideas

BY JANE WAKEMAN
Deaconess

It's January. The temperatures are dropping and the snow is piling up. This is the time of year when thoughts of summertime and camping are both most welcome and least likely! Our camps are not asleep, however! Far from it. Retreats at Quinipet are keeping the staff busy, and all involved are planning for summer. This year, opinions are being sought from our campers and camping families. Both Kingswood and Quinipet are asking for input for the year ahead.

Quinipet staff are hoping to have your input on camping "electives," following a change to open up camps to age-related "family" groups with activities of all kinds each day. Our new program has been designed to simplify registration, unify our campers, and tailor each camper's experience here at camp—all suggestions that have come from you. To get your camper involved, take the [electives survey](#) together and help us continue to make Camp



Quinipet the best it can be!

Likewise, Kingswood administrators and staff would like to know what types of youth camping opportunities are most desired. Woodsmoke, the annual youth-centered camp, is being given a break for this year, in order to re-design elements of that program. If you have an interest in a beautiful, restorative experience for your child, grades 5 through 12, please take time to send your comments and hopes via [email](#). We would love to have your thoughts.

Camp Quinipet also welcomes Madi McNew as the new program services director. In addition to her responsibilities on the program leadership team, she welcomes retreat participants all year. She came in December and has already made herself a welcome addition to the staff. With a degree from Indiana University, she hopes to put her communication skills and passion for recreation together for the benefit of our camping ministry.

Not yet convinced that we have great camping opportunities in our New York Conference? Camp Quinipet is offering three Saturday open houses from 2 to 4 p.m., on April 14, May 12 and June 16. Come visit!

Next month: Take a virtual tour of Kingswood from home! Take a look at a typical "equipped site" as well as other special features of our rustic camping that anyone can enjoy.

Kingswood is open for registration already and Quinipet's registration will be open by January 15. Reserve your spots now at the [camps web site](#) and dream of summer!

Experience of Peace in Promises of God

BY JIM STINSON
Consultant on Older Adults

"I feel a peacefulness that I can't explain."

As I write, I am reflecting on a conversation I had today with a man in his nineties. He is incredibly bright and creative, quick witted and charming. We were talking about his late wife and his grieving process during the year since her death, as well as his recent hospitalization with a heart problem. To which he noted that he felt "a peacefulness" that he could not explain.

As he gave expression to that reality, he added that he understood he was surrounded by a "great mystery" from which he felt support and love. Is there a better definition of experiencing God than that?"

That question lingers. Along with it is a question near to my heart. What is the goal of ministry to and with the older adults in our midst? Indeed what is the goal of ministry with and to anyone in our midst? What is the good news of the gospel, the good news of Jesus the Christ? Is it not to enable the realization and the claiming of the "great mystery" through, and by whom, we are supported and loved?

My friend offered this insight as the church approached the midpoint of Advent,

as it prepared for the celebration of Christmas, the birth of one we often know as Emmanuel, God with us.

As a preacher, his words were heard with appreciation. They captured the purpose and the wonder of Christmas. In these troubled times is there a more important goal than witnessing to, and enabling, a realization that we are surrounded by the mystery of a Love that will not let us go? The gospel is clear in its announcement. "Do not be afraid. Behold I bring you tidings of great joy."

Emmanuel!

Is there anyone alive who does not need to hear this word, this promise? This is the work—the joy—of ministry. Young, old, and in between, need to hear the promise. We are not alone. God is with us. Our calling, our ministry as lay and clergy, is to enable the realization of the promise of Christmas, the promise that leads one to announce "I feel a peacefulness that I can't explain."

May we all experience such certainty, such joy.



JOB OPENING

Executive Secretary to Resident Bishop

The New York Conference is seeking an executive secretary to provide comprehensive administrative services to the resident bishop in his/her role of providing oversight and support to the churches/ministries of the New York Annual Conference, as well as the responsibilities the resident bishop has to ministries/assignments to the wider global church.

The executive secretary is a fulltime position and is under the direct supervision of the resident bishop with secondary accountability to the assistant to the bishop and the Episcopacy Committee.

Principal duties include scheduling, hospitality, mailing, database maintenance, and finances. A minimum of 10–15 years of administrative support experience, including at the executive level, is desired. It is expected that the executive secretary will learn United Methodist polity, structure, and terminology.

A full job description can be found [here](#). Those interested should submit a cover letter and resume to Robert M. Walker, assistant to the bishop, at rwalker@nyac.com.

Getting Past the Gatekeepers: The Aftermath of Christmas

BY JACOB DHARMARAJ, Ph.D

The Gospel lesson that is often read the Sunday after Christmas, Matthew 2:13–18, confronts us with an anti-climactic scene—Herod’s rampage, killing all the male toddlers following the birth of the Holy Child. In documenting this violent tragedy, verse 18 says, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

The death of a child under violent circumstances is one of the most painful tragedies that a parent can face, for it is unnatural, atypical, and unpleasant. Such a tragedy occurred during Jesus’ time, and happens every day in our time. How might we, as followers of Christ, have compassion on the Rachels and the members of their families today?

Perhaps, just perhaps, by journeying with them; by advocating and advancing justice on their behalf, by fostering a covenant among parents everywhere that they will not raise children to kill someone else’s children.

Surviving children of the Rachels

Not long ago, we watched in horror the migration of millions of families forced from their homelands in search of safety and freedom. During that process, thousands perished in raging waters and merciless weather. As a church, we swore our missional commitment to the victims when we saw the haunting images of children’s bodies swept ashore and boats full of escapees drowning. Indeed, as a denomination, we are good on our promise not to forget by establishing task forces and funding programs. But, apparently, we turn away from those who survived and moved to our neighborhoods.

During the last few years of my ministry with Christian refugees in the United States, I witnessed firsthand that most of our love has been for the dead and not for the survivors. Sometimes, it is the gatekeepers of the church who ostensibly play the role of Herod’s agents.

Accepting the unacceptable and welcoming the stranger is the greatest of missional challenges as it presents a frontier over which the journey of understanding is both outward and inward, both exploratory and reflexive. Knowing and loving the other requires mature self-knowledge, yet such maturity is not accessible to the isolated self or to the isolated church. It is an everyday reality and demand.

Louis L’Amour, novelist of last century, wrote that we must think about the present as if it were

COMMENTARY

the distant past and meet the challenges head-on with the lessons learned. He wrote, “It is our destiny to move out, to accept the challenge, to dare the unknown . . . If we are content to live in the past, we have no future. And today is the past.”

We should remind ourselves that these refugee Christians of today are the leaders of tomorrow’s faith. How we minister with them as they cope with the traumatic journey will enrich our mission and ministry, both today and tomorrow.

In *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, a novel by Morris West, the pope after his coronation, walks through the streets of Rome and visits the apartment of a dying man. The family has waited too long to seek help and the man is beyond hope. The pope tries to comfort the family. But a young woman who has been nursing the man says, “They can cope with death. It’s living that defeats them!”

And it is living that defeats many of the Christians who are refugees from other parts of the world. If we are serious about ministering to those in diaspora, we must cross the expanse of culture and language or anything else that separates us.

Living faith

In an era when immigration has become political tinder and neighborhood injunctions, a few of us from the Asian American United Methodist Federation started working with refugees and asylum seekers in various parts of the United States. As a result, we witnessed first-hand the emergence of new churches in various Asian languages for the first time. Some of them include Arabic, Nepali, and Karenni (Burmese) language congregations. During that process, we realized that some of these communities got stuck in the bottom layer of ecclesial bureaucracy and entangled in the web of callous gatekeepers. In certain situations, their predicament got worse when they lacked sponsors at the top to advocate for them.

About three years ago, we started new congregations among three different language groups in one of our annual conferences. After they were denied worship space by a number of churches, the leaders of the Asian-language groups heard about the new owner of a decommissioned United Methodist church and its parsonage, which were sold by the

annual conference to a nearby UM congregation for a dollar. When the leaders of the new congregations approached the trustees of the new owner about a worship place, they were coerced to sign a contract for \$250 in monthly rent while other groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Zumba classes, the historical society and etc., were allowed to use the facilities for free.

The rent was paid faithfully out of the meager refugee stipend that was collected in the weekly offering. While the three groups worshiped in the sanctuary at three different times on Sundays, there was often no heat, and access to the entire facility was restricted. The rental agreement was signed by the refugee Christians who knew very little English.

Having noticed the rapid growth of the immigrant congregations that averaged more than 200 people each Sunday, a sympathetic patron started paying the rent until alerted by an informed outsider. This blatant disciplinary violation is not fully resolved as of this writing.

Accessing justice at the gate

The relationship between “native-born” United Methodists and “foreign born” Christians who happen to be refugees and asylum seekers has not been pleasant in some conferences. There is a wide chasm between awareness and action.

As a denomination, we can offer only service and pass legislation—not care—for care can be given spontaneously only from the heart of one to another. Local congregations and conference clergy are often oriented around neighborhood hospitality, rather than United Methodist connectional identity or today’s borderless world. And they are indeed the gatekeepers of our time.

By the end of these and other stories, weeping with Rachel is too easy. Her spouse and older siblings of the murdered toddlers are wailing and lamenting, too. What is needed in such contexts is not tears, but righteous outrage. We cannot substitute rhetoric for actual narrative; we can never uphold placation over remonstrance. Until then, all our holy conferencing and invitation to move forward is nothing but a hollow imperative. It’s only a palliative prescription for a severe ecclesial malaise, the “take two aspirin and call me in the morning” of compassion—an aimless prayer pill, maybe.

Dharmaraj is president of the National Federation of Asian American United Methodists.

OBITUARIES

Rev. Henry H. Hobbs

The Reverend Henry H. Hobbs of Port Chester, N.Y., died December 30, 2017, after a brief illness.

Rev. Hobbs was born in Clearwater, Fla., to Thomas and Clarine Hobbs. He graduated from Plant High School in Tampa, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Union Theological Seminary in New York. During World War II, Hobbs was a member of the 104th bomber squadron of the Army Air Force.

Hobbs was ordained in the New York East Conference in 1957 and served the following churches: Wakefield Grace and Westchester in the Bronx; Port Chester; Hobart and Township in Hobart, N.Y.; and Rye. While at Westchester UMC, he oversaw the establishment of the Tremont Daycare Center, currently an independent non-profit serving more than 200 children.

In addition to his service in parish ministry, he was a founding member and the first executive director of Human Development Services of Port Chester, a non-profit organization providing housing and supportive services for the homeless and mentally ill. He worked with others in the community to establish the organization in the late 1970s and early 1980s and continued as executive director for a number of years after he retired from the New York Conference in 1992.

Rev. Hobbs is survived by his wife, Sandy; son, James; two grandchildren and numerous nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by a son, Kevin; two sisters and a brother.

A memorial service was scheduled for 11 a.m., January 20 at Mamaroneck UMC, 546 East Boston Post Rd., Mamaroneck, N.Y. Burial will be private. Memorial gifts may be made to the Mamaroneck UMC Endowment Fund.

Messages of condolence may be sent to Sandy Hobbs, 201 Willett Ave., Apt. 223, Port Chester, NY 10573.

Nancy (Shaw) Rivenburgh

Nancy (Shaw) Rivenburgh, died December 14, 2017, at age 92. She was the widow of Rev. Francis Rivenburgh, who served the New York Conference for 19 years and died in March 1977 while serving St. Paul's UMC in Inwood on Long Island.

The couple was married on July 9, 1944. According to his memoir, "For Francis and Nancy the ministry of the Gospel was a team ministry, and it became more and more a partnership. After Francis experienced some physical limitations, Nancy became his means of transportation, his feet and his hands, so to speak; but his voice still rang out to the Gospel call to which they both had responded."

Between 1958 and 1976, Rev. Rivenburgh served the following churches in the Catskills and the Hudson Valley: Hunter, South Jewett, Platte Clove, Jefferson, North Harpersfield, North Blenheim, Blenheim Hill, East Jefferson, Durham; Susquehanna, Roxbury, Halcottville, Coeymans Hollow, Dormansville, Cold Spring, and South Highland.

Rivenburgh lived in Clay, N.Y., and is survived by four children: Martha, Cynthia, Robert and Edwin.

Jonathan Caldwell Bortin

Jonathan James Caldwell Bortin, 26, died December 4, 2017. He was the son of Rev. Dorothy Caldwell, pastor at Community United Methodist Church in Massapequa, N.Y.

Bortin was born August 10, 1991, in Newark, N.J., and grew up on Staten Island, where he attended P.S. 45 and I.S. 61. In 2003, he moved

to New Paltz, N.Y. He excelled in math and science, graduating from New Paltz High School in 2009 with 37 advanced placement credits. He attended the University of Albany from 2009 to 2012, where he majored in physics and psychology. While in college, he played ultimate Frisbee.

He was a lifelong Kingswood camper, camping there every summer for more than 23 years. Bortin loved to play chess, ride his bike, listen to and make music, cook, swim and play video games.

Bortin is survived by his mother, Rev. Dorothy Caldwell; his father, Rev. Benjamin Bortin of Port Washington, N.Y.; his sister, Rachel Bortin of Oswego, N.Y.; his best friend, Tim Oldmixon of Jersey City, N.J.; his grandmother, Beverly Bortin of Walnut Creek, Calif.; and aunts, uncles and cousins throughout California and Texas.

A service to celebrate Bortin's life is planned for 1 p.m., January 20, at Community UMC, 100 Park Blvd, Massapequa. A meal will follow the service. Snow date is January 21 at 2 p.m. There will also be a remembrance of his life at Kingswood Camp this summer.

Condolences may be sent to Rev. Caldwell at 2 Renee Place, Massapequa Park, NY 11762; to Rachel at 78 West Albany St., Oswego, NY 13126; and to Rev. Bortin at 464 Main St, #207, Port Washington, NY 11050. Gifts in memory of Bortin may be made to Kingswood Campsite. Checks should be made payable to NYAC, with Jonathan Bortin and Kingswood written in the memo space, and sent to NYAC, 20 Soundview Ave, White Plains, NY 10606.

Rev. Byung (Joseph) Mo Kim

The Reverend Byung (Joseph) Mo Kim died December 4, 2017. He was the husband of Pastor Jane Kim, who serves at Vail's Gate United Methodist Church in New Windsor, N.Y.

Rev. Kim was born on November 3, 1962, in Seoul to John Kim and Myung Ae Lee. He immigrated to the United States in November 1980. He graduated from McCormick Theological Seminary and received his doctorate of ministry from New York Theological Seminary. He was an ordained Presbyterian clergy and led a congregation in Central Valley, N.Y.

Rev. Kim was the founder of Go Leaders Ministry and traveled to Guatemala every year to educate local Christian leaders.

He is survived by his wife; children Christine and Joshua; and daughter-in-law, Yeajinn.

Funeral services were held December 8 at Kim Funeral Home in Fort Lee, N.J. Burial was at the Rockland Cemetery, 201 Kings Highway, Sparkhill, N.Y.

Messages of condolence may be sent to Pastor Kim at 25 Marshall Drive West, New Windsor, NY 12553.

Rev. Robert E. Hullstrung

The Reverend Robert E. Hullstrung, 83, died December 3, 2017 surrounded by his family. He was the husband of Flora (Robinson) Hullstrung, to whom he had been married for 58 years.

Rev. Hullstrung was born October 8, 1934, in Mineola, N.Y., son of Jacob and Ethel (Condy) Hullstrung. He served the New York Conference for more than 37 years, pastoring churches on Long Island in East Meadow, Flanders, East Quogue, Uniondale, and Woodbury. Hullstrung retired in 1996 and moved to Vermont, where he served for 18 years at West Swanton UMC.

In addition to his wife, Hullstrung is survived by four sons: Garret of

Continued on page 9

OBITUARIES (Cont.)

Syosset, N.Y.; Jeffrey of Jericho, Vt.; Russell (Sophia) of Beacon Falls, Vt.; and Gregory (Liza) of Mohegan Lake, N.Y. He is also survived by four grandchildren: Savannah, Michael, Matthew and Jaxon.

A memorial service was held at the Yorktown UMC on January 6, 2018. Memorial donations in Hullstrung's name can be made to Yorktown UMC, 2300 Crompond Rd., Yorktown Heights, NY 10598 or the [Closer to Free Fund](#) at Smilow Cancer Center at Yale New Haven Hospital.

To offer condolences, please visit the link for [Alderson Ford Funeral Homes](#).

Rev. Clifton Gatewood, Jr.

The Reverend Clifton Gatewood, Jr. died December 2, 2017. He served God and the people of The United Methodist Church for 40 years prior to his retirement.

A celebration of life service was held at Salem United Methodist Church, 2190 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd, New York, N.Y., on December 13. Rev. Marvin Moss officiated. A repast took place in Cullen Hall after the service.

Rev. Dr. John C. Raines

The Reverend Dr. John C. Raines, 84, of Philadelphia, died November 12, 2017, of congestive heart failure.

Rev. Raines was born in Minneapolis, Minn., on October 24, 1933, to Richard C. Raines (who served as bishop of the Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church from 1948 to 1968) and Lucille (Arnold) Raines. He graduated from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis and Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. Raines earned a master of divinity and a doctorate in theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

He was ordained in the New York East Conference in 1959 and served Setauket UMC until 1961. While doing graduate work, he was drawn to social activism, traveling with the 1961 Freedom Riders to Little Rock, Ark., where he was arrested and jailed while trying to integrate a bus station. He continued to work for integration and voting rights over the next several years. During a school summer break, Raines met his future wife, Bonnie Muir, who shared his commitment to social activism.

Rev. Raines was appointed a professor of religion and social ethics at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1966 and taught there until his retirement in 2011. He retired from the United Methodist Church in 2004.

In 1971, thousands of documents were stolen from an FBI field office in Pennsylvania. The burglars distributed these files, which documented illegal surveillance and sabotage of dissident groups, to journalists and members of Congress, which sparked a Congressional investigation into abuses in the intelligence community. The Raines' participation in the burglary was not revealed until nearly 40 years later; additional details can

be found in his obituary in [The New York Times](#).

In addition to his wife, Raines is survived by daughters, Lindsley and Mary; sons, Nathan and Mark; a brother, Robert; and seven grandchildren. A memorial service was held December 2, 2017 at Christ Church in Philadelphia; burial was private. Memorial donations may be made to the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) or the [ACLU](#).

Rev. Reuben Gums

The Reverend Reuben (Ben) Gums, 89, died October 11, 2017, at the Jamestown, N.D., Regional Medical Center. He was born October 16, 1927, in Cleveland, N.D., to Fred and Katherine (Vossler) Gums and attended Jamestown Public Schools. He attended Jamestown College from 1945 to 1947 and graduated from North Central College in Naperville, Ill., with a bachelor of arts in speech and religious education.

In 1952, Gums graduated from Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville with a master of divinity degree and was ordained an elder in the Dakota Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) Church. Rev. Gums served Zion Church in Kulm, N.D., for one year, followed by an appointment to serve as director of the radio-audiovisual commission of the Philippine Federation of Christian Churches.

While in the Philippines, he met Frances Lorene Seifert, of Vernon, N.Y. They were married on March 9, 1956, in Manila, where Frances was serving a three-year term for the Methodist Church's Division of World Missions and the EUB Division of World Missions.

Rev. Gums worked for the U.S. Air Force part-time as a civilian auxiliary chaplain and a "supply" preacher at other military installations while in the Philippines. After returning to the U.S., he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he earned a master of sacred theology degree in 1959.

The couple then moved to Chicago, where he was appointed director of radio and television for The Church Federation of Greater Chicago. They lived in Chicago until 1968, when Gums was appointed executive secretary of the department of communications for the Council of Churches of the City of New York.

After his wife passed away in 1970, Rev. Gums continued to live and work in New York, where he was active with the United Methodist Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew. In 1974, he was appointed to develop Tri-State Media Ministry, serving all churches in the metropolitan area. After retirement in 1985, he served as executive director for the Laymen's National Bible Committee, which organizes National Bible Week. He also had his own public service radio program each Sunday morning on WYNY.

Rev. Gums moved back to North Dakota in 2004, where he was active in St. Paul's UMC in Jamestown.

He is survived by two brothers, Ervin (Nora) Gums of Jamestown, N.D., and Lloyd (Millie) Gums of Lodi, Calif.; two sisters-in-law, Laura Wells of Vernon, N.Y., and Eleanore Lamanque of Clinton, N.Y.; two brothers-in-law, Lawrence (Lillian) Seifert of Oneida, N.Y., and George Seifert of Vernon, N.Y.; and several nieces, nephews, great nieces and great nephews.

He was preceded in death by his wife; two brothers, Fred, Jr. and Harold; three sisters, Leah Fuehrer, Helen Powers and Edna Weispfenning; two sisters-in-law, Violet Robinson and Sharon Clark; and two brothers-in-law, Verne Seifert and Milton Seifert.

A funeral service was held October 18, 2017, at St. Paul's UMC in Jamestown, N.D., with Rev. Joel Winckler officiating. Burial was in Highland Home Cemetery in Jamestown.

UM Scholarship Applications Open

The United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry has opened scholarship applications for college, university and seminary studies in Fall 2018. You need only to submit one application per year. That application will be screened for all possible eligible programs. The applications are due by March 7 and can be found on the [GBHEM web site](#).

Communicators Select Top UMC Stories for 2017

BY JOEY BUTLER

UMNS | For the second consecutive year, the work of the [Commission on a Way Forward](#) in addressing the church's debate over homosexuality was considered the top news story by church communicators.

Coverage of the commission's progress came in first place out of 37 ballots cast by communicators in the United States, Africa and Asia, along with News Service staff. Second was the denomination's response to a number of natural disasters worldwide in 2017. The Judicial Council's ruling on the election of a gay bishop, United Methodist response to gatherings of white supremacists and Global Migration Sunday rounded out the top five.

#1: Commission on a Way Forward

The 32-member commission has been meeting throughout the year to seek a way through the [denomination's impasse](#) over how LGBTQ individuals are included in the church. The bishop-appointed commission serves in an advisory capacity to the bishops, and in November, the bishops reviewed the [three possibilities the commission is currently considering](#). The bishops also have called a special General Conference in February 2019 to take up the bishops' legislation based on the commission's work.

#2: United Methodists respond to natural disasters

The United Methodist Church, through churches, annual conferences, The United Methodist Committee on Relief and individuals, stepped up again and again to help after natural disasters around the globe. United Methodists were there in the aftermath of devastating hurricanes in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico; earthquakes in Mexico; wildfires in the western United States and a deadly mudslide in Sierra Leone. They prayed, assembled cleaning buckets, offered shelter, donated financial resources and brought their muscle and know-how to disaster response. A group of United Methodists even [developed an app to facilitate hurricane response](#) in Texas and now Puerto Rico. United Methodists also continued rebuilding in West Virginia and Louisiana after 2016's floods and the Carolinas after 2016's Hurricane Matthew. Response even continues to Superstorm Sandy, [which happened five years ago](#).

#3: Judicial Council rules on gay bishop

The Judicial Council, The United Methodist



PHOTO BY MIKE DUBUSE, UMNS

Volunteer Hannah Guzinski helps serve a meal to immigrant children in an educational enrichment program at the United Methodist Peace Church in Hamburg, Germany.



A "brigade" of United Methodists, left, unload the supplies they left at the Utuado church to meet the needs of the population that have not been reached by FEMA or federal aid organizations after Hurricane Maria.

PHOTO BY REV. GUSTAVO VASQUEZ

Church's top court, ruled on April 28 that the [consecration of a "self-avowed practicing homosexual bishop" violates church law](#). A key part of Decision 1341 is that a "same-sex marriage license issued by competent civil authorities together with the clergy person's status in a same-sex relationship is a public declaration that the person is a self-avowed practicing homosexual." While the majority decision did not name Bishop Karen Oliveto, the denomination's sole openly gay episcopal leader, it was her election and consecration in 2016 that prompted a petition to the church court. The ruling marked the first time the denomination's court weighed in on same-gender marriage licenses since the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015 established same-sex civil marriage as a constitutional right.

#4: United Methodists witness against racism

White supremacists were on the march in 2017, and United Methodists provided a witness against racism and for the way of Christ. United Methodist clergy and their interfaith partners in Charlottesville, Virginia, [took a stand against the Ku Klux Klan](#) in July and offered shelter when white supremacists rioted and a woman was killed when a white nationalist intentionally drove into a crowd of counter-demonstrators. United Methodist clergy also bore witness against white supremacy when the same white-nationalist groups headed to Tennessee.

#5: Global Migration

More people are on the move than at any

Continued on page 11

Communicators Select Top UMC Stories for 2017

Continued from page 10

time in recorded history and United Methodists around the world are helping those migrants and refugees. In response to the global migration crisis, The United Methodist Church planned a day of prayer and a special offering to raise awareness and funds to aid migrants and refugees. Global Migration Sunday was held Dec. 3, the first Sunday of Advent. The offering went to the denomination's [Global Migration Advance](#), a fund set up in 2014 for donors to designate gifts specifically to support work that alleviates the suffering of migrants.

Selecting the top 5

Conference communicators and editors, as well as United Methodist News Service staff, vote each year on what stories were the biggest news in the denomination.

A first-place vote counts five points, second place four, and so on. If two stories get the same number of points, the number of first-place votes is used as the tiebreaker.

Butler is a multimedia producer/editor for United Methodist Communications.



PHOTO BY KATHY L. GILBERT, UMNS

The Rev. Jackson Henry of St. Mark's UMC, joined several hundred others in Murfreesboro, Tenn., to protest a white-supremacist rally that was planned but later canceled Oct. 28.

New Year's Greeting from Council of Bishops

Continued from page 5

our Rule of Life—do no harm, do good, attend to the ordinances of God.

The New Year is a time for renewing the covenant. John Wesley clearly understood that covenant cannot be manufactured or maintained by structural, administrative or compulsory means. He knew that covenant-making and covenant-keeping were spiritual matters—a function of offering one's life to God and to God's purposes above all else.

The first celebration of the Covenant Service in the Methodist movement was held on Monday, August 11, 1755. In short order, covenant renewal services were being held on

New Year's Day in class meetings and societies of the Methodist revival movement. Many United Methodist churches utilize this service in their own Watch Night or New Year's Day worship. Many United Methodists can recite all or portions of Wesley's invitation to his Covenant Service as deftly as they can recite the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed or Psalm 23.

The words are powerful and provocative. I believe they may hold the key to our seeking a way forward. They invite a measure of humility, integrity, denial and surrender that is often discomfiting and disorienting to our preconceived, siloed positions.

They clearly remind us that we belong to

Christ, and that to give ourselves to Christ in all things is the heart and soul of all covenantal relationships within our great United Methodist Church.

So, as we enter into 2018 and trust that God will provide a future with hope, I invite all United Methodists to renew our covenant with God and one another, as we join Methodist people throughout the ages in praying the Covenant Prayer, which in part reads:

*Lord, make me what you will
put myself fully into your hands;
put me to doing, put me to suffering,
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and with willing heart
give it all to your pleasure and disposal. Amen.*

May God add God's blessing to our journey together as a covenant people and grant us a blessed New Year.

2,000 Cards Sent to Incarcerated

More than 2,000 incarcerated men in New York and Connecticut received Christmas cards from some 40 churches in the New York Conference. Loving individuals wrote sincere messages for "the least of our brothers" to extend the light and love of Christ to them during the holy and blessed season in which we

celebrate His birth, according to an email from Sharon Roth, secretary of the Conference Board of Church and Society.

Prison chaplains let us know they could have given out 5,000 cards if we had sent them that number. Thank you to all who participated.

*Bishop Bruce R. Ough
President, Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church*

Spiritual Decluttering: A Fresh Start for a New Year

BY JOE IOVINO

One of the wonderful things about each new year is that it brings with it a sense of a new beginning, 365 days of promise and possibility.

Some use this time to bring freshness to their lives. They may decide to declutter the junk drawer, attic, or garage. It may also mean removing many of the sugars, fats, and carbohydrates from our diets.

As a United Methodist church member, parting with some things for a season, may help declutter your spiritual life. Doing so helps make room for a new movement of the Holy Spirit in the months to come. What might you set aside in the next year?

Your pew

Pastors often know where each member of their congregation sits each Sunday. Some of us worship from the very same pew every week. More of us tend to gravitate toward the same general area, like somewhere in the last two rows on the right.

Choosing to worship from a new seat for a season will give you a new perspective—literally. You will see the service from a different point of view, but more than that, it may also change the people around you each Sunday, the usher with whom you interact, the members of the choir or praise team you can see, and more. All of this can help you stay more focused on the worship service as you see things a little differently.

Time-wasters

John Wesley instructed his pastors to “Never trifle away time” (2012 Discipline 330.5.d.19.a). Instead, they were to be engaged in the practice of ministry or the development of their spiritual lives. While we may not want to get rid of *all* time-wasters since we need times of rest, there are diversions we could remove and replace with something more beneficial.

Consider finding ways to free up time to volunteer at a local food bank or other mission, to make regular calls to old friends and church members you no longer see, or join a class or small group at your church.

A version of the Bible

If you have been a Christian for some time, you probably know the Bible fairly well. There are verses you know by heart, and stories that are very familiar. Reading from a different version of the Bible can help bring new life to those passages. A translator’s decision to use one word over another may give you some new

insight you hadn’t thought of before.

If you regularly read from a modern version like the Common English Bible, consider a more traditional translation like the New Revised Standard Version. If you gravitate toward the more traditional, try something more modern. Search the web for Bible reading sites and apps (there are many free ones) where you can access a new version of Scripture.

A devotional

Devotionals are helpful aids to lead us in Scripture reading and prayer every day, but we can become stuck in a rut with them as well. If you have been using the same book or website for more than a year, you may benefit from trying something different this year. A new devotional resource, like an unfamiliar Bible translation, can bring new life to your time with God.

There are many devotional helps available online and in physical and digital books. The Upper Room from Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church, is a very good source. Try something new.

A favorite author

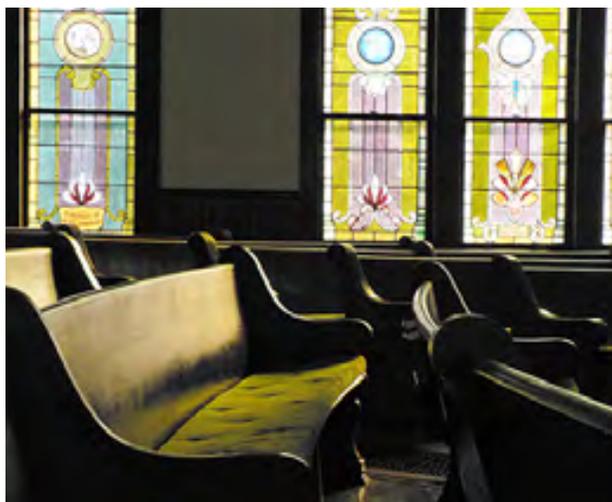
Many readers have favorite authors. We like the way they turn a phrase, develop a story, or how they put into words what we have thought or felt for some time. Growth, though, often comes from thinking about things from a variety of perspectives. Reading a variety of authors can challenge us to do just that.

When looking for a book to read for spiritual enrichment, from Cokesbury or Abingdon Press, consider something new to you, which may be something old. You might want to read from a theologian whose work you have heard is important but you have never read, a person on the best-seller list whose views you think may be different from yours, or a recommendation from your pastor.

A class or group

Give yourself permission to take a break from that class or group you have been attending solely out of habit. It’s OK. Try a new class. Join a group that discusses things that interest you.

Be careful with this one though. Connections to other people of faith are vital, so don’t pull away from all groups. If you take a break from



one group, make sure you find other Christians with whom you can share and from whom you can learn.

Negativity

Although we do not like to admit it, there are seasons when many of us can fall into patterns of negativity. Discouraged by the news, the theology of others, policies of our denomination, and practices of our congregation can become sources of stress and fodder for complaining.

Removing negativity from our lives and choosing instead to find things to celebrate can lift your spirits and renew your passion for that which matters most. Find where you see the love of Jesus in the world and celebrate it.

Obligatory church-stuff

Some of us do things in the church that bring us no joy. We’re not really sure how we ever got the job. We don’t really want it. Yet, we are pretty sure that if we don’t do it, it won’t get done. Those types of obligations often lead to church burnout.

After the New Year is underway, schedule a conversation with your pastor. Ask how you can step away from that obligation and into a new way of using your gifts to serve your church or community. That will be a blessing both to you and your congregation.

New possibilities

The New Year can be one of new experiences in your church and spiritual life. Make room in days ahead for the Holy Spirit to do a new work in you. Then see what happens.

**Joe Iovino works for UMC.org at United Methodist Communications.*