



"We are an emotional, 'feely' type people. We're Christians. We don't want to hurt any one. But the Conference is a business. We have to live into our stewardship." -Dian Jackson

Board

Acts

to

Face

Bottom

Line



It's four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and the Conference Board of Directors is intent on not leaving before their work is completed. Left to right: Jay Kennett, Sharon Hammill, Bob Barrows, Hudson Barksdale and Lorita Mayo.

-Photo by C. L. Stumb

by C. L. "Curly" Stumb

What has been feared for several years has become reality as the Southern Conference moves into a new year. In a letter to clergy and lay leaders on December 18, 2008, Steve Camp and Dian Jackson announced that "The Board of Directors has made decisions that affect our staff size and scope. They have done so out of financial necessity, not desire."

Treasurer Ron Barlow had already told the Conference Board in a spring '08 meeting that unless revenues increased, the conference would not be able to meet payroll by early 2009. The same alarm was noted in minutes of a June Board meeting as part of the budget discussion: "Mr. Barlow estimated that, if no substantial changes are made to income or expenditures, the Conference has roughly one year left of financial solvency."

Noting across the board cuts of staff salaries and/or benefits, removal of several positions, and scaling back of other personnel; the Conference President was asked what triggered the drastic action now. Her answer referenced a bottom line signal, whereby the Conference finances had dropped to a benchmark that the Board had earlier established as a "Red Flag."

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Bottom Line

Passion fuels Victory Christian's ministries

by Linda Coutant

Pastor Rose Wright-Scott worked in management at Dominion Virginia Power for 22 years before receiving the call to become a pastor, so she knows a lot about delegating responsibility and building leadership skills in others. Those abilities, combined with energetic church members who share her passion for helping the community, have built a pow-

erful, transformative congregation in Petersburg, Va.

"We're ordinary people doing extraordinary work through God," Wright-Scott says of 10-year-old Victory Christian United Church of Christ whose ministries address hunger, homelessness and HIV/AIDS education in an African-American community hit by hard economic times. She believes the congregation's work in the community far outweighs the

size of its membership.

"When people ask 'How many people do you have?', I respond, 'How much ministry do you do?' We may never be a mega church, but we do a mega ministry," she said.

Victory Christian's largest and longest-running ministry is its weekly food bank. It started with a

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Passion fuels ministries



Thomas Hart (above) transitions EVA leadership to Julia Avery Muse (p3)



Youth praise dancers help celebrate Victory Christian member's 90th birthday. -photo provided

Think about Living

Camp's Notes



by Stephen W. Camp
Conference Minister

Tony Snow, former White House press secretary, speaking to cancer patients, said last summer before his death, "Don't think about dying. Think about living." I believe it was a profound faith statement he so vividly shared. For us in the Southern Conference, for too long and in too many important ways we too have been thinking about dying. We have been obsessed upon staring into the sky, looking for it to crumble and fall on our heads, engrossed upon what we don't have, absorbed by bottom lines and deficits, and fixated on dying rather than celebrating life. It has seemed very hard for us as Southern Conference people, to really and faithfully believe, realize that our future as a conference is secure in Christ and firmly held by God. It seems easier for many to simply slowly die than to boldly and confidently live.

These are words many will not want to read, but when we are honest, we know that in these financial times we have advocated retreat rather than

Our conference sense of vitality has been measured by our bank balance rather than our impulse to be charitable in these days.

kept the charge we have together. Our church councils and consistory are in survival mode, rather than mission mode in far too many places. For lack of five hundred dollars additional giving to the Southern Conference through OCWM per church, over and above our current level of giving, our financial woos continue. We have allowed cutback and ways to curtail to dominate us, rather than spend our energy seeking ways to expand and find new and creative ways of being in ministry together. The role of activist has given way to fear and frustration, a sense that it won't be long before the last one will need to simply turn the lights off behind her. We receive one, two and in some churches three offerings each week, but we still spin our wheels in debt and admit an inability to make ends meet.

We have believed the "hype" as many have offered hype that says that our viability is based upon particular theological viewpoints at the exclusion of others or management styles that

demand that we only respond in rainy day situations. In times of dire challenge we argue outcome rather than act. We walk together in a long dark tunnel, not yet seeing light and hope at the other end or on the other side of the mountain we have just passed through. We want church development for example, but not in our back yard, or find few ways to partner with it. We want trained leaders, but too many still go to non-accredited schools or use mail order academic degrees, rather than attending the first rate program we have offered for several years now in the conference. Staff respond in crisis moments, but seldom get credit for the success. We say our churches are dying, but behold, a president is inaugurated, nurtured from our pews. Our conference sense of vitality has been measured by our bank balance rather than our impulse to be charitable in these days. We are content to leave an

empty pew behind rather than a planned gift that will make a difference for the generations to come. We want life, but we have developed an upsetting

sense of every person or every church for one's self and the result has been that the Southern Conference has been low on our list of priorities. Don't think about dying. Think about living, what good advice.

For many of us, the notion is that the conference is swimming in cash and really doesn't need the dollars we can offer. It is not true. We need your financial gift in ever increasing ways. When times are financially tough, the church still responds, still makes a difference, still matters. Your church's financial help is needed, if only to express life and bring hope through the ministries we offer and in the partnerships we value. Let 2009 be the year that your congregation or as individuals, we place the Southern Conference high on the list of priority gifts made each month/quarterly, annually in the year. After all, it is a matter of living in Christ with confidence and assurance. "Living," surely it is something to think about.

Life can be tough at times. Hurricanes, earthquakes, cyclones, and tsunamis smash communities to bits. Wars and ethnic conflicts shatter the very foundations of life, showing people out of their homes and transforming them into frightened refugees. Persistent hunger, drought, poverty, lack of education, and ill health shrivel the life and dry the spirit, leaving individuals to crumble from the inside out.

Yet scripture gives us a different view of who we are. "You are children of the Lord your God. ... It is you the Lord has chosen ... to be God's people, God's treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 14:1-2).

As children of God, we are called to care for the things that God cares for. To treasure what God treasures.

Through giving to One Great Hour of Sharing®, we can address some of the difficulties that so many are facing today. We can offer a warm blanket, clean water, shelter, and food in the wake of a disaster. We can provide assistance to communities internationally by offering education, health care, tools, seeds, and animals as resources to people who want to build better lives for themselves and their children. Through One Great Hour of Sharing, we kindly, persistently and boldly care for God's treasures by sharing our earthly treasure with those who need it.

Read more: www.ucc.org/oghs

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The December budget intervention, Rev. Jackson believes, while difficult to implement, was long overdue. "We are an emotional, 'feely' type people. We're Christians. We don't want to hurt any one." The conference postponed, she believes, for longer than perhaps logical, the decision to make the announced cuts. "But the Conference is a business. We have to live into our stewardship."

In June 2008, Board Members wrestled with the numbers. There was even a move by some, including Kristin Andes, to NOT recommend the prepared budget to the Annual Gathering, because it was a deficit budget. That motion failed. "As an ethical employer," says Kristin, "You can't say 'Sorry, I can't pay you.' You have to make drastic changes."

On the floor of the '08 Annual Gathering in June, lines formed at microphones to discuss budget issues. Rev. Julie Peebles convinced delegates to table the morning discussions and convene a gathering during lunch "to discern possible solutions to our ongoing budget crisis."

Enough delegates concurred with Rev. Peebles, and after the lunch discussions, a gathered body approved the proposed budget with three conditions. The Annual Gathering wanted a task force to reach out to non-contributing congregations. They asked for the Board to cut the deficit in half each year. And finally, the formation of a standing committee was recommended, separate from the Board's Budget and Finance Committee, whose sole work would be stewardship.

At the conclusion of a long two day Board Meeting in September '08, Rev. Bob Barrows headed his car into the sunset, knowing he had accepted the chair of a task force laden with an assignment of responding to the financial shortfall and addressing future needs of Southern Conference. To the question, "Is there hope?" he returned a "yes" without hesitation. "The Board is devoted to finding ways to make the Conference work." He went on to suggest the need for changes, better utilization of technology, identifying tasks churches need the

Conference to perform, and interpreting the role of Conference itself,

Julie Peebles in January '09, reflected on (in her words) "the sadness of this situation." "We need to move beyond blame and get our act together, trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us. Someone once wisely said, when there is deficit of funds, there is nearly always a spiritual deficit behind it. We've got to address both, or risk forfeiting our rich history and our potential for future ministry as a conference.

Editor's note: This story went to press prior to a January 17 meeting in Burlington. For updates on conference related news, check website: www.soc-ucc.org

Former NFL Pro Ehrmann to Speak at Catawba

Former NFL Pro Joe Ehrmann, now an ordained minister, will be the keynote speaker for Catawba College's sixth annual Lilly Colloquium on Tuesday, February 24. Ehrmann, who played professional football for 13 years and was selected as the Colts Man of the Year, followed his pro career by matriculating at Dallas Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary before being ordained in 1985.

Two of Ehrmann's on-campus presentations are free and open to the public, one at 11:00 a.m. in Omwake-Dearborn Chapel, and another at 7:30 p.m. in Hedrick Little Theatre in the Robertson College-Community Center.

SOUTHERN SPIRIT

The Reverend Stephen CampConference Minister and Editor
Janelle Bunn Administrative Secretary and Managing Editor
C. L. "Curly" Stumb, Irwin Smallwood, Linda Carter Communication Team
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News items and pictures of interest are welcome. Send to 252-B West Fifth Street, Burlington, NC 27215. Deadline is the fifth of each month prior to published editions.



Making a Difference the EVA Way

by **Julia Avery Muse**
President, Eastern Virginia Association

Happy New Year and GOD's continued blessings to you for the 2009 church year. A year that is already marked, "prophetic" as well as "historic" as we welcome and officially install our 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, the country's first African American president. Isn't it good to be alive to witness this historic event?

I consider it a privilege and an honor to be able to serve as the newly-elected President for the Eastern Virginia Association (EVA) during the same administration as our 44th President. I envision EVA emerging as an exemplary association under the direction and grace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As we embark upon a new year, the obstacles will be even greater than in 2008. But, I am encouraged, as it is stated in Isaiah 43:5: "Fear not, for I am with thee." GOD has promised that he would not leave nor forsake us as long as we believe in him.

As we face a growing economic emergency that will conclude with all of us tightening our budgets and finding new ways to do more with less, we hope to see the gifts of opportunities that The Lord has given us to help those in need: the sick, shut-in, homeless, and misguided.

The New Year is calling upon us to make a difference in the lives of others by what I like to call "Servant Leadership." As church leaders we recognize that change is upon us. We also must admit that we cannot continue to do the same things and expect different results. The EVA Board of Directors and Commission Chairs has committed itself to our mission: To help churches understand and grow in their Christian mission. We are also pro-

The New Year is calling upon us to make a difference in the lives of others by what I like to call "Servant Leadership."

gressive enough to meet today's perpetual challenges. Using one of Barack Obama's campaign slogans for change, "Yes, we can," EVA's goals and objectives response will be, "Yes, we can." Yes, we can expand, strengthen and promote congregational growth and vitality, "Yes, we can" discover more effective procedures to address church differences and conflicts, "Yes, we can" increase congregations understanding of UCC history and polity and "Yes, we will."

EVA has already started making a difference -- doing "new things" and breaking new barriers in these changing times.

(1) *Newsletter*: Starting with the January issue of, "The Voice of EVA," congregations can now share Christian experiences, activities, projects, and ideas.

(2) *EVA Website (eva-soc-ucc.org)*: Congregations can also connect with each other on the web. In this Technological/Information Age, we do not want GOD's people to perish

because of the lack of knowledge.

(3) *EVA Awards/Recognition Banquet*: This will be a first. EVA will be working closely with the churches to spotlight those leaders and laity within the churches who have demonstrated their Christian mission through labor and service to GOD and man.

I would like to thank Rev. Drew Morris, Area Conference Minister, Rev. Thomas Hart, immediate past President, the EVA Board of Directors, and Commission Chairs for their faith, encouragement and most of all, their cooperation in accepting the challenges ahead.

As we continue to commit to the goals and ideals of our GOD and EVA, don't forget, "Together we can; Yes, we can," make an affirming influence that will impact the world! "We walk by Faith, not by sight."

Julia's Thoughts



Southern Regional Women's Meeting

October 16-18, 2009
Keynote Speaker: Rev. Jo Hudson, TX
Bible Study Leader: Rev. Rose Wright Scott, NC

Heartland Country Inn & Christian Retreat Center, Brenham, TX

Practicing Faith with Children

February 13, 2009
9am - 5pm
United Church of Chapel Hill

A one-day ecumenical conference for Christian Educators, Children's Ministry Directors, Pastors, Volunteers and Seminary Students

Black Lake Reflections

by Nora Driver Foust

Are you in the Black Lake Three Thousand? That is to ask, are you one of the more than 3000 people that visited Black Lake Retreat Center in 2008? This past year, Black Lake Retreat Center offered breathing space for respite, fellowship and study to more than 10 UCC groups as they picnicked, camped, retreated, celebrated or otherwise just spent time with God in the green space at Black Lake. There were also 9 weddings, several business and church meetings, a church conference gathering of almost 200, and many families retreated in the cottage.

Can you join the Black Lake Three Thousand? Yes, in fact you can help us grow it in 2009. The Leonard Lodge will host a Church Vitality Workshop on May 2 and this summer, the cabins and shelter area will see the return of the zoo camps hosting youth from kindergarten thru 8th grade. A few churches have discussed the possibility of having their Vacation Bible School at Black Lake this summer or even having the kickoff or closing activities at the shelter. Other groups have contacted the Center to book weekend youth retreats or zoo trips. Don't let the cost deter your

planning. Call or email and let us work with you and your budget.

So, make your plans now to join the Black Lake Three Thousand and help us grow it!!!

Whether you are in the Black Lake Three Thousand or not, we are recruiting a Special One Thousand. As staff and advisors at Black Lake Retreat Center work to develop a ministry plan for the Leonard Lodge, we are seeking One Thousand people and congregations to support the current ministries by giving at the \$30 level. Church and group rentals of the picnic shelter and cottage, as well as Leonard Lodge, just don't meet the expenses incurred by this new facility as we work on a ministry plan that can sustain the Center. Several churches already give at or above this level and for that we are grateful! Encourage others to join you. Help Black Lake reach her goal of Three Thousand Visitors and One Thousand Supporters in 2009!

With your help, Black Lake can continue to offer breathing space for respite, fellowship and study to all God's people as they seek green space to simply be with God.

www.blacklakere retreatcenter.org

Centerclair Welcomes Sallie Hepler



United Church Homes and Services (UCHS) and Centerclair are pleased to welcome Sallie Hepler, RN as Director of Nursing. Hepler has a strong background in home health and geriatric services having served as Marketing Director for Advanced Home Care and Assistant Director of Nursing at Piedmont Crossing in Thomasville, also a UCHS community. Immediately preceding her move to Centerclair, Hepler was Director of Marketing at

Piedmont Crossing.

An active community leader, Hepler serves on the Board of Directors for Hospice of Davidson County and has held numerous leadership roles in her church, Fairgrove Methodist in Thomasville.

"Sallie's clinical skills combined with her knowledge of the community and love for the elderly make her an ideal candidate for Director of Nursing", said Lee Syria, Vice President of Operations of UCHS. "We are very pleased to have Sallie in this role." Hepler and her husband, Kenneth live in Thomasville, NC.

Centerclair is a not-for-profit skilled nursing facility offering quality long term and rehabilitative services. It is affiliated with United Church Homes and Services and the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ. For more information contact Cindy Montgomery at 336 249-7057.

UCC colleges and universities among U.S. News and World Report's best

Thirteen historically UCC related colleges and universities have received U.S. News and World Report's top 100 rankings for 2009. SOC's Elon Ranked #2

in *South Masters*; Catawba was 16th in *South Baccalaureate*.

Readmore: www.ucc.org/news/ucc-colleges-and-universities.html





Chicory
Cichorium intybus
Photographed in Pisgah National Forest
near Johns River Valley Camp
by C. L. Stumb

2009

Calendar

February 10: Conference Minister meets with Catawba District Clergy, Zion UCC, Lenoir, 10:00 AM

February 13: Practicing Faith with Children, Chapel Hill

February 24: Catawba College's 6th Annual Lilly Colloquium with speaker Joe Ehrmann; 11:00 AM in Chapel; 7:30 PM in Hedrick Little Theatre

March 14: Johns River Valley Camp Work Day

March 20-21: Franklinton Center Women's Retreat

March 19-23: Joint National UCC Boards and Executive Council Meeting, Cleveland

March 22: Suggested date for receiving One Great Hour of Sharing Offering

April 8-12: Southern Conference to host German delegation from Rheinland Church

April 24-26: Mothers' Retreat at Johns River Valley Camp

April 24-25: SISTAS' Keeping It Real. Franklinton Center conversation on race for women

May 9-10: John Thomas (UCC president) will be visiting WNCA

May 20-21: Annual Southern Conference Gathering, Catawba College

May 29-30: Strong Men's Conference: Franklinton Center

June 7-10: UCC Community boys Football Camp at Franklinton Center

June 26-30: General Synod meets in Grand Rapids, Michigan around theme 'Immerse Yourself'



Administrative Staff Switch Roles

Burlington, N.C. A flash of reality struck Linda Carter and Janelle Bunn as they engaged in a moment that appeared like Musical Chairs. When the music stopped, they lowered their computers on new desks and sat down to changed scenery. Linda could no longer see the outside door, a view that had been almost as important to her as her computer screen. After all, her smiling face and warm personality have doubled to welcome countless visitors into the Conference Office for a span of ten years.

"I like challenges," commented Linda as her face tensed and she pondered new surroundings in the office that Janelle Bunn had occupied. "I love working here," she continued, and her smile followed. Staff changes announced in a December 18 letter to the Conference necessitated the office shuffle. Janelle (who came to the SOC office from BRAG in 2001, during the interim leadership of Herman Haller) officially retired at the end of January 2009, though she will continue in a part time role. Linda assumed -- on January 1 -- the responsibility as Executive Assistant to the Conference Minister, a role Janelle previously managed.

Linda was hired as a Receptionist / Office Assistant by Lucinda Graves, a 24 year veteran of the office (who died suddenly within months of Linda's employment). She still remembers the final question of her job interview, "What kind of car do you drive?" At the time it was a Geo Prism,

which for four months would sit in the shadows of Lucinda's Cadillac in front of the Graham office. And what's Linda driving now? A Nissan Altima.

A thoughtful Linda Carter ponders those early months at her first desk. "It worked out," she said. "I'm still here."

She knows her experience will serve her well in the new role. She anticipates continued work with *great people* (her emphasis). The conversation seemed to return to "new challenges, church development, new stuff," all in a day's work.



Left to right: Linda Carter sits in new desk as Janelle Bunn transfers project files -C. L. Stumb photo

Research Guru Details a Changing North Carolina



Left to right: Margot Pickett and David Mateo follow slides of a power point presentation by Ferrel Guillory. -C. L. Stumb photo

Chapel Hill, N.C. "In my daily work," suggested Ferrel Guillory. "I document the obvious." In case it is not obvious, suggested the theme of his presentation to a January gathering of Research

Triangle clergy, North Carolina is no longer a rural state. With a series of census slides graphically illustrating population growth over the past century, viewers saw the state grow from a level in the year 1900 when only one city was evident as an urban center (Wilmington), to a place where a distinct outline of the Piedmont Crescent Railroad was recognizable in 1930, to the point of a mid-decade census correction in 1986 which documented more persons living in urban areas than rural.

The August 2008 issue of *Carolina Context*, published under the direction of Guillory, states that "North Carolina is headed toward a population of 9.5 million people in 2010," where "Today, more than 4.1 million people live in the state's three largest metropolitan areas - the Charlotte-

Mecklenburg region, the Research Triangle, and the Triad."

Name the three fastest growing counties in North Carolina. Guillory lists them in order: (1) Union (South-east of Charlotte; Jesse Helm's birth-place, he adds as a trivia footnote), (2) Hoke (includes Fayetteville, with Fort Bragg at hub of a significant military presence), and (3) Wake (encompassing the Raleigh area).

Says Paul Davis as he tries to make sense of the seemingly endless battery of numbers encapsulated throughout Guillory's power point graphs, "The Southern Conference sometimes 'feels' to me like a collection of small town churches, with a few urban churches tossed in. Maybe our desire to hold onto some black-white balance should ease into some urban-rural balance where we place our resources in some proportion to our population make up."

Mac Legerton -- a UCC clergy person who resides in Roberson County and has also worked with Frye Guillory -- likes to remind the public (He's a public member of the NC House-Senate Study Commission) about poverty trends in his state. "Regarding growing poverty in NC," he states, "40 of our 100 counties now have poverty rates over 17%. It's a major crisis and will only worsen in the present economy." Legerton positions Roberson County as "the poorest of all NC counties and is the most ethnically diverse, rural county in the nation." Notes Rick Edens, coordinator for the Triangle gathering, "The disparity of wealth should continue to distress us and be a focus for our service and mission to the community around us."

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few church members assembling food baskets in someone's apartment. Now through collaboration with local grocers and Central Virginia Food Bank, the ministry distributes bags of groceries to more than 75 people each Tuesday. It feeds people's souls, too, since Wright-Scott's husband, Minister Bobby R. Scott, began leading a non-traditional worship service to coincide with the food distribution.

Those out of work can use a computer to search for jobs online thanks to a grant Victory Christian received from Central Virginia Consortium.

The SISTAS ministry (Sisters Informing Sisters About Topics on AIDS) provides intervention, testing and education related to HIV/AIDS, whose rates continue to rise among African-American women. SISTAS has reached nearly 1,000 individuals through case management and prevention services in collaboration with the Petersburg Health Department and other healthcare agencies.

The church offers a prayer line for anyone to call with any prayer request. "They may call and say they have an appearance in court that day. We go right into prayer, and it has been very powerful," Wright-Scott said.

"We want to be a blessing to others and stay connected to what the community needs," she said. That doesn't necessarily mean giving direct hand-outs, but rather empowering individuals to take care of their own mind, body and spirit while giving them a helping hand to meet immediate needs.

"The vision at Victory Christian is it's our responsibility to reach, teach and preach to all people. The ultimate goal is salvation, but you've got to reach people where they are. Someone who is hungry doesn't want to hear about salvation, they want to eat," Wright-Scott said.

Wright-Scott and her husband co-founded Victory Christian in May 1999, but its core members had been together since the early 1990s as a

Bible study group meeting in a local daycare facility. With a strong commitment to improving the community, this group already had established the food bank and phone line ministry.

"We started out with nothing - just eight people with heart," Wright-Scott said. Now Victory Christian has more than 100 members. They are mostly poor but are committed to being the living hands of Christ.

The church's growth in size and service "was a matter of having lots of faith and prayer and hard work... The people that God allowed to be part of the core group had strong faith, a plan and didn't mind getting down and doing the work," Wright-Scott said. She is now a mentor to other new church starts in the UCC and says those traits are critical to establishing a successful congregation.

To stay energized for all that God has called her to do, Wright-Scott meditates daily. "I believe in self care. I exercise, I read. I have my own time just for me."

She added, "I love what I'm doing. I'm passionate and God has been good to me and to our congregation. We have been blessed."



Women's Ministry group of Victory Christian express church pride with shirts. -photo provided