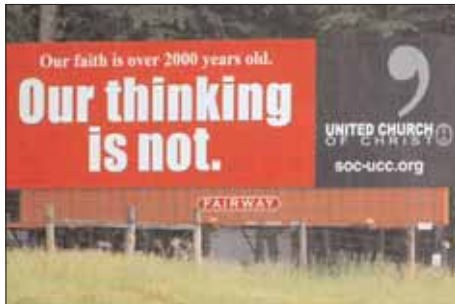




A  
 Growing  
 Church



Proceeds from "Live the Vision" campaign funds have initiated an advertising program in Southern Conference, including the use of billboards and print media. The pictured sign can be seen while driving west on Business I-40, approaching Greensboro just beyond the Lee Street exit.  
 - Photo by Paul Davis



Rev. Reiss Potterveld will bring a voice of theological education to the Annual Gathering's forum.



Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. will remind delegates of the call and message of biblical prophets.

The Southern Conference starts a church growth initiative, and successful churches offer tips on what draws in new members.



The Tsutsumi family was invited by friends to visit their church after relocating from Oregon. They officially joined High Country UCC on May 18.

- Photo by Lynne Townsend

By Linda Coutant

When Jessa Tsutsumi moved to North Carolina from Oregon last year, she was thirsty for a spiritual home. Despite spending time in various denominations in her lifetime, Tsutsumi says she'd never quite experienced the Christian community that she knew in her heart was possible.

Then friends invited her to the local United Church of Christ congregation in Boone, N.C., called High Country UCC. "It had been so

many years since I felt nurtured in a church," Tsutsumi said, who is married with two teenage sons. She immediately warmed to the congregation's message of love and acceptance of all, and its hands-on social justice work.

"It was so thrilling to witness in action all the things my husband and I have tried to instill in our boys. I enjoy the whole approach of being responsible and globally aware, and embracing everyone," said Tsutsumi. For that reason, she and her family officially joined the congregation May 18.

The UCC believes there are more people like Tsutsumi - marginalized, yet seeking the spiritual comfort and mission opportunities offered through church community. That's why the Southern Conference has embarked on a church growth initiative to start new congregations and revitalize older ones whose membership has plateaued.

"We're looking at areas in the Southern Conference where UCC

**continued on B-3  
 A Growing Church**

Delegates Invited to Come and Grow

The Southern Conference welcomes all to the 2008 Annual Gathering. Two dynamic church leaders, plus several national staff will enrich the agenda. The Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. will preach for worship and speak at the banquet. While Rev. Wright has experienced intense media coverage over the last few months, Southern Conference welcomes him, given his long and faithful years of service to the United Church of Christ.

Having grown a church to over 8000 members, Wright's story becomes a case study for understanding church growth. This will be a time of learning, void of the political landmines many have witnessed in the media.

Find also at the table, and offer a warm welcome to Rev. Reiss Potterveld, president of Lancaster Theological Seminary, in Lancaster, PA. Rev. Potterveld has a distinguished teaching career

and will offer practical guides for ministry and present ways to transform one's pastoral leadership skills.

All are invited. The Thursday evening worship is open to the public and the banquet on Friday will be available as long as tickets last. Call the conference office for extra banquet tickets, as reservations are required. This event will also feature the graduation of several PLD students.

## Can We Talk about the "R" Word?

# Camp's Notes



Steve Camp

by Stephen W. Camp  
Conference Minister

Racism exists. It is a present, current reality in our American daily experience. Any one who does not believe that racism is real in our culture, or anyone who believes that racism is already a concern that has been overcome, may have their head in the sand, like the ostrich. For some to deny or suggest that racism elimination is erroneous or bogus work, miss an important historical mark. Racism is in our culture, and in the fabric of American life. To deny the reality of racism is a way to fortify one's own privilege and societal standing. For still others, ignorance is bliss, until something happens to jar the person into a place of shock and disbelief, before admission of the reality of the racial divide is present. One of the hardest, even insidious parts of the evil of racism is the feeling that its invasion is with others and never with me. With denial, racism wins.

*In the United Church of Christ we talk a lot about race and diversity, we believe it is soul work for us, but....*

Let me be quick to say, that we have come a long way in race relations and equality work, but this evil is still real and alive and should never be minimized. I know for example that a mere generation ago, I would have never been elected to serve the Southern Conference without the transformative work underway then and continuing now. It has been the work of many current and past, working for a church and society where racism does not have the last word. It is a hard subject to bring up and harder to engage with others, especially with those who are of different racial sensitivity. Whites don't want to talk to Blacks and vice versa; and beyond that, the conversation with other races seems nearly impossible. But still it is work we are called to do.

In the United Church of Christ we talk a lot about race and diversity, we believe it is soul work for us, but we know that it is work to be done and ground that is hard to cover and overcome. We are careful, so careful sometimes that we often feel like we are not moving forward, making headway as we should in our time. In the community of faith, the problem of race is not exempted from everyday life nor should it be so. It is work we are called to engage, work for each of us.

Having said that I believe that racism can be dramatic, but also it can be subtle, hard to articulate or put one's finger on. When felt, it does not feel good. The result of racism leaves a mark on our spirit and in our lives. The church is, however, in the position to make a difference in the elimination of the evil it presents. The church's great strength is in its ability to talk things through. Our faith can be cleansing even with the soiling residue of racism. What we do about the recent public concerns we witnessed on the evening news should be filtered through our faith, not bottled in our emotional places that can explode or become toxic. What is needed is a measure of patience and a willingness to hear the diverse voices, before we react and conclude that we have absolute and definitive answers. People in churches across the conference are experiencing deeply held sentiments that rarely get touched.

The conversations shared and stretching across racial lines in our own Southern Conference are difficult conversations with no easy answers. It is in the listening to each other that we find a way forward together. Sometimes this may mean hearing from someone who initially has a perspective that is radically different than your own. In the United Church of Christ we have moved forward historically because we have had the ability to hear all the voices and form opinions independently and faithfully.

So I want to encourage each local church in the Southern Conference to find ways to talk about race, but more so about racism. I am not suggesting a one time conversation but a series of conversations that leads toward faith places not seen before. I further encourage every local church to reach out to a church that is different than your church, theologically or racially. Set up a series of dialogues and conversations, pastors group; let the conversations start with you and laity; let this be your aim for a season. The recent events in our national conversation prompted through the media, calls us to be proactive, not reactive. The future is in our hands, that is if we don't stick our heads in the sand, like the ostrich.

Have a blessed summer and see you at the annual gathering.

The Southern Conference is living -- to some extent -- on the generosity of members of the past. Many of the scholarships, grants and educational offerings are due to former generosity of Southern Conference members. It becomes the responsibility of persons living in the present to invest in the Conference's future with gifts and bequests that will strengthen ministry for years to come. For further information, contact the Conference Minister or your ACM.

### Finding Justice in the Fields

by Edie Rasell, Minister for Workplace Justice, Justice and Witness Ministries, UCC

Farm workers in NC endure poverty-level wages, substandard housing, racism, and difficult work conditions. Each year thousands suffer from green tobacco sickness caused by overexposure to nicotine absorbed through the skin.

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the union that organized workers at the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, is now engaged with farm workers who harvest tobacco grown for R.J. Reynolds.

These farm workers are not employed directly by RJR, but by tobacco growers under contract to that firm. These contracts specify in great detail how the tobacco is to be grown. Unfortunately, the contracts are largely silent regarding the treatment of workers. But many people concerned about justice believe that large corporations have an obligation to require their suppliers (growers in this case) to operate in just and humane ways. R.J. Reynolds needs to acknowledge its responsibility for the workers who pick its tobacco, and ensure that growers treat workers fairly.

### EVA Youth Discover through Action

What do 35 youth, 270 pounds of canned food, 50 sandwiches, and 35 cards and banners have in common? Says Bonnie Dinges, "On Sat. March 8th at Union Congregational UCC Church, Norfolk Virginia, you could have found out....."

"That was the day for *Random Acts of Kindness*," she continues, "done by the youth of the Eastern Virginia Association." Despite the rainy weather, (which forced the cancellation of all our outdoor yard cleanup to many Norfolk senior citizens), youth from the various churches were asked to have food drives in their, local churches prior to this Mission Day, and bring them to the event. And bring they did!

Two groups were formed. High schoolers and young adults went to the Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia where they stocked shelves. Participants engaged in discovery with a facility tour, a little history of the Norfolk Food Bank and some education about hunger in America.

The younger group remained at the church and made greeting cards for shut-ins (those we would had done yard work for...) along with making sandwiches for Union Mission, one of the largest soup kitchen/shelter/advocacy centers in Norfolk. This group also played a few games (so who WAS the spoon hanging champ?) and worked on setting up worship.

After a yummy pizza lunch, the groups engaged in some fun and meaningful games. The day closed with worship lead by the youth, including an awesome message from one of the college students from St. Mark's (Norfolk). Other participants came from the following churches, Hampton 1st, Portsmouth UCC, Lynnhaven Colony UCC, Tidewater UCC, Fellowship UCC, and host church, Union Congregational UCC. Thanks are extended to Union UCC for being such great hosts. Please watch for another of these events again, especially with current cleanup needs from the recent tornadoes.

### Everyday Green Ideas for the Faith Community - Part 1

by Kaye Crawford

As the world becomes more aware of energy costs and environmental concerns, churches can do much to lead the way in reducing energy use and waste. If Christian communities see as important the caretaker role of God's creation, churches can become models for implementing simple changes in a congregation's on-going life.

By forming a Creation Care Team, a church can begin to study environmental concerns and make recommendations for conserving, preserving, and caring for creation. Possible recommendations include:

- ...Install water heater timer and heating / air programmable thermostat
- ...Purchase doormats and carpets from recycled products
- ...Create sustainable lawns by using drought-resistant plants, more trees, mulch and less grass to reduce energy used in mowing.
- ...Avoid the paving of walkways and parking lots unless penetrable paving products can be used to avoid runoff and erosion.
- ...Compost food remains and use to fertilize lawn plants
- ...Purchase as many products locally as possible
- ...Purchase items with minimal packaging to reduce landfill waste.

### SOUTHERN SPIRIT

The Reverend Stephen Camp ..... Conference Minister and Editor  
 Janelle Bunn ..... Administrative Secretary and Managing Editor  
 C. L. "Curly" Stumb, Irvin Smallwood, Linda Carter ..... Communication Team

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## Peering through Doorways of Faith

by Rev. Lary Diehl  
Pastor, First UCC, Hampton, VA

Several years ago, I had the experience of standing in front of the door upon which Martin Luther had hung his "95Theses." I was in Wittenberg, Germany with my good friend Bernard Jacobi who had been an Ecumenical Intern Minister at First United Church of Christ. There the two of us stood like two bobble head dolls staring at "the door."

Then we heard the tour guide tell us that this particular church had burned to the ground twice since Luther's time. Then she added that the door before us—all bronzed like baby booties—wasn't the original doorway. It seemed that the last time the church had been rebuilt, the doorway was moved slightly. Ah, but there we were at what seemed to be the epicenter of the Reformation. What an experience that was!

What Luther started opened an entryway for believers. No longer would believers have to adhere to what someone else said about the faith. They could think and reason on their own. The freedom this gave to Christians inspired them to explore their own

beliefs and to grow in their faith. What an experience that would allow!

As we participate in the 2008 Annual Gathering of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ we will not be far from another important place. One of the founders of the Christian churches was James O'Kelly. In Surry County, he reopened an entrance for believers. In the Six Cardinal Principles of the Christian Faith, the fifth one states: "Individual judgment

in all questions of faith and practice is the right and privilege of all." Once again, our faith was strengthened by the affirming of an individual believer's oppor-

tunity to explore and expand their personal faith. What an experience this can be!

It is a great privilege for each of us to gather and express our faith. The diversity of our churches enriches all of us. Is this the inspiration behind such openings that Martin Luther and James O'Kelly started? We have an awesome mission of discovering and developing our faith in the freedom of the Southern Conference. Each of us has the privilege to share what makes us unique. Welcome to Eastern Virginia.

*What Luther started opened an entryway for believers. No longer would believers have to adhere to what someone else said about the faith.*

# A Guest View



### continued from B-1 -- A Growing Church .....

churches currently don't exist, and we're talking to folks in those areas to see if they could support a UCC congregation," explains project leader Rev. Vertie Powers, associate conference minister for the Eastern N.C. Association.

The Southern Conference currently has 230 congregations in North Carolina and eastern Virginia. Its goal for 2008 is to get one new congregation up and running and conduct exploratory work to start three to five more in 2009. In revitalization, the conference plans to work with three congregations this year and another three to five in 2009.

The initiative will also include workshops "for churches that are healthy but want to do more," Powers said. Possible topics will be how to be more welcoming, how ministry and mission help churches grow, and what it means when church giving declines.

#### Tapping into others' experience

A number of newly formed UCC congregations, called new church starts, are doing exceedingly well, Powers said, and the Southern Conference looks to them for expertise in helping others.

One is High Country UCC, which started out with 20 members and has grown to about 200 in five and a half years.

"I think people are hungry for intellectual and spiritual integrity in their church, as well as a church that serves," says Rev. Shelly Wilson. Her church's mission work includes regular wood delivery to people in need who heat with wood stoves,



*Members of Corinth Reformed Church work on a Habitat for Humanity House. The project, which was built on the church lawn and later moved to the homeowner's property is part of their connection with the Hickory community.*



and assistance to a local medical clinic serving those without insurance.

Another successful church start is Great Awakening UCC in Virginia Beach, Va. What started out as a few people meeting for Bible study in the lobby of a non-profit organization helping at-risk teens has grown into a church of 90 members within five years.

"Most of the people who now attend our church were at some point rejected or not fitting in where they were," said Rev. Nanette Hillard, who personally experienced rejection as a divorcee attending a conservative church in her 20s.

The core group that formed Great Awakening UCC "wanted to set up a body of worship, a place where anyone could come to wor-

ship - whatever their background or where they were on their spiritual path, regardless of color or sexual orientation. A place that really meant 'who so ever,'" Hillard said.

Great Awakening UCC's commitment to at-risk youth has grown, too. In addition to supporting a group home, the congregation now helps train and employ young people in the cosmetology business.

"Our mission is to reach the least, the last and the lost, and to facilitate their spiritual growth wherever they are on the journey. Being part of a church that truly mean 'who so ever' is a very positive feeling," she said.

#### Programs that fit the community

Conference Minister Rev. Stephen Camp said most church

growth in the Southern Conference is toward open and affirming, liberal congregations. But he added that some of the conference's conservative congregations are growing too.

Corinth Reformed Church in Hickory, N.C., founded in 1869,

By harnessing the interests and passions of its existing membership, Corinth Reformed Church strengthened its youth programs, developed grief and divorce support groups, and when the area hit hard economic times, started a job-seekers program. New members followed.

Sometimes reaching people "where they are" brings unexpected connections. Hillard said she didn't enter seminary knowing she would someday lead a congregation that is open and affirming toward gays and lesbians, but that as Great Awakening UCC has grown, its mission to the community has "unfolded."

"We discover in the unfolding. Evolution is continuous and beautiful, and we unfold with it," she said.

The Southern Conference believes there are lots of people out there wanting to join an evolving church.

"I know there are people out there waiting for us to come and say, this is the place for you. Some are worshipping in congregations who must deny who they are or how they express themselves in worship, and we want to plant churches that say, 'You can come and you can worship God in a way that's true and authentic to you,'" Powers said.

That's certainly true for Tsutsumi, who looks forward to becoming more involved in High Country UCC.

"It feels," she said, "like I've finally come home."

has grown from 550 members to 930 in the past 15 years. The past 12 months have been the best in recent memory for increasing membership, says Rev. Bob Thompson. He attributes his congregation's growth - as well as that of other congregations - to needs-based programs.

"Five years ago, I did my doctoral thesis on church growth among mainstream churches in the Bible Belt. In my research I found that the No. 1 factor leading to church growth - and it didn't matter if the church was white, black, conservative, liberal, new or old - was needs-based programs. Find out where people in the community are hurting, and that's where you build your programming. If you can connect with people where they are and relate that to the gospel of Jesus Christ, they will come to you."

For more information about the church growth initiative, contact Rev. Powers at (336) 343-4066 or vertiepowwersenca@soc-ucc.org



Buttercup  
Ranunculaceae  
Photographed at Johns River Valley Camp  
by G.L. Stumb

## 2008 Calendar

**June 15:** First Day of Camp in the summer program of Johns River Valley Camp

**June 20-21:** UCC 2008 Women's Retreat, Summit Conference Center at Haw River State Park in Brown Summit, NC

**June 26-27:** SOC Annual Gathering, Hilton Garden Inn, Suffolk

**July 8-12:** United Black Christians, Durham

**July 24-28:** 2008 National Youth Event, University of Tennessee

**August 2:** Franklinton Center Day

**September 26-27:** Christian Education event at location to be announced

**October 4:** Western North Carolina Association Meeting

**October 9-11:** African American Women in Ministry Retreat at Franklinton Center

**October 11:** Eastern North Carolina Association Meeting

**October 18:** Eastern Virginia Association Meeting



## Multi-Cultural Exposure Impacts Ministry of PLD Students



Brenda Burton / Licensed / Associate Minister, Antioch UCC, Townsville, NC



Tom Benedict / Licensed Minister, pastor of Asheboro UCC



Susan Bowen / CPE at Alamance Regional Medical Center

by Margot Pickett

Ask Brenda Burton when recycling became her passion, and she'll give you the same answer that Roy Stokes will if you ask when he decided to get rid of cable television: "After spending two weeks in Germany last summer."

### Spring Unveils Blossoms of New Life at Black Lake Retreat Center

January one saw a new face at Black Lake Retreat Center; Rev. Nora Driver Foust carved her niche in the office of Leonard Lodge with yellow tulips in the windows, daisies on the bookcase and orchids on the credenza.

Her next order of business was studying the history of Black Lake and looking for ways to grow the use of the facilities there. "It didn't take long to discover," says Foust, "that UCC use of Black Lake has fallen off over the past several years. With perfect facilities for weekend youth retreats and a new lodge great for meaningful one-day programming, it is time to remind members of the Southern

Proponents of international travel and education believe that spending time in other cultures makes a profound difference in the way you see the world and the way you live your life. "You'll never be the same" is the common refrain and those who have participated in the Southern Conference's partnership with the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland (EKiR) over the past 23 years will heartily agree.

The most recent exchange between the partner churches came last May when 15 members of the Pastoral Leadership Development program accepted an invitation from the EKiR to study at the Pastoralakolleg in Barmen-Wuppertal and enjoy home stays with local pastors. During the visit they learned how the EKiR works, saw pastors and congregations in action, and had the extraordinary experience of visiting a Jewish synagogue and a Muslim mosque. Participants returned home with new perspectives on their own country, church, faith and personal habits.

Dave Carter said the experience gave him insight into the culture of his own congregation, Hebron UCC, whose members are largely German in heritage. Tom Benedict said that as a result of the visit to the synagogue he led a Passover meal as part of his church's (Asheboro UCC) Holy Week activities. Leroy Dukes initiated a dialogue between his congregation, Galilee UCC in Pamlico, NC, and Muslims in his area and held a joint worship service with a neighboring white United Methodist church. He said, "I came away from Germany thinking that if we could worship with others and try to understand each other's ways rather than to try

and change them, then we could [do that here.] When I was in Germany I got a better understanding of how Muslims thought and worship, so now I can appreciate them more rather than to talk negatively about them."

Visiting local parishes and ancient cathedrals gave the Americans insight into how much work the German churches do in their neighborhoods-helping the homeless, the sick, and the addicted, and a new appreciation for the long history of the Christian church in Europe. But the time there wasn't all about UCC folks hearing about the EKiR. The German hosts were curious to know more about American churches. During a tour of a sanctuary, which served as a multipurpose room, Roy Stokes' guide turned to him and asked, "Why do Americans worship their pulpit and communion table?" When Roy asked what she meant, the long-time church member said, "You feel like you cannot move these things in your sanctuary, you cannot even touch them! Why are they so sacred to you?" When Roy returned to Union Hill UCC in Sedley, VA, he started asking his parishioners similar questions, and for the first time in anyone's memory they've started moving the furnishings when the need arises!

All the participants agreed that the trip helped them to appreciate and respect other people and other religions. Tanya Best, from Mt. Calvary in Durham, reflected, "Just the fact we traveled to another country and saw all these different religions, which I know God is everywhere, but it was really obvious God really is everywhere. And not only that, but God is still speaking. It's not just what's hap-



Dave Carter / Licensed Min / Pastor of Hebron UCC, Winston-Salem, NC



Tanya Best / Associate Minister at Mt. Calvary UCC, Durham, NC



Roy Stokes / Licensed Min / Interim Pastor, Union Hill UCC, Sedley, VA

pening here at your church, or your denomination, or your country...God is everywhere and God is still speaking everywhere. I knew that before the trip, but to really feel it, see it, witness it...was awesome. God is an awesome God!"

contact Nora at 336-381-BLRC or blrcucc@yahoo.com.



Nora Driver Foust presents program ideas for BLRC Board of Advisors

Conference what a gem they have in central North Carolina."

The original gift from Lavonna Black in the 1990s included her family's two room retreat house and the lake along with 280+ acres. This cottage still stands on the property and is great for a pastor's mid-week get-a-way or a family bonding weekend. With a picnic shelter, grill and fire pit, its also perfect for small gatherings.

Across the lake, stands the picnic shelter and 4 cabins that were built by volunteers in the late 90s. "This shelter will seat about 100 and has bathrooms, showers and a kitchen, says Nora. "The

cabins combine to sleep 24. There is also plenty of open area for tent camping."

Black Lake's newest facility, Leonard Lodge, has a large main room perfect for almost anything and two smaller break-out rooms for smaller group meetings. "The main room can host your gathering of up to 160 at round tables and as many as 300, chairs only," Foust continues with excitement. "Leonard Lodge also has a large commercial kitchen."

To learn more about Black Lake Retreat Center and the ministry opportunities available there, check out the updated website at [www.blacklakeretreatcenter.org](http://www.blacklakeretreatcenter.org) or