Bishop’s installation Oct. 23

Installation service for the new bishop of the Oklahoma Area begins at 4 p.m. Oct. 23 in Tulsa at Asbury United Methodist Church. All are invited to attend that afternoon and join in celebrating the assignment of Bishop James “Jimmy” G. Nunn.

Twelve years have passed since Oklahoma United Methodists received a new episcopal leader. This should be quite a party.

The event is “a collective way to welcome and officially name him as our bishop, as a whole area,” said April Coates of the program planning team.

“We are his congregation, and he is our pastor.”

Bishop Nunn leads both the Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conferences, about 600 churches total.

This is an area-wide service, emphasizing Christian unity amid many kinds of diversity, Rev. Coates said.

Representatives from both conferences will present the bishop with unique gifts. A pastoral staff is being made by an OIMC member. Cookson Hills Center is sewing a stole.

Nunn will receive the gavel that retired Bishop Dan Solomon used during his eight years in Oklahoma, according to Joseph Harris, director of Communications.

Linda Harker, senior pastor of McFarlin UMC in Norman, will introduce the bishop. She is the new chairperson of the South Central Jurisdiction’s Committee on Episcopacy.

At the request of Bishop Nunn, the program also will commemorate a milestone for women in ministry. During 2016, the denomination is celebrating 60 years of ordination for women in Methodism.

Can’t attend in person? Watch the live stream at www.okumc.org.

Nunn will preside at Communion, which will be served by 30 current and retired clergy women, both deacons and elders.

Also at the bishop’s request, the offering will go to the Clergy Crisis Fund.

A celebration service is traditional in annual conferences when episcopal leadership changes, said Rev. Dr. Harris.

Few people can attend the jurisdictional (regional) conferences where bishops are elected. So this event offers people an opportunity to personally meet the new episcopal family.

Coates expressed her appreciation for the generous invitation by Asbury to host the installation.

Asbury UMC is in southeastern Tulsa, across the street from Union High School. Address is 6767 S. Mingo Rd.

On Nov. 6, the OIMC community will host an installation service at Smith Chapel on the Oklahoma City University campus.

Introducing 2 young leaders at HQ

Ramirez pursues innovations in ministry

Carlos Ramirez uses a ball chair and a sit/stand table in his streamlined office, befitting his work focus: innovation and leadership development at all levels within the Oklahoma Conference.

With a few computer keystrokes, he produces a digital map of a neighborhood. It shows more than you’ll see on a printed street map or, in some aspects, Google Earth. He’s added more relevant graphics: candles represent United Methodist churches; crosses, other churches; and push-pins, schools. Color-coding identifies ethnic minority clusters.

He clicks another symbol, and Census demographics pop up.

The interactive map he’s created is helping leaders assess how God is calling them forward in ministry.

“Seeing the maps provide lots of answers,” said Rev. Ramirez. “You get excited about your area of ministry.”

Rev. Ramirez saw just such enthusiasm when he met recently with 30 people at an Oklahoma City church. They had asked him: Can you help us to see where we’re going?

The map also can be configured for an entire city, a Missional Area, a district, or larger area.

“The balcony view” is vital for the new job of associate director of Leadership Development and Innovation. His office is at the United Methodist Ministry Center in Oklahoma City.

Belase takes on disciple-making task

To explain his role as the Conference’s new director of Discipleship, Derek Belase pointed to paragraph 122 in the denomination’s Book of Discipline. It lists the processes for carrying out the Church’s mission of making disciples. Among those: proclaim, lead, and nurture.

“That’s the steps; rinse and repeat,” said Rev. Belase, smiling.

The words are short, but the work isn’t simple.

“He’s really digging into discipleship,” said Craig Stinson, the director of Connectional Ministries who oversees Annual Conference Council staff.

SECTION 14 | OCTOBER 14, 2016
The Oklahoma United Methodist Contact

October 14, 2016

Into the unknown

BY BISHOP JIMMY NUNN

It is difficult to walk into an unknown place.

The challenge starts with finding a place to park. It is my first time to come. Questions crowd my mind. Where should I park? Are there marked or unmarked spots for people with special needs? What time does the program start? Is there a sign? What is the real start time, based on the number of cars in the lot? Sometimes there are very few cars and start time is only minutes away. Other times, all the choice spots are full.

Which entry do I use? Which door really is the front? The last thing I want to do is walk in and see everyone looking at me like I’m a fool.

And I’m not sure what to do with my children. Are they welcome in here? Is there a place for them? Where is the sign? How will I know they are safe? What will they be doing while we are here?

Another question quickly follows: What will I be doing while I’m here? How will I be greeted? I may not know anyone — or perhaps a few people, but certainly not many. As I enter, I am questioning myself. Could I belong to this group?

Greeters may say hello, but later to receive new people is to look at the church and the mission field. The contrast the perceptions of people both in congregation in order to compare and contrast the perceptions of people both in the church and the mission field.

The third step is to worship God with passion and excellence. I believe your church can grow.

The Oklahoma United Methodist Contact

Welcome, new students

This fall Oklahoma City University welcomed 314 freshmen, 209 transfer students, and 33 new international students into the university’s seven schools, an increase over the previous year. Additionally, 157 new students began their legal studies at OCU Law, and 36 students joined the inaugural class of the Physician Assistant (PA) Program. Increased recruitment efforts and new academic programs are credited with the positive growth.

Stars Week 2016 — Left, freshmen line up to touch the OCU Star and seal their pledge after the Matriculation service on Aug. 17. Above, underclassmen move into the residence halls during the week prior to the start of classes this fall. Below, new students are welcomed to campus by the First Year Experience Staff.

OCU ranks best in state

U.S. News & World Report again has ranked Oklahoma City University among the best colleges in the country. OCU scored the No. 23 spot in the listing of “Best Regional Universities in the West,” the highest placement of Oklahoma universities in that category.

The regional category is made up of universities that offer a full range of undergraduate and master’s programs. Along with the high regional ranking, OCU is one of only two schools in the state on the West regional universities “A+ Schools for B Students” list; ranks No. 13 for “Best Regional University for Veterans in the West,” rising seven places from last year and highest in the state; and is named on the “Most International Students” list.

The “A+ Schools for B Students” list commends the universities and colleges that accept outstanding applicants whose scores are not “A.” The schools included in this list see great potential in those students and help them achieve their goals.

U.S. News & World Report bases its rankings on various factors including graduation and retention rates, peer assessments, faculty resources, student selections, financial resources, and alumni giving.

This report comes on the heels of OnStage magazine’s ranking of top dance programs in the country. OCU’s Ann Lacy School of American Dance and Entertainment was ranked No. 2 in the nation, ahead of New York University and just behind Juilliard.

Moving to a new address? Call 405-530-2075 or send an email to communications@okumc.org.

Sign up for Contact Digest, a free e-newsletter, at www.okumc.org.

Send news to editor@okumc.org.

Next publication date: November 4, 2016.
A native of Mexico, the young adult pastored rural churches in far eastern and far western Oklahoma before his appointment in 2012 to the Office of Mission staff. His wife, Wendi Neal, is pastor of OKC-Mayfair Heights, and they have two children.

Craig Stinson, the Conference’s director of Connectional Ministries, oversees Annual Conference Council staff at the United Methodist Ministry Center. The LDMT is one programming branch of the Council.

“Leadership: I feel a lot of hope about it,” he said.

Work by the LDMT and Ramirez starts with the Conference’s Strategic Plan, said Rev. Stinson. Among the Plan’s goals are reaching younger, more diverse people; and recruiting, equipping, and deploying effective lay and clergy leadership.

“This all feels like alignment (with the Plan). It’s like when you’re in the dark and you’ve got a flashlight. You know the basic direction you’re supposed to head. You just step out, you go to where the light is, and then you go further. There probably are multiple paths, and that’s exciting.”

He continued, “If we’re successful in … releasing and deploying the giftedness of this wonderfully more diverse group of young adults, who do want to make a difference in the world, I think the churches will be a much more powerful force in our neighborhoods and towns than they are now.”

A series of podcasts is another creative way that Ramirez is expanding community in collaboration with LDMT.

Find “The Door Is Open” on Facebook, subscribe to the podcasts through iTunes, or go to www.TheDoorsOpen.org. Interviews address five general topics: income, education, religious affiliation, automation, and demographic changes in the U.S. A new podcast is uploaded about every two weeks.

Contact Ramirez at 405-530-2074 or cramirez@okumc.org.

—Holly McCray
Muskogee church and Langston campus ministry work to educate children

BY CHRIS SCHUTZ

The Wesley Foundation at Langston University hopes to repeat its summer program that focused on teaching school-age children about their spiritual gifts, the history of the African-American church in the United States, and ways to become leaders.

About 30 children, ranging from first graders to high schoolers, attended the IMPACT Academy, held in Muskogee at Spencer Memorial United Methodist Church, which is historically African-American, during a week in August.

About 15 members of the church helped out with the academy, said June Chubbuck, treasurer of the Wesley Foundation’s Board of Directors. LU is the only historically black college in Oklahoma.

Four young adults also helped, including Tierra Harris, a biology major at LU and a Wesley participant. Age 21, she graduated from Millwood High School in Oklahoma City.

She said her job was to "help students understand what the Bible is about and how you can use it in your everyday life."

She saw improvements in their attitudes. One self-conscious girl didn’t want to have her academy photo taken. Harris explained to her that “God made us all different shapes and sizes.”

The next day, the girl was ready for her photo, Harris said.

Some children came to the academy with little knowledge of any African-American history, Chubbuck said.

Among the topics they learned about was the forced integration of public schools. Especially younger children “were not aware of those kinds of conflicts — the way it was ‘back then,’” Chubbuck said.

The students also were surprised to learn “there were people within their own community that were so influential beyond Muskogee,” Chubbuck said. Among those leaders was Gloria Chisholm, a research scientist who helped develop night-vision goggles for use by the U.S. Air Force.

Speakers included IMPACT Academy director Debra HorseChief; Porter Reed, one of the few surviving Negro Leagues baseball players; retired educator DeRutha Richardson; musician Ray Davis; and Cecelia Brooks, pastor of Spencer Memorial UMC.

“They were excited to learn that even if you’re from a small town you can make a difference in the world,” Chubbuck said.

The academy was held at the Muskogee church because Rev. Brooks recently became pastor there. She is the previous director of the Wesley, which is the United Methodist campus ministry at Langston.

Emery Mason, superintendent of the Green Country District, visited the academy. He praised the program for giving the children a chance to hear from people in the Muskogee area who had excelled in various fields.

“The kids were just hanging on every word of those that were there to share,” Rev. Mason said. The students learned that they, too, can “have a wonderful life and do a great job. It really did encourage them.”

The program also encouraged them to “grow up as leaders in their churches,” Chubbuck said.

Juan Davis, associate director of the IMPACT Academy, directs a leadership game at Muskogee-Spencer Memorial UMC. A blindfolded student plays the “sheep” and has to guess which student is its shepherd by the sound of that person’s voice.

During the week, three students were baptized. And after the classes concluded, some of the children said they now understand more about spiritual gifts, communicating, and loving God.

The program was paid for with a $10,000 grant from the denomination’s General Board of Higher Education & Ministry and $450 from the Oklahoma Conference’s commission called SBC-21 (Strengthening the Black Church in the 21st Century).

Apportionment giving undergirds the work of both GBHEM and SBC-21.

If funding becomes available next year, the campus ministry at Langston will offer the academy for other churches in the Conference, engaging students of various ethnicities.

Five major topics were presented in Muskogee.

• “Spiritual Gifts”

• “ Estranged Heritage” (the aftermath of slavery and segregation and its effect on contemporary African-Americans)

• “Black Lives Matter” (meeting current African-American civic leaders and celebrating African-American leadership in education, arts, humanities, science, business, and social justice)

• “The Black Church in the 21st Century” (the legacy of slavery and segregation in church history)

• “Exploring God’s Call” (learning about ministry opportunities for laity and clergy)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

new director agreed their vision is “Oklahoma United Methodists growing in the likeness and image of God by loving God and neighbor via the Wesleyan means of grace and sharing that with others.”


Belase said they want to offer churches resources and pathways for disciple formation — and hope.

“You are going to hear more about what good is happening in Oklahoma,” he vowed. “Why talk about the declining ones? We know we’re in decline.”

He noted, “106 of our churches have grown over five years.”

He looks forward to reading “Feed me a story,” a new section of the charge conference form. It’s found in the pastor’s profile.

Belase “gleaned creativity and life from walking alongside new-church pastors” during eight years on the board of Congregational Development/New Faith Communities. The greatest lesson for him was: You must make disciples.

“No one church or social platform is going to” renew The United Methodist Church, he said.

“You must make disciples. Rinse and repeat.”

Belase said his parents modeled making a difference. He grew up in Carnegie, where his dad was fire chief and young Derrek went out with him on calls.

Before entering career ministry, he worked in criminal justice. He and his wife, Rebekah, are graduates of Saint Paul School of Theology. She is an ordained deacon, working for Church World Service. They have two children.

He also pastored at Wakita/Manchester and Stillwater-Highland Park.

He credits the Conference Strategic Plan and a consultation for helping Highland Park grow its ministry in a college town with more than one United Methodist church.

Highland Park formed connections with college students “who were from smaller expressions of church,” he said. “That’s when I really recognized that a plan is important.”

You can contact him at 405-530-2144 or dbelase@okumc.org. — Holly McClary

Employment

Two positions: Youth Director (full- or part-time) and Children & Family Ministry Director (part-time).

Fairview-First UMC. Resume to fairviewumc@sbcglobal.net or First United Methodist Church, P.O. Box 457, Fairview, OK 73737-0457.

Youth Director: Cushing-First UMC. Part-time. Contact Kathy Leitner at katleit2@aol.com or 918-225-5683.

Pianist: Crescent-First UMC. Part-time. Contact Rick Cato at rdcato_1@yahoo.com

Director of Student Ministry and Contemporary Worship: Lawton-Centenary UMC. Full-time. Resume to nquinn@lawtoncentenary.org

Choir director: Choctaw UMC. Part-time. Resume to Andy James at pastor@choctawumc.com

Appointment

Peter White, deacon, from Tulsa-First UMC associate pastor to Restore Hope Ministries chapel ministry coordinator, effective Sept. 1.
When we love one another, the darkness in our lives disappears and the light of life in Christ shines in.

–1 John 2:8

Volunteers and Baskets Needed!

We are accepting donated baskets through October 14. Volunteers can sign up at: http://goo.gl/eZg20a.

Thank you for your support!

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Providing Christian help, healing and hope to children and families in crisis to ensure a safe, healthy and spiritual future.

A bridge to faith
Heavener churches join hands as multi-ethnic ministry

BY CHRIS SCHUTZ

The two United Methodist congregations in Heavener — one English-speaking and one majority Hispanic — have built a bridge between one another and formed a new church.

They chose a new name, too. Faithbridge United Methodist Congregation held its first joint service Sept. 11 in the building that housed the former First UMC. Faithbridge will continue to meet there.

About 100 people attended that first service.

The merger has been a blessing, said Pastor Tim Boyer. “Both (congregations) have accepted it with love and accepted each other with love.”

On Sundays, two worship services are offered, with the choice of Spanish or English.

The Spanish-language service is led by Associate Pastor Castulo Garcia and meets in the church’s fellowship hall. Worship in English is held at the same time in the sanctuary, with Rev. Boyer preaching.

Faithbridge’s leaders are convinced that children are the key to a successful merger, so there is one “children’s church” ministry.

Children are “together in school. We wanted them to be together in church,” Boyer said. “That’s a big priority.”

Leaders believe the merged congregation also will be stronger in other ways, said Larry Bauman, superintendent of the Lake Country District. Previously the Hispanic congregation had been meeting in an aging, former Presbyterian Church facility and needed better space, and the Anglo congregation needed an infusion of energy.

“The challenge is always building understanding between different cultures,” especially when they don’t share a common first language, Rev. Bauman said.

Once a month there is a bilingual service, on Communion Sunday. For that time, songs are in Spanish and English and the words are projected in both languages. Boyer gives a “short meditation” instead of a full sermon, he said.

That Sunday, the congregations also collaborate in a meal featuring Mexican and American foods.

This month, the church plans to introduce wireless translating equipment, Boyer said. In the English-language service, worshippers using the headsets will hear Spanish translation.

In keeping with its dual-culture theme, Boyer hopes Faithbridge soon will offer classes in Spanish and in English for second-language learners.

The word Congregation is part of the name because its definition is “a group of people assembled together. It helps identify that we are a people assembled together for Jesus Christ; more than just a building, but a connected group,” Boyer said.

A Local Pastor, he was formerly a youth director at Ponca City-St. Paul’s UMC. He began preaching at Heavener in 2014.

He values highly several books he read before September’s official merger. He is pleased with Faithbridge’s early results. “We have reached new people. We find that to be exciting. Being in a multicultural church is exciting!”

Superintendent Bauman said the English-speaking worshippers number about 70, and about 30 people attend the Spanish service at this time.

Carlos Ramirez, a previous pastor at Heavener, attended the first joint service. “We are all one in Christ. What better way to show it?” he said.
Together, we do

La Lydia’s students put lessons into action after flooding

BY BETTY BACKSTROM
LOUISIANA CONFERENCE

The students of Lydia Patterson Institute in El Paso, Texas, know what it means to face challenges — and to overcome them.

Students of the school, a majority of whom live in Juarez, Mexico, leave their homes as early as 4 a.m. to travel to “La Lydia,” as the school is affectionately known. They cross a bridge at the Mexico/U.S. border, and when they arrive at the bilingual United Methodist school, scholarship students often work for an hour on chores.

“In exchange for tuition, these amazing kids perform kitchen chores or assist with mowing and keeping school grounds neat. Many of those same youth don’t leave campus until around 7 or 8 if they participate in sports or after-school activities,” said Tom Garmon, the school’s vice president of Religious Affairs and chaplain.

A group of students from La Lydia traveled to Louisiana recently to muck out several homes affected by historic floods in August. The young people were shocked and saddened to see the devastation there.

Felixhy Dominguez, a senior, said she “couldn’t believe” the loss she observed when the team arrived at its first work site. “As we were driving there, we saw so much furniture — everything that people owned, in huge piles out in front of their homes. “I kept thinking: This is somebody’s home. Someone was living here.”

The team decided to come to Louisiana while they were taking a Lay Ministry class.

“We were talking about how so many people in Louisiana had lost their houses in the floods. And then we talked about how the people in Louisiana have helped our school so much in the past. We all agreed that we should return the favor and come here to help,” said senior Rebeca Dominguez, after a day of mucking out a house.

The elderly owner of a Livingston Parish home that the students helped clean had received no help since the floods hit.

There was so much mold that the kids had to wear Tyvek suits, respirators, goggles, and even shoe covers to do the hard work of mucking the woman’s home. We pulled up carpet, pulled down walls, and carried all of her belongings out of the house,” said Rev. Garmon.

The owner of the first home worked on by the team also expressed her thankfulness. “Even though she was going through hard times, she was really nice, and she was still smiling. It impresses me how she was dealing with this,” said one student.

“God is there when we need help. And somehow, God sent us to help her,” the student said.

Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey of the Louisiana Conference visited the third work site while the students were there. “So, when they decided to make the 17-hour trip to give back to the people of Louisiana in an expression of thanksgiving for the support they have received, the story of extraordinary young people — most who are Mexican citizens — is told once again,” Bishop Harvey said.

La Lydia is a mission of the South Central Jurisdiction and is supported by Apportionments and other contributions.

(Excerpted from Sept. 22 story on the Louisiana Conference website)
MORE

The impact of 12.4 million United Methodists, in 136 countries, is phenomenal. You bless the work of the Church for the love of Christ when you support the shared giving that we call Apportionments. We connect globally through 7 General Church Apportionments. Learn more at www.umcgiving.org.

Oklahoma’s 2017 share: $1,623,014. This fund is the financial lifeline for a long list of missions and ministries throughout the denomination. This vital fund helps to build new churches, pays missionary salaries, expands Bible studies, provides leadership for youth ministry, supports peace and justice advocacy, and so much more.

5. The Interdenominational Cooperation Fund.
Oklahoma’s 2017 share: $42,872. This fund enables United Methodists to have a presence and a voice in the activities of several national and worldwide ecumenical groups. It provides the UM share of their basic budgets and pays travel expenses of UM representatives.

6. The Episcopal Fund.
Oklahoma’s 2017 share: $494,641. Bishops are an integral part of the spiritual and administrative leadership of the Church. We elect and consecrate bishops to speak to and from the Church. This fund pays their salaries, covers their office/travel expenses and health benefits, and more. 

FAREWELL — In New York City, the General Board of Global Ministries on Sept. 27 celebrated the rich history of Methodist mission work, as part of final preparations to leave the agency’s home office since 1959.

By Nov. 1, GBGM will complete the move of its U.S. headquarters to Atlanta, Ga. A few executives will stay for work related to the United Nations.

Also remaining in New York City will be the National Office of United Methodist Women, which previously was part of GBGM. In 2012, UMW became an independent body.

The Atlanta site is operating, and many of the staff who accepted invitations to make the transition already have moved there. Others, including 39 support personnel, were not invited to move.

In 2014, the board of directors approved the move and also establishment of offices in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. (United Methodist News Service)

PIPELINE PROTEST — The two top executives of the General Board of Church and Society recently traveled to Standing Rock in North Dakota to be with the Standing Rock Sioux Nation and the Six Council Fires, and with all those engaged in peaceful protest and resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Susan Henry-Crowe called all United Methodists to also stand in solidarity. She pointed to UM resolutions “Caring for Creation: Our Call to Stewardship and Justice” and “Environmental Racism.”

Also traveling there in support have been members of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference.

David Wilson, OIMC superintendent, said 200 tribes are represented at the encampment.

He sees action and support as vital to the integrity of the denomination. The Church “has been on this act of repentance journey. If we are sincere about being in community with Native people … this is a great time for us to put our words into action.”

Video of the United Methodist presence at Standing Rock, produced by the Dakotas Conference: https://vimeo.com/182515416

GOAL — In an area where green space is hard to find, the new soccer field on the Gethsemane campus of St. Luke’s UMC in Houston, Texas, is rightly referred to as the “Field of Dreams.”

Pastor David Horton admits, “I knew soccer was huge in the multinational communities around our campus, but, initially, I did not realize how huge. In the home countries of (our) first-generation immigrant neighbors … children learn soccer around the same time they learn how to walk.”

In August, the church hosted a Soccer Field Grand Opening Celebration by partnering with Houston’s professional soccer team to promote clinics and activities.

“The dream for the soccer field is … that it might be a mission to the ends of the earth in our very own backyard,” said the pastor. (UMNS, Sept. 29)

NEW CHRISTIANS — Just eight months after launching worship, Northwest Minneapolis United Methodist Ministry baptized 18 new Christians. The Hmong ministry at Robbinsdale is one of the Minnesota Conference’s newest church starts and is supported by the Conference-wide campaign Reach•Renew•Rejoice. (Minnesota Conference news, Sept. 22)

RETIRING CLERGY — Across 10 years, the average retirement age for United Methodist elders has gone from 64 to 66, according to the newest Clergy Age Trends Report by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership. The Lewis Center analyzed data provided by Weshpath Benefits and Investments (formerly General Board of Pension and Health Benefits).

Church law allows pastors who are officially retired to continue to be appointed, though they aren’t guaranteed a pension contribution and housing allowance. Such pastors aren’t reflected in the Lewis Center study. (UMNS, Sept. 21)
“Music is my life, my peace, my freedom, and my heartbeat”

Music is a gift that can affect any life and unite all kinds of people. Music is the heartbeat that pushes on in a ministry here in Oklahoma. El Sistema Oklahoma is an impressive program established in Oklahoma City, supported by St. Luke’s United Methodist Church and the Wanda L. Bass School of Music at Oklahoma City University.

**MUSICAL CITIZENS**

“The mission of El Sistema Oklahoma is to serve the community by engaging children within an ensemble-based music program so they can share the joy of music making and grow as responsible citizens.”

—WWW.ELSISTEMAOK.ORG

El Sistema Oklahoma is impacting 220 children daily in the third through ninth grades and developing in them the skills and tools to express themselves and find personal fulfillment by learning to play an instrument. Music has the power to transform lives, empowering children beyond their wildest dreams.

**DO YOU WANT TO TELL A BETTER STORY?**

El Sistema Oklahoma is partially supported by funds from a grant established by an individual and managed by the Foundation. You have the ability to support stories like this with a gift from your estate. Will you consider telling a BETTER STORY?

For information on how you can tell a BETTER STORY through a legacy gift, contact David Battles at 800-259-6863 or dbattles@okumf.org.

(Title quote by Maliah, eighth grader, cello, El Sistema Oklahoma)

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**CJAMM’S New Day Camp**

**Volunteer: ‘I can’t wait to go again’**

BY ELLEN LYONS

I hear stories that often include the phrase “I felt God’s call” or “God spoke to me” so often that I find myself slightly skeptical of God’s involvement in the event. With that said, lately when I am asked to move outside my normal routine, I find myself responding, “Is this you, God? Are you speaking to me? Is this a call?”

Such was the case recently when I began to learn more about the Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries (CJAMM) of the Oklahoma Conference.

Through my involvement with United Methodist Women, I was introduced to Exodus House and New Day Camp, both part of CJAMM.

At Edmond-First United Methodist Church, my UMW small group (the Seeker’s Circle) had formed as a book study circle, and we read selections from the UMW Reading List.

We read a book about prison ministry and decided that offered us a mission opportunity. To help us figure out how to get involved, we invited guests from Exodus House to a UMW meeting.

Exodus House provides temporary housing and help for people newly released from prison. New Day Camps are for children of incarcerated parents.

A few months later, I attended a district UMW meeting; the speaker was a New Day Camp representative.

At that meeting, I knew for certain that New Day Camp was indeed God’s call for me.

I sent an email to the Conference office, indicating my interest in volunteering, and quickly received sign-up forms. The process included a background check.

Fast-forward to June 24, the final day of camp. There was no doubt in my mind that I had been placed intentionally at New Day Camp. I had been privileged to be God’s servant to the children there.

The program was held at Cross Point Camp, the United Methodist facility beside Lake Texoma.

Three girls were in my care almost continuously. We were in a small group that stayed together for all the daytime activities and included two boys, cared for by another leader. In addition, the girls and I were housed in a cabin with eight more girls and a Leader-in-Training, serving there with me.

Typically I arose early for some quiet time, then woke and assisted the girls getting ready for the day, and then met up with the boys for breakfast. Our scheduled activities included crafts, service projects, small-group lessons, focus sessions (counseling), swimming, hiking, outdoor games, and worship.

I hadn’t been a mom to 7- and 8-year-olds in quite some time, but that didn’t matter. I experienced extraordinary patience, calm, and understanding as I moved through the joys and challenges of each day. I had more energy than I thought possible!

In the cabin at the end of each day, the Leader-in-Training and I gathered up the girls for prayer during the evening, we talked about the day, both the good and the bad. I told the girls that the blanket had been prayed over before I brought it to camp — that prayers had been said for these young campers even before we met.

I told them that I was certain God placed me in camp so I could meet each of them and that they will always be in my heart.

In my private time after we ended each day with prayer and hugs, I thanked God for New Day children and adults.

I received a letter from one camper’s grandmother. “He was so excited about it that he has said many times that he can’t wait to go again next year,” she wrote.

My sentiments exactly; I can’t wait to go again next year!