

Older adult ministry: Georgia church helps senior citizens improve driving skills

By Fran Coode Walsh

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (UMNS) – In a shelf-lined library at Alpharetta United Methodist Church, 20 senior adults gather around a table with workbooks and pencils for a quick tune-up on life-saving rules of the road that most learned first as teenagers.

Participant Sue Cook says she's gotten some "very good information" from the church's AARP Driver Safety Program course.

"It would pay (for) all the senior citizens to come and do this," says Cook, who is also a member of the suburban Atlanta church.

The nation's first and largest refresher course for drivers age 50 and older, the program emphasizes how to operate your vehicle more safely in today's increasingly challenging driving environment and offers tips on how to adjust to age-related changes in vision, hearing and reflexes. Graduates can earn multiyear discounts from auto insurance companies in most states.

The United States has about 28 million drivers over the age of 65, according to the American Automobile Association. Traffic studies show that older seniors are nine times more likely to die in a crash than those ages 25 to 69.

Ron Feldman, 71, wants to do his part to improve those odds. A member at the church and a certified instructor for the program, Feldman tells his students

he has a vested interest in their success - literally.

"I tell them in the class, 'I want you to learn how to drive well not only to protect your life, but protect me - because I'm walking the streets, I'm driving the car, I'm out there on the road, too,'" says Feldman.

Never too old to learn

Open to drivers of all ages, the course costs \$10 and consists of two four-hour seminars. Feldman has taught it five times at sites around Alpharetta such as the local hospital.

The purpose of the AARP Driver Safety Program, says Feldman, is "to have seniors recognize that their ability to drive changes from when they first got their license, in some cases 50 or 60 years ago. You're tested once to learn how to drive, and you're forever certified. Now the problem is you're not the same driver you were 50 or 60 years ago."

A driver's manual offers reminders about good driving habits including keeping proper following distance at all times and the safest way to change lanes and make turns at intersections. It also goes over the effects of medications on driving, limiting distractions such as smoking and cell phone use, and properly using safety belts, air bags and anti-lock brakes. Video clips illustrate safe driving techniques.

"We are driving bigger, heavier, faster cars and we are driving faster roads and multiple road



UMNS photos by Ronny Perry
Edith Ennis of Alpharetta United Methodist Church studies the AARP safe driving manual.

capacity," says Feldman. "It's not like it used to be when ... our grandmother lived on the corner, and two doors away were the one son and across the street was another and the drugstore was right around the corner and they could walk to the grocery store. Now you really feel more isolated if you can't drive because everything is so far away."

Pat Oxford says she learned a lot by taking the course, even though she's been driving for decades. "I was really amazed, but a lot of accidents are caused by left-hand turns and people thinking they have the right-of-way," she says.

Fastened securely in her gray Mazda 6, Oxford carefully looks left, then right, then left again before pulling onto a busy road in Alpharetta. A volunteer at a nearby hospital emergency room, she says the course definitely has changed her approach behind the wheel.

"I know the results of bad choices and bad judgments in driving. And I just think that every time you take it you learn something new," she says.

Adjusting for age

Cases of elderly drivers making costly errors often make the news, but Feldman says those reports shouldn't discourage seniors from driving.

"I don't emphasize what we're losing as much as I emphasize ... what you still have left and to take care of the stuff that you still have left ... so that you continue driving," he says.

Knowing when to give up the keys is important, too, says Feldman, who peppers his presentation with personal anecdotes. He recalls how his own mother-in-law had a tense encounter on the highway while driving with her grandson in the car.

"She knew there was a tollgate there. But what did she do? She went through at 75 miles an hour. Well, it not only frightened my mother-in-law, but can you imagine the face of the person in that tollgate when she went through there? And ... my son ... was sitting in the passenger seat ... hoping she would make it through those two gates."

The scare was enough to convince his mother-in-law to give up her keys. "Sometimes it does take one incident like that ... to alter your vision on what's really safest," he says. ■

Walsh is supervising producer of UMTV, a unit of United Methodist Communications based in Nashville, Tenn.

Environmental stewardship: United Methodists join movement to care for the planet

By John Gordon

EMPORIA, Kan. (UMNS) – A symbol of environmental stewardship, the Rev. Mic McGuire's bright yellow Beetle glides to a stop in front of Grace United Methodist Church.

"I think a lot of people are really tired of putting three-dollar-a-gallon gasoline into their car," says McGuire, who turned a used, rusty car into a model of efficiency that runs off an electric motor instead of a gasoline engine.

Now, instead of stopping at the pump to fill up, McGuire plugs in the car at his home to recharge overnight. He's able to reach a top speed of more than 50 miles an hour but finds the 30-mph range sufficient for making rounds in his small town.

"I think that the war in Iraq just convinced me that we need to do something about how we share the planet, how we participate in a global world," he says. "The United States has been talking about how they needed to be less dependent on foreign oil for years."

A sound investment

McGuire spent about \$6,000 to convert the 1971 Super Beetle, enlisting the aid of church member Tony Tollett, who works on cars as a hobby. After working for months to replace the motor, install batteries and repair the brakes, they painted the car a bright yellow with the words "450 amps" on the side.

Curbing pollution was among the rewards for their efforts. "We're just choking ourselves to death. We're killing the environment and everything else," Tollett says. McGuire doesn't miss those weekly trips to the gasoline station either.

"You can kind of do the math. I'm spending probably three to five, six cents for electricity per mile," he says.

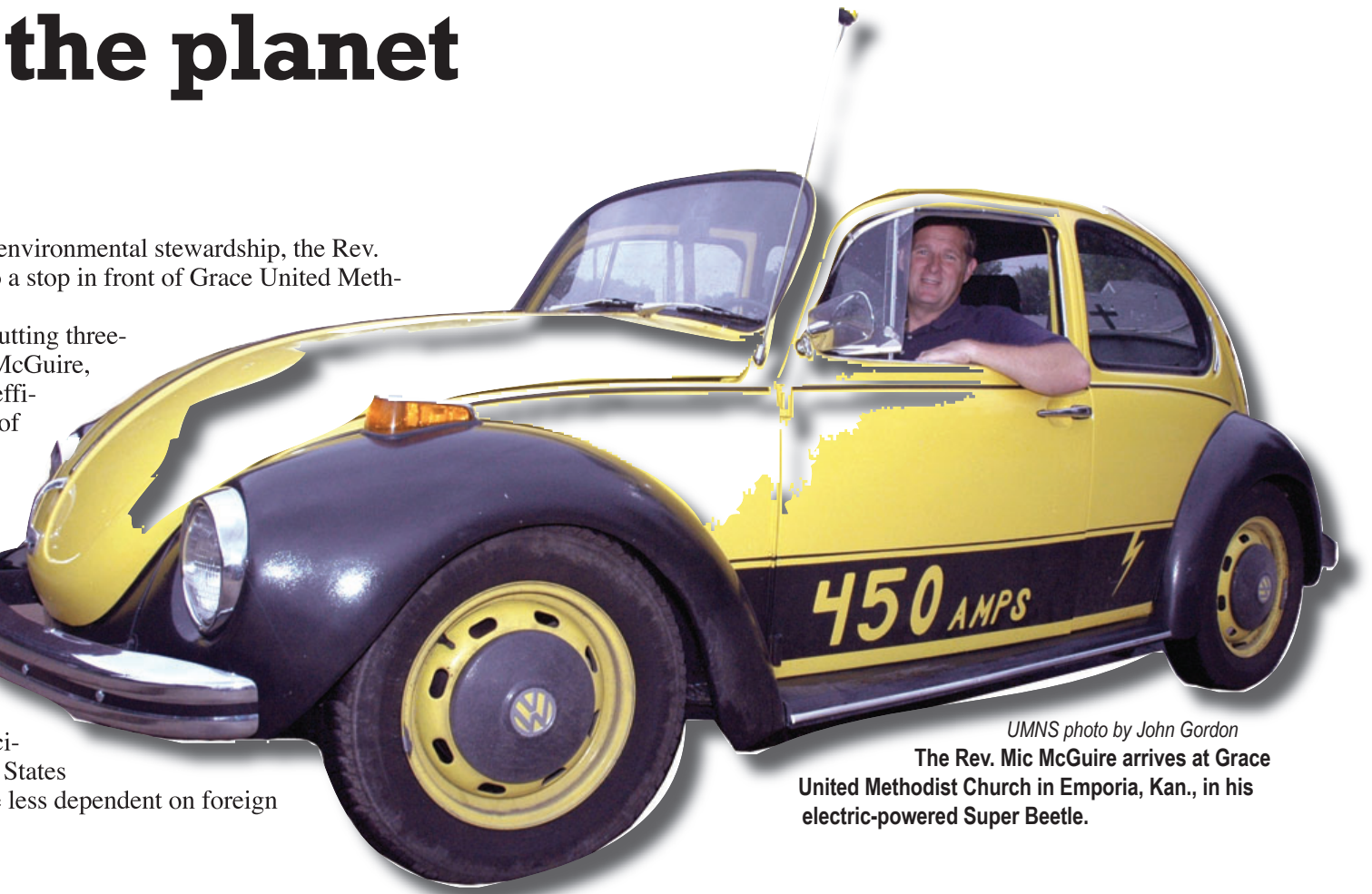
McGuire plans to donate the savings to charitable projects such as buying food for the hungry. He also expects to save on automobile maintenance, since there's no oil to change.

The car uses nine eight-volt batteries to power the engine and a separate 12-volt battery for turn signals and accessories.

As he hums along the road quietly, McGuire gets his share of second looks. "I don't think I hide the fact that I was trying to make a statement, trying to get people's attention," he says.

It's a message that resonates with members of his church.

Melinda Groves now uses fluorescent light bulbs inside her home to save electricity. She also hung a clothesline for drying clothes and bought a push reel mower. "If a



UMNS photo by John Gordon
The Rev. Mic McGuire arrives at Grace United Methodist Church in Emporia, Kan., in his electric-powered Super Beetle.

The Rev. Bryan Fink of Fayetteville, Ark., rides to work on a scooter that gets 80 miles to the gallon.

UMNS photo by Anthony Reyes, Northwest Arkansas Times

bunch of individuals do something, we can make a difference," she says. Facility operations also have gradually been adapted at Grace United Methodist Church.

The church recycles printer cartridges and started using LED lights in exit signs to conserve electricity. Member Lola Collinge is lobbying to get rid of Styrofoam plates and cups in the church kitchen to keep from clogging landfills.

"I think the world is beautiful," she says. "I think we want to leave it for our future generations so that they won't wonder, 'Mama, mama, what's a tree?'"

Some members say their next cars will be electric vehicles or hybrids. Others recycle plastics and newspapers.

'Scooter boy'

United Methodists everywhere are responding in similar ways, as the denomination's "Social Principles" call on members to make lifestyle changes "to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world."

In Fayetteville, Ark., the Rev. Bryan Fink, pastor of discipleship at Central United Methodist Church, now drives a motor scooter to work.

"After about a year with the scooter, I've put about 2,000 miles on it," says Fink. "Some people call me 'scooter boy' now."

Fink drives his scooter to work, on errands and even when making pastoral hospital visits. Filling it up only costs about \$3 - compared to \$70 he used to spend filling his van.

"I thought that was ridiculous," he says of the escalating gasoline prices. He notes that the church also is trying to sell its gas-guzzling van.

Meanwhile, back in Kansas, McGuire says his electric Beetle may not be the ultimate solution to pollution and energy problems. But for short trips and driving home a message, it's ideal, he says.

"I just think it is one way in which I, personally, can be more responsible about taking care of the planet," he says, "as opposed to just using it and maybe abusing it." ■

Gordon is a freelance producer and writer based in Marshall, Texas.

Editor's Note: Holston ministry leaders have recently assembled a Task Force on Environment that will address ways in which churches can demonstrate environmental stewardship. Information will be provided in a future edition.



Senior adults brush up on their driving skills and knowledge in the library of Alpharetta (Ga.) United Methodist Church, where the AARP Driver Safety Program is taught by church member and certified instructor Ron Feldman.