

Despite winter headaches, churches find opportunities to share the love of Christ

By Annette Spence

- **A home-cooked dinner for utility workers on Christmas Day.** – *Dickenson, Va.*
- **Extra loads of firewood for people who need heat.** – *Greeneville, Tenn.*
- **Hot coffee and a warm place to sleep for stranded travelers.** – *Tazewell, Va.*

In an unusually cold and snowy winter, Holston churches are finding opportunities – amongst the icy roads and frozen pipes – to share the love of Christ.

But prior to the joys of ministry, many have experienced winter headaches. Parking lots have been salted and meetings re-scheduled. Pastors have felt forced to cancel worship services, even in the deep-south part of the Holston Conference.

At Sand Mountain UMC in Trenton, Ga., the Rev. Wayne Cook called off worship on Jan. 10 because of the icy roads leading up the mountain. “We don’t need anyone taking a chance to get to church,” the Chattanooga District pastor announced on Facebook.

At Norton UMC in Big Stone Gap District, Pastor Ken Taylor blamed snowy roads and a power outage for the cancellation of the Dec. 27 worship. At First Gatlinburg UMC on Jan. 6, Tracy Starker mourned the cancellation of Wednesday night Bible study and Tuesday afternoon delivery of groceries to weekly motel residents.

Yet, other churches experienced blessings along with the inconveniences. In the week before Christmas, thousands of southwest Virginians lost their power. Three Bells UMC in Big Stone Gap District opened its building as a shelter to the community of Duffield, Va.

By Christmas Day, the power was still out near Dickenson, Va., and utility workers from four states were trying to repair the damage. Members at Sulphur Springs UMC went into action.



ABOVE: Mt. Olivet UMC of Tazewell District hosts stranded travelers, keeping them warm with blankets and supper.

With turkey and ham donated by Food City, about 30 church members prepared a Christmas dinner and supper for 150 utility workers in the fellowship hall. An additional 100 neighbors without electricity in their homes came for dinner as well. Later, Sulphur Springs youth delivered boxed meals to about 50 homebound senior citizens.

“It was a great blessing, that we had the opportunity to do this on Christmas Day,” said Pastor Charlie Killen of the Russellville Circuit, Abingdon District. “We took \$300 out of the church budget to pay for the food. By the end of the day, it was donated back to us.”

Warm offerings

In Greeneville, Tenn., Christ UMC is leading a firewood ministry that the church started last year. But with the severity of this year’s winter, the ministry is working overtime and involving other churches.

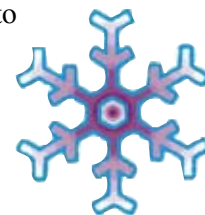
“There’s nothing like working outside when it’s 15 degrees,” said Greg Isom, who helped deliver 20 loads to needy neighbors on Jan. 9. “We were delivering it as fast as we could get it split. We’ve got to have a big day of hauling and splitting next week to try and stock it back up.”

Also participating in the ministry are Asbury UMC, Trinity UMC, and Cherokee Circuit, all of the Morristown District. Five non-United Methodist churches have joined in, too, along with inmates from the local jail. The group receives names of families depending on firewood for heat from the Greene County Food Pantry, according to the Rev. Ginger Isom of Christ UMC.

“Last winter, we delivered 200 loads of wood. This year it will be 350 to 400,” she said.

In Tazewell, Va., Mt. Olivet UMC recognized a ministry opportunity when a tractor trailer loaded with cattle slid off and blocked the only road into Burkes Garden on Dec. 18. The church building was opened for six motorists who were forced to wait until the truck could be moved the following morning. A neighbor took blankets and pillows off her

beds and sliced a ham and bread for the stranded guests, according to the Rev. Rodney Lawson. Church members



dropped by to make sure the visitors were comfortable and to offer hot coffee and breakfast.

The following morning, with 24 inches of snow on the ground, neighbors helped the driver maneuver his truck back onto the road, and the guests were on their way. “A port in the storm of life is Jesus

Christ,” said Lawson. “It is so wonderful when one of his church buildings can be a port in the winter storm.”

At your service

Other Holston ministries also reported their winter-weather ministries. After receiving a strong response from Holston churches during the Christmas outreach, Jubilee Project has been better equipped to meet the community’s needs, according to Doris Burton.

“We’ve had a few problems with families with broken water pipes, low wood supplies, and other needs related to the cold,” she said. “We help where we can and try to keep our finger in the dike. Our kids, however, are keeping warm with the blankets and coats that [Holston churches] provided for them and their families at Christmas.”

On a day when Chattanooga was dizzy with the unusual prospect of snow accumulation, the University of Tennessee cancelled its classes. The Wesley Foundation promptly stepped up with an irresistible invitation.

“It’s 29 degrees, the snow is falling, and the sky is gray,” the Rev. Keith Moore wrote on the Wesley Foundation Facebook page on Jan. 7. “Don’t you wish somebody had a nice bowl of hot soup waiting for you and a warm fire to sit beside?”

At day’s end, the Wesley Foundation’s Jackie Watson reported that the “major storm had not materialized.”

However, the students “enjoyed the extra time off” and their special guests were some UTC janitors who stopped by for a bowl of soup and Christian fellowship. ■



Greg Isom of Christ UMC bares 15-degree weather to cut firewood.



Firewood photos by Dennis Loy for The Call

ABOVE: Volunteers from Christ, Asbury, and Cherokee Circuit – Greeneville churches from the Morristown District – work overtime to cut and deliver firewood to families referred by the food pantry. **BELOW:** Students at the UTC Wesley Foundation share Christian fellowship on a snow-expectant afternoon.



ABOVE: Sulphur Springs UMC of Abingdon District feeds Christmas dinner to utility workers who came to restore power to southwest Virginia. **RIGHT:** French Broad UMC of Knoxville District sends in a beautiful seasonal sight.



Don't be shy! New conference will put legs on 'Offer Them Christ'

Feb. 19-20
in Knoxville



Every year, Holston Conference awards the Harry Denman Evangelism Award to a clergy, lay, and youth member dedicated to reaching people for Christ. In 2004, the lay winner was Ronnie Collins.

Today, Collins is the Rev. Collins, associate pastor at First Hillsville United Methodist Church, Wytheville District. He's also chair of the Witness Ministry Team, which has created a new evangelism conference and a subsequent "50 Days of Evangelism" campaign. The team hopes the effort will capture the Denman spirit and put legs on Holston's ongoing "Offer Them Christ" mission.

The Holston Evangelism Conference will be held Feb. 19-20 at Cokesbury Center in Knoxville, Tenn. Speakers include Holston's own Bishop James Swanson and the Rev. Rudy Rasmus, senior pastor at St. John's UMC in Houston, Texas. Rasmus led his congregation from nine members in 1992 to 9,000 today.

Also appearing is the Rev. Bob Pierson, Oklahoma pastor and author of "Needs-Based Evangelism: Becoming a Good Samaritan Church."

Collins said that after he won the Denman award, he "read everything he could find" about the man whose passion was faith sharing.

"It just gave me a burden for lost people," he said. "I hope this conference will do the same for others. This really is a celebration of Harry Denman's life."

"What the Holston Evangelism Conference will help us remember, I pray, is that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever," said the Rev. Amy Rollins Probst, senior pastor at Broadway UMC, Maryville District, and a member of the Witness Team. "The good news of Jesus Christ is the same – even when we have to find new ways to share the old, old story."

Participants will learn that going door-to-door to invite people to church still works for some, while online social networking can be used to reach others, Collins said. The evangelism conference features an optional "Grace Bags" mission project for Knoxville's homeless.

Following the conference, Holston churches will participate in a 50 Days of Evangelism campaign beginning Easter Sunday, April 4, and concluding on Pentecost Sunday, May 23, with the goal of baptizing 3,000 people. More information will be provided in *The Call* e-news.

Registration fee is \$30 per person, with a maximum cost of \$100 per church. Information and online registration are available at <http://www.holston.org/ministries/connectional-ministries/evangelism-witness/> or call toll-free (866) 690-4060. Registration deadline is Feb. 15. ■