mydistrict

BIG STONE GAP

Nancy Holmes, age 62, has been a Church and Community worker for seven years. She is a trustee of the United Methodist Church and has attended First UMC for 42 years. She is a parishioner of the district office.

1. Abingdon
2. Big Stone Gap
3. Burbage
4. Chatsworth
5. Damascus
6. Marion
7. Mt. Airy
8. Mt. Olive
9. Mt. Zion
10. Narrows
11. Tazewell
12. Wytheville

Big Stone Gap District is one of 12 districts in Holston Conference. It includes 99 charges, 81 churches, and one mission outreach. The Virginia-based district includes all of the City of Norton; all of Wise, Lee, Scott, and Dickenson Counties; and a small part of Washington and Russell Counties.

- Largest membership church: Gate City, with 469
- Largest average worship attendance: Hillston Memorial, with 220
- Smallest membership church: Robinson Memorial and Shale are tied with 9
- Smallest average worship attendance: Robinson Memorial with 6
- Oldest church: Fort Gibson, founded in 1786
- Youngest church: Three Bees, founded in 1981

Congregations with the largest percentage growth: McClure (Dickenson County) with 14 percent, Dungannon with 9 percent, and Spark's Chapel with 9 percent

Who’s the boss? District superintendent is the Rev. Dan Taylor, an African American from Chatsworth, Tennessee, who now lives in an area that is 97 percent white. Administrative assistant is Beverly Crabtree, a Big Stone Gap native and member of Allen UMC. The district office is located at 101 Gilley Avenue East in a 45-year-old house across the street from Trinity UMC. The district office has occupied the house since 1986.

Small is cool: The district is the smallest in Holston, in population and total church members (6,301). The congregations are also comparatively small in numbers – if not in terms of ministry. “While they may be small in size, they get a lot done,” says former District Superintendent Dorinda Humphreys (1999-2001).

Proud to be from BSG: Church members are proud of their coal-mining heritage. The building of coal camps in Southwest Virginia began in the 1800s, peaking in the 1920s. These homes still exist today, although many of the mines have closed. Still, it’s common to see customers at Food City with faces blackened by coal dust, says Beverly Crabtree. “It’s like stripes on a military uniform. Coal miners still command a lot of respect, and we always say a little prayer for them, remembering those who have lost their lives before.”

A statue in Miners Park, in Big Stone Gap, recognizes the area’s mining history.

Keep on the Sunny Side: A.P. and Sara Carter of country music fame were members of Mt. Vernon UMC and are buried in the cemetery. Today, their granddaughter and great-grandchildren remain active in the church. Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash bought the old Carter home place about a half mile from the church, sometimes visiting Mt. Vernon before they died. In 1981, the Cashes taped a TV Christmas special at Mt. Vernon. If you were a tourist you might consider:

- Weekly concerts at the Carter Family Fold in Hiltson
- Powell Valley Overlook in Norton
- Trail of the Lonesome Pine: outdoor drama in Big Stone Gap
- Southwest Virginia Museum in Big Stone Gap
- Appalachia, considered to be an “exact era town” of the late 1800s

Best-kept ministry secret: Churches are dedicated to Camp Fort Blackmore, which is not supported by the conference but by the district. For two weeks each summer, BSG churches provide a free day camp for the community. As many as 150 children attend.

The district is known for:
- Its response to high rates of unemployment, suicide, and drug abuse. Numerous ministries are geared to the community’s needs, including a district “disciplinary fund” for utilities and rent payments; food pantries sponsored by Trinity and Midway Memorial.
- Free Thursday night dinners at First Pennington Gap;
- A Thanksgiving dinner at Norton Church; leaders from Norton and Pleasant Hill have also started a suicide-prevention ministry, and the district benefits from the ministry of Nancy Hobbs. As a Church and Community Worker, Hobbs serves hundreds by facilitating the collection of garden seeds, school supplies, Christmas gifts, food, and clothing.

Best place to eat after church: In Big Stone Gap, wordspigers might choose Little Mexican or the old-timey Mutual Pharmacy. Virginians in Norton and Wise like their meat well-done at Prime Rib or Bonanza. Pastor Randy Powers of Mt. Vernon UMC locals for soup beans or fried fish at Pop’s fish and seafood restaurant across the state line in Kingsport, Tennessee.

Remember our connections: The district is home to the Wesley Foundation at University of Virginia College at Wise, and to the historic Jonesville Camp Meeting, held nearly every summer since 1810.

Safe sanctuaries

The balancing act between showing hospitality and protecting children

By John Shawer and Annette Spence

The Open House Month in the United Methodist Church, a time when we emphasize hospitality to visitors and newcomers. It’s also a time when the debate over immigration reform is heating up.

Since 1980, the United Methodist Church has issued statements of support for immigrants and refugees declaring that “being an undocumented person is not a crime.” And yet, many United Methodists ask how the church can support someone who is disobeying the laws of the United States. (See related stories, page 9.)

Here in Holston, congregations are launching a new year of children’s and youth activities, while trying to welcome new communities of immigrants into their churches. Some are discovering what could be conflicting principles.

For instance, how can a church protect children with “Safe Sanctuaries” policies, without excluding immigrants and international students from some of their activities?

The rub lies in a Safe Sanctuaries policy that recommends background checks for staff and volunteers who work directly with children and youth, in order to reveal any history of child abuse or violent crime.

In 2004, the Holston Annual Conference adopted a Safe Sanctuaries resolution that made child abuse prevention policies mandatory in each church by fall 2005.

Most Holston churches followed through on training and implementing the policies. According to the Rev. Dan Gray, coordinator of youth ministries, “The rub lies in a Safe Sanctuaries policy that recommends background checks for staff and volunteers who work directly with children and youth, in order to reveal any history of child abuse or violent crime. In 2004, the Holston Annual Conference adopted a Safe Sanctuaries resolution that made child abuse prevention policies mandatory in each church by fall 2005. Most Holston churches followed through on training and implementing the policies, according to the Rev. Dan Gray, coordinator of youth ministries.”

Safe Sanctuaries’ policies are derived from guidelines of the same name.

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