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The Grand Parkway Ride: Methodists Help to Organize Unique Cycling Fundraiser to Fight Human Trafficking

On your mark... get set, and pedal over to the once-in-a-lifetime biking event planned for March 19 before the newest segment of The Grand Parkway opens in North Houston.

TAC leaders helped form a unique partnership between the Texas Department of Transportation, YMCA, Zachry-Odebrecht Parkway Builders and the United Methodist Church to generate fun –and funds for a great cause.

Everyone hates traffic – especially the atrocities of human trafficking. So what better way to publicize the need to stop this kind of “traffick” than to host a unique cycling fundraiser on a major new thoroughfare before it is open to traffic?

This one-of-a-kind opportunity, “The Grand Parkway Ride” is fast approaching. Registration is required, and opens to the public on February 29 on the web site: www.thegrandparkwayride.com.

The Backstory

Truth be told, cycling enthusiast Morris Matthis, Central North District Superintendent, has been eyeing the construction on the Grand Parkway for over a year, with this very goal in mind. “I called a friend at the county commissioner’s office,” he shares, “and told him about my weird fundraising idea. I thought he might hang up on me but, instead, he thought it was the coolest idea ever, and he connected me to someone at the Texas Department of Transportation to keep the conversation going.” Morris put together a leadership team for the event, including Rev. Susan Kent, associate pastor of **The Woodlands UMC**, and Cissa Madero, regional marketing and communications manager of the YMCA of Greater Houston.

“We kept moving ahead with logistics and details,” adds Morris, “for another six months, not knowing if it would ever become a reality, so it was a bit of an emotional rollercoaster of stops and starts but finally got the green light in mid-February.” Publicity for the fundraising ride launched via the event website and on biking enthusiast Facebook pages, reaching thousands of people almost overnight.

The 170-mile State Highway 99 opened its first section in 1994 and will be the longest beltway in the U.S. upon completion, and the region’s third loop. “For cyclists and citizens in general,” Morris notes, “This is an exciting celebration and preview of a new section of an important thoroughfare for the city.”

Organizers are expecting about 4,000 riders, thanks to a dozen or so Methodist churches in North Houston and YMCA branches that are helping make the Grand Parkway Ride an instant success.

Life-changing Purpose of the Ride

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Shockingly, the I-10 corridor running through the Greater Houston area is designated as the top route for human trafficking in the nation. It is estimated that 25% of victims in the U.S. are trafficked through Texas. This fact stimulates Houston area and Texas organizations and churches to advocate – and partner together --for these victims. Since 2003, the YMCA International Services Trafficked Persons Assistance Program has been providing life-saving and life-restoring services to the most vulnerable individuals in our community. So far, over 400 have benefitted. These are adults and children who have been turned into commodities to be bought and sold either through sexual exploitation or other forms of forced labor. “This event will not only raise funds to help us provide critical programs and services to this population, but will also raise public awareness of the issue and the impact it has on the clients we serve as we help them build stability, restore hope, create opportunities and change futures,” says Jeff Watkins, YMCA Vice President for Global Initiatives.

“We are very excited to be part of an event that brings the church and the community together to cycle to help our brothers and sisters in need,” adds Rev. Susan Kent, pastor of Local Missions & Women's Ministry, **The Woodlands United Methodist Church**. “Not only will we band together, building a closer community, but we will also help raise awareness and support the fight against human trafficking. The greatest way for us to fight injustice is to commit to caring for our neighbors just as the Grand Parkway is opening up the doors between our neighborhoods.”

Important information

Funds will be generated via the \$50 entry fee for each rider registered ahead of the event. No one will be allowed to register on the day of the ride. Routes are available in incremental distances of 15, 25, 50 and 75 miles to fit all ages and levels of cycling experience. Details about registration, parking, rest areas and the YMCA International Services Trafficked Persons Assistance Program are available on the [event website](#).

“Planning this has been a team effort – grueling and exciting at the same time,” Morris shares, “By the grace of God it is now going to be a great event to build human trafficking awareness and by doing something about it, per one of our Texas Conference goals to *Invest in the Young*.”

For more information: www.thegrandparkwayride.com.

TAC Encourages Churches and Pastors to Embrace the Sabbatical Opportunity

“One of the greatest gifts for my life as one who serves God is observing the sabbath. Celebrating sabbath is the best way I know to learn the sense of our call - the way in which God's Kingdom reclaims us, revitalizes us, and renews us so that it can reign through us. Before we can engage in the practice of our call, we need to be captured afresh by grace, carried by it, and cared for.”

— Marva J. Dawn, **The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World**

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Ministers who receive the gift of a sabbatical can, as author Marva Dawn states, be “captured afresh by grace.” In the Texas Annual Conference, there are provisions for pastors to take some time apart after 6 years of full time service. (Book of Discipline 351.3) The short-term sabbatical leave (up to four months) allows time for the pastor to be renewed in their calling. Attention is given to spiritual renewal and/or study of worship and ministry. Not only is the pastor being cared for during this time of sabbatical, but also the congregation. A trained and efficient intentional interim is appointed to care for the members and community during the time of the pastor’s absence.

In the later part of 2015, Dr. James Roy went to his Staff Parish Relations Committee and requested a sabbatical. The group, led by Mr. Alfonso Charles, overwhelmingly approved, as well as the North District Superintendent Rev. William Taylor.



With their support, the next step was the appointment of Rev. Dan Hoke to serve as the intentional interim ministry. Rev. Hoke concentrated on worship, preaching at both services each Sunday. He also led staff meetings, attended ministry team meetings and led the study group on Psalms that Pastor Roy had started. Rev. Hoke states, “In short, I had a fantastic time! I found the staff and the laity committees were eager and active to make an interim transition seamless through the daily ministry tasks and plans. I am honored to serve as an interim pastor at the Bishop’s appointment. As a retired elder, it is an effective way for me to stay current and active in preaching, teaching, and pastoral care in a concentrated way.”

Rev. Bonnie Osteen, the Director of Intentional Interim Ministry spoke with Dr. James, after he had returned to his appointment at Longview First UMC. He shared with her how very pleased he was to have had this opportunity and that it made a huge difference in his spiritual leadership. Having time to care for his family and for himself gave him a new perspective as he returned to the congregation and to God’s calling in his life.

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Ministers who are prayerfully considering taking a sabbatical may speak to their district superintendent or Rev. Osteen for more information. [insert link to conference website here with info on sabbatical and app] When the request and eligibility has been approved, an interim will be appointed. The salary of the sabbatical pastor will continue to be paid by the church, while the interim's salary is paid by the Texas Conference. This avoids any burden on the congregation or pastor.

Rev. Osteen states, "Our intentional interims take part in a nationally accepted training program of three phases which equip them to be effective in areas of pastoral care, conflict management, grief, system assessment and more, in a fast paced appointment. They are prepared to lovingly care for these congregations as the pastors take some "sabbath" time. I encourage pastors and congregations to receive this gift, hopefully before a pastor's energy level has reached depletion. Although there may be some apprehension in the beginning, at the end of the interim appointment, the discovery is the rewards are great!"

Interviews with TAC General and Jurisdictional Delegates

Lay and Clergy delegates have been carefully and prayerfully chosen to represent the Texas Annual Conference at the 2016 General Conference in Oregon this May, but what are their passions and thoughts, and motivations? Learn the "backstory" of several delegates by following this series in this and the next two issues of Cross Connection. You'll find Q and A's either by video or text and gain a better knowledge of the people representing you at General Conference 2016. Delegates will work with others to revise church law as well as adopt resolutions on current moral, social and economic issues, along with the approval of budgets and plans for denomination-wide programs.

The first edition of this series includes Rev. Dr. Lacey Warner, Executive Vice Dean on the faculty of Duke University Divinity School. Lacey lives in Abbott, Texas with her husband Rev. Gaston Warner and one daughter.

Reggie Clemons is a lay member of our delegation. Reggie is the Church Administrator and Worship Leader at First United Methodist Church in Pearland, Texas. He and his wife Caroline have 3 daughters and 3 granddaughters. (This is taped interview and can be seen online at www.txcumc.org/crossconnection .

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Rev. Lacey Warner

Why did you want to participate in General Conference?

One of my goals in teaching UM Studies, including UM Polity, over the last fifteen years is to inspire new pastors to trust and participate in the denomination beyond the local church—and to inspire others, especially laity, to do the same. After serving on general church groups, such as the Council of Bishops' Ministry Study and the University Senate, as well as teaching so many others to participate, I felt called to offer my self as a possible delegate willing to participate in these important efforts.

Why do you think General Conference is important?

General Conference is the authoritative body and voice of the United Methodist Church. Its delegates represent United Methodists worldwide. By the Constitution of the UMC, the General Conference is given the authority to discern, lead, and speak for the denomination every four years.

Do you have a prayer request concerning General Conference?

My prayer request for the General Conference is for its participants to know the Holy Spirit's guidance and wisdom to embody a faithful Christian witness of unity, courage, and the love of God in Christ.

What is your greatest hope for General Conference?

What is your greatest hope for the UMC?

What are some of the most exciting ministries that the UMC is doing globally or locally?

One of the most exciting efforts related to General Conference is the discernment and composition of a Book of Discipline for the world-wide United Methodist Church. United Methodism is vital and growing rapidly in Africa, Asia and many other regions across the world. Creating a world-wide Discipline is a monumental task. It requires deep wisdom, close listening, and care for details not just related to the content of the published work, but the facilitation of spiritual formation and Christian vocations of United Methodists around the world.

Envisioning a New Future: Iconoclast Students Debut Poetry Anthology March 4

Help teens flourish as published and public poets by attending the March 4 event at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, or by purchasing their first anthology entitled "They Say."

Ever considered the logistics and positives of "improbable friendships?" On March 4, inner city students, families, teachers, administrators, artistic sorts and city officials will be gathering together to celebrate student-authored poetry. In recent months the Iconoclast program has been nurturing this "new community" which provides a unique sense of support and encouragement for almost 200 students from five of Houston's public schools and two juvenile detention centers. This poetry program, partially sponsored by **St. Paul's UMC, Houston** and the Texas Conference Center for Missional Excellence, is experiencing life-changing success by teaching students to express themselves in positive ways.

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Iconoclast is one of the programs of ProjectCURATE (Center for Urban Reconciliation and Theological Education) which exists to facilitate new expressions of kinship, compassion and solidarity that fosters inclusive diversity. So far, Iconoclast is a promising strategy to block the school-to-prison pipeline that often haunts impoverished students who miss school and often get tangled up in a downward spiral.

“This diverse group looks like Houston,” says Rev. Matt Russell, senior associate pastor at **St. Paul’s** who is more than excited about the March 4 “They Say” event marking the debut of the students’ first poetry anthology. “I am most excited about having a prominent venue that is creating space to hear voices that we often ignore or choose not to listen to in our city,” he shares. “This new community crosses boundaries between people that would likely never meet, so I am excited about watching how these students’ poetry might open doors to their future!”

While many of these students struggle with grades and negative behavior, they are finding a sense of belonging, empowerment and new ways of addressing their personal experiences through poetry. “The goal of the Iconoclast program is to help them imagine a new future and then create definitive pathways towards new possibilities,” Matt shares.

Investing in the Young

Everyone is invited to attend March 4 book debut at 7 pm at the Museum of Fine Art, 1001 Bissonnett. The Houston Youth Poet Laureate Andrew White will open the evening, then Robin Davidson, Houston Poet Laureate will talk. The evening then will spotlight 10 of the Iconoclast student poets as they perform their pieces. “The call to action,” Matt adds, “is to come and hear these students, participate in their future, buy a book and invest in their lives!” Preview several of the student poems via the videos featured in this recent article: <https://medium.com/@kasorrell/can-poetry-block-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-c3f569375219#.jz1qwtsyt>

Event details are on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/iconoclastsessions/?ref=hl>

The sale of the book goes to an educational fund for the students, they will be giving autographs. You can buy the book at the MFA book store, at **St. Paul’s**, and online at: http://www.amazon.com/They-Say-Matthew-H-Russell/dp/1938633717/ref=sr_1_fkmr1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1455745242&sr=8-1-fkmr1&keywords=they+say+iconoclast+poets

VCI Success Story: Exciting Anecdotes from Cheatham Memorial UMC

Inspired by their Vibrant Church Initiative involvement since 2014, members are still witnessing the impact of having an intentional focus on “visioneering” and disciple making from the inside out.

Heartwarming stories of divine ministry connections abound these days at **Cheatham Memorial UMC** in Edgewood. Members are excited to share the one about the impromptu auction benefit for a young student with brain cancer that they literally launched with less than 48 hours’ notice to raise \$1,600. Someone is likely to share about the day about 60 members of the congregation traded traditional worship in favor of a multiple-hour day of service, complete with the preparation of food boxes and wrapped gifts for families in the Angel Tree ministry. Another might share the story about raising more

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than enough money to sponsor member Pat Brown on a trip to participate in the ZOE ministry in Kenya, a life-altering experience that led her to a job helping dispatch others with a heart for global missions.

“The Vibrant Church Initiative (VCI) process does not happen in a vacuum nor does it give simple answers to the complex questions of how to revitalize our congregations,” admits Rev. Alan Van Hooser. “In our experience, this is *visioneering* on the fly. There is no magic checklist to fix anything, however, it is a little boost that can go a long way.”

In recent months, giving has increased, attendance is up over 20% and he estimates 85% of the church is involved in a hands-on ministry activity.

VCI team member Judi Yarbrough, who chairs the Community Connections Team, sees it this way.

“**Cheatham** was a church *on the cusp* of stepping out to be the church God wanted it to be: one that looked outward, loved beyond its walls, and served the Lord tirelessly. The VCI process helped to unite the congregation and refocus it into a church that serves more effectively as *God's love in action*.” Adds Judi, “It is so much easier to be in service when we first stop to pray and ask ourselves if what we are doing will truly bring Jesus to the community. Over the last 18 months or so, we have collectively learned how to become disciples making disciples. VCI has been the catalyst – and for this and I am thankful.”

Another dramatic demonstration of the dynamics of this process, adds Pastor Alan, began with a simple visit from an apartment manager, making an obligatory stop at the church to educate community neighbors about her 24-unit senior care center. “It was obvious she was a dedicated Christian and faithful employee and this visit was a part of her job on behalf of people she genuinely cares for,” explains Alan, who filed the flyer and business card into his VCI notebook under “Resources.”

Ironically, the **Cheatham** VCI Team was reading and discussing, *The Externally Focused Church*, by Rusaw and Swanson, he adds. While **Cheatham Memorial** has a long history of being involved in the community, he recalls the team identifying with the message of this book in ways that would almost immediately bring life-changing impact. “Team members took the VCI community questionnaire to various civic leaders to determine their thoughts about the most fragile people group in our community,” he shares, “but most mentioned the lonely and disconnected elderly people.”

Simultaneously, another team was revisiting the church’s vision statement which led to adopting one with three areas of focus: “*Welcome Home: Cheatham Memorial United Methodist Church is Christ’s Love in Action: Following (Christ), Serving (people) and Unifying (the body of Christ)*.”

Alan admits that a full year passed before he reluctantly began tidying up his overstuffed VCI notebook and rediscovered the flyer and business card again. “I felt compelled to call her and check in, and ask what our church could do for her or her residents,” he shares. She was quiet for a moment, admitting no church had ever asked.” Christmas was approaching and she suggested **Cheatham** provide special music for her residents’ party that she was personally funding, as a result of cutbacks to the budget and her paid hours.

“What happened next was the direct fruit of our visioning activities and newfound awareness of how to build better bridges to our neighbors than we had done in the past,” he adds. “Some of the residents greeted us and we enjoyed an informal time of socializing around the table before we led music and

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made new friends that day.” As a result, several of the residents visited the **CUMC** Wildwood service and again on Christmas Eve.

“Doing this with and for our neighbors makes me feel closer to God,” says member Linda Gressley, “and gives me the chance to share what I have in Jesus with people I didn't even know. This project has started small but is impacting lives.”

The **CUMC** mission committee has since led prayer for this facility and measured it against the vision, asking: *Is there a ministry need here? If we join them, are we following Christ? serving our community? unifying our church family?* Key mission minded leaders then met with the complex manager, and planned another social gathering. “We asked the residents what they would prefer,” notes Alan, “and they asked to join our folks in planning a Bible study and a game day – which we will do next month followed by additional activities in subsequent months.”

The Fruit of Revitalization

Cheatham Memorial is now among the list of medium size churches benefitting from this process of discerning God’s unique role for them in their community. Many members have actively considered ways to improve communication, as well, and made significant modifications to the website, “The process of revisiting or crafting a vision statement provides a marvelous instrument to rally around,” notes Alan. “The VCI Communications workshop has impacted our bulletin, website, Facebook presence and even our meetings are more creative and enjoyable.”

Beverly Chadwick, vision team member and coordinator of the Ministry Audit Team adds, “VCI opened my eyes to what we are already doing AND what we could be doing.” Adds Alan, “There is a new energy around here as God leads new people to visit and get involved, a new sense of consistency as we become more intentional about our presence in the community and learn to listen to how we can empower others to be what Jesus intended them to be.”

Elders’ Retreat Sparks Rejuvenation

Attendees hearing Dr. Jack Levison, featured speaker and professor of Biblical Hebrew/Old Testament Interpretation at Perkins, share personal highlights from the event.

Vibrant churches need vibrant leaders that genuinely inspire congregational transformation from within. About 140 elders and clergy experienced life-giving encouragement at the February Elders’ Retreat at Lakeview, which they can pass along to their ministry leaders in the weeks to follow. Within the peaceful “Lakeview Laboratory,” guest speaker Jack Levinson, invigorated the group with insight from his book, *40 Days with the Holy Spirit*. His passion for this topic is evident in his portfolio of books and blog posts with *The Huffington Post* and other website interactions.

During their time together, participants elected Rev. Todd Jordan, **Strawbridge UMC**, as the new chair of the Order of Elders. They also shared worship services together and enjoyed several ice cream fellowships and rejuvenating free time.

God Moments

Highlights for **Rev. Jon Stouffer, FUMC Brenham** included getting to know and learn with Jack Levison. “Jack is engaging, attentive to each and every conversation, as well as a top scholar in

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original Biblical languages,” notes Jon. “Jack is one of the best and most practical teachers I’ve learned from in a long time, both for the arm-chair theologian and for the person-in-the-pew!”

He also responded to the much needed reminder in Lent to stop, listen, and breathe in the breath of life that is the Spirit-Breath. Jon also appreciates the mentoring that retreats offer in the “connection.” Adds Jon, “We are a product of those who mentored us and are invited to share with others what we have received. The Miracle of Multiplication: that if one person mentored another for six months and then those two mentored two others for six months, and so-on, in 10 years there would be a total of 1,048,576 who have been involved in a six-month mentoring relationship.”

Jon adds, “The Leadership Team and staff at Lakeview welcomed us with such grace and peace providing the highest quality of hospitality. As sisters and brothers in Christ, we were at ease with one another from the moment we arrived on campus, through every meal in the cafeteria, every time of learning and worship in Bagley Hall, and in our free time everywhere we spent time together. For me, our time together reflected well what the Psalmist wrote in Psalms 133:1, *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*”

Attendees felt renewed from the inside out. “Feeding our spirit through the word of God is imperative in becoming our best,” notes Rev. Michelle Hall, **Christ UMC Sugar Land**, “and doing it in community is all the more fun - the Holy Spirit—what an inspiring topic! My peers and I felt informed and instructed as we gathered to support and encourage one another in living out our response to God’s call.”

Rev. Christie Hale, **Mission Bend UMC**, shares, “I carved time out to attend this year because my cup was empty and I needed a refill. Jack Levison was dynamic and life giving. He gave me easy tools to use as soon as I got back to life in the real world.”

Rev. Mike Lindstrom, **FUMC, Conroe** offered, “I loved two things about the retreat, well, three really. One, Matt Neely is a gifted worship leader and I was lifted up. Two, Jack Levison is a wonderfully unique speaker combining deep spirituality with a dynamic presentation. Finally, I am overwhelmed by the Spirit of God in the pastors I know and those I have been meeting. Their presence in that place was good for my soul.”

Rev. Nathan Bledsoe, **St. Peter’s UMC Katy** echoes that perspective. “I really value the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with my clergy colleagues at places like Elder’s Retreat. Being able to do that away from our ministry settings helps us to be more fully present, authentic, and to have fun, too!”