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The Call

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Congregation grieves loss of praise leader

LEBANON, Va. -- Trevor Blankenship, age 30, worked all day on the highways for a paving company. On Thursday evenings, he jumped in his pickup truck and drove to Lebanon, where he played guitar and led a praise band for a recovery worship service.

"Sometimes he barely made it, but he said the recovery worship rejuvenated him," said the Rev. Wil Cantrell, pastor at Lebanon Memorial United Methodist Church. "He said he had never been part of a service where people understood how badly they need God."

On Oct. 2, Blankenship died after an 18-wheel tanker crashed into his truck and another truck, causing an explosion on I-81 in Smyth County, Va. Two other men died, including Blankenship's co-worker and the driver of the tanker.

The accident happened about 3:30 p.m., 90 minutes after a church bus crashed into two other vehicles on I-40 near Jefferson City, Tenn., killing eight and injuring 14.

Blankenship coordinated and led music for Recovery at Lebanon, held at Lebanon Memorial United Methodist Church since its launch on Oct. 18, 2012, Cantrell said. The United Methodist congregation partnered with another church, Lebanon Community Fellowship, to offer the new ministry for people suffering from addictions, eating disorders, codependency, relationship issues, or grief.

Recovery at Lebanon is connected to the Recovery at Cokesbury Network based in Knoxville, Tenn.

Blankenship was a lifelong member of Lebanon Community Fellowship, also leading its praise band, according to his



Trevor Blankenship was one of three people killed in a multi-vehicle crash. (Photo courtesy of Lebanon Community Fellowship)

pastor, Rev. Jeff Williams.

"I've known him since he was five or six years old. He was a member of our family," Williams said. "The loss for our church is personal and painful."

In less than a year, worship attendance for Recovery at Lebanon has grown to 120, Cantrell said. At the Oct. 3 evening service, 140 came to worship God and remember their praise leader.

Representing Cokesbury United Methodist Church, Brent Ronald came to console the family and congregation and to let them know their Knoxville family is praying for them, Cantrell said.

Blankenship's mother spoke to the grief-stricken group, saying her son was happy now and "God will see us through this." Cantrell spoke about "responding to life's tragedies without relapsing or self-destructive behavior."

"They've had so many tragedies in their lives that this tragedy, although it may not be directly related, could trigger memories," Cantrell said.

Blankenship will be remembered as a person who was "humble, genuine, and authentic," Cantrell said.

"After almost every worship service, I would go up and thank the praise band and tell them how their music touched me," Cantrell said.

"Trevor never seemed interested in the compliments. He always shifted the message to how something I said during the service had affected him. He was very focused on his relationship with Jesus Christ." ■

Kentucky connection: Churches reach out to the poor through Henderson Settlement

WHITE OAK, Tenn. -- Last summer, the Rev. Mark Fuerstenau and his mission team spent a week expanding a mobile home for a family of five in White Oak, Tenn.

The volunteers were quietly surprised one day when they saw the mother fry up a pound of bacon – and nothing else – for the family meal.

“We wondered about it and then we realized: That’s all they had,” said Fuerstenau. “They make do with very little.”

White Oak is located within the Holston Conference. But when a United Methodist team comes to fix their roof or a United Methodist van delivers a box of food, the people of White Oak assume they were sent by Henderson Settlement, a mission in Kentucky.

Based in Frakes, Ky., Henderson is five miles from the Tennessee line and 18 miles from White Oak. Many of the 2,800 volunteers that come through Henderson each year are dispatched to repair homes within a 20-mile radius.

“These are the people the scripture tells us to take care of,” said Fuerstenau, pastor of Kossuth Zion United Methodist Church in Spencerville, Ohio. In August, he and a team representing two Ohio churches drove 5 ½ hours to serve needy families in White Oak, located in Campbell County, Tenn.

Congregations all over the U.S are familiar with the 88-year-old Henderson Settlement, which now has 1,500 acres, a farm, and multiple ministries to employ and serve residents in this pocket of Appalachia.

From Holston Conference, 15 churches send mission teams and 63 churches provide financial support, said Michael Feely, director of mission advancement.

However, the fact that Henderson has a satellite campus in White Oak – located in the Oak Ridge District of Holston Conference – is not well-known.

Jerry Lambdin, mission outreach director, says the White Oak Center was opened in 2001 to accommodate volunteers.

“We knew we were turning away a lot of groups over the summer because we were near to full capacity,” said Lambdin, referring to the 200 beds and other accommodations available at the Frakes Center.

The White Oak Center accommodates 48 volunteers at once. Some work teams request the “intimate” White Oak dorm over the larger, busier Frakes site, Lambdin said.

“Most initially are sent there due to wanting a week that has already filled up,” he said. “Afterwards they have that connection and continue to request the White Oak site.”



A family shows off their new home addition, built by a mission team from Henderson Settlement.

Henderson has a history of tackling the region’s long-term poverty through home repair, food, utility assistance, agriculture programs, new mother support, youth and senior activities, thrift stores, crafts, education and literacy programs.

About 200 families receive assistance from the mission each month, according to Feely.

“The cost of living here is lower but people are just barely scraping by. That hasn’t changed in 200 years,” Feely said.

Surveys show that “more than anything else, people need jobs,” said Mark Lemons, executive director.

Now that the busy work-camp season is ebbing away, Henderson staff are focusing on fundraising, bringing jobs to the area, and addressing the regional drug problem, Feely said.

For several weeks, Henderson staff and community members have been traveling to Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., to worship at its Thursday-night recovery service. Their plan is to launch a Recovery at Cokesbury ministry in Frakes.

“We desperately need for people to come up and serve, but we also want people to come and help us figure out some of this stuff,” Feely said. “Jesus talked about this and John Wesley sure did. We are a connectional group, and we want to partner with churches in Holston and a lot of other places, too.” ■