

## Digest

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# The Call *Digest*

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Johnson City District pastors collaborate on new special-needs ministry.

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[www.holston.org](http://www.holston.org)

## Vestal hopes for a comeback

**KNOXVILLE, Tenn.** -- Pastor Tim York just called his congregation a "stubborn bunch of people."

"You're that faithful. You're that stubborn," the pastor said on a recent Sunday morning. "Your stubbornness and faithfulness are being rewarded by being able to be back in this place."

With a newly repaired and polished sanctuary and a new ministry providing basic needs to the community, Vestal United Methodist Church is hoping for a comeback that will bring new people to their doors.

The gothic building has been a landmark in the South Knoxville neighborhood for 89 years, but for the last three years the space for Sunday worship has been unusable, according to York. The number of regular attenders has dropped to about 12.

"The fact that we are able to once again worship in this place is God's work," York said.

In May 2014, three neighboring churches joined to establish "Beacon of Hope" in Vestal's education building -- providing food, clothing, "getting ahead" classes and other outreach ministries to people living in the 37920 zip code.

In August 2014, volunteers joined to rescue the sanctuary from water damage wrought by a 2011 hail storm. John Rodgers, a member of Church Street United Methodist Church in Knoxville, devoted more than 200 hours to repairing the ceiling and floor. He had help from the Rev. Kevin Blue, pastor at Asbury United Methodist in Clinton, as well as others from Church Street.

"I kind of made this my second home," said Rodgers, a Knoxville fire marshal. "I want to see this church prosper."

The Vestal congregation celebrated a "grand opening" of the sanctuary on Sunday, Oct. 5, with about 70 in attendance.

David Taylor, age 76, has been a member of the church since age 11. He remembers when the congregation numbered 400 in the 1950s and '60s.

"This church is the center of Vestal," Taylor said. "We want the 'Beacon of Hope' to be an example in the community."

The Beacon of Hope is the creation of the "benevolence team" at Church Street United Methodist Church, which partnered with the Vestal congregation, Mountain View United Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, and local nonprofit Compassion Coalition.

So far this year, Beacon of Hope has provided financial assis-



Seventy people attended an Oct. 5 "grand re-opening" of the Vestal sanctuary.

tance for utility bills, rent, bus passes, and gas to more than 135 people, according to director Richard Ginn. "If clients are physically able we ask them to complete voluntary community service at Vestal at a rate of one hour of service for each \$10 worth of assistance provided," he said.

In addition, more than 340 families have receiving clothing and toiletry items valued at \$10,500. Ten people are involved in a class that teaches how to overcome poverty.

"Our overall goal is to serve the needy of South Knoxville and grow the membership of Vestal UMC," Ginn said. "We encourage the people we touch through our programs to consider visiting the church service at Vestal, but the congregation has to close the deal by welcoming them with open hearts and providing spiritual support for their needs."

Like many of the members who remain at Vestal today, Peggy Williams has strong family ties to the church.

"My granddaddy helped build this church, and my mother was christened and raised here," said Williams, age 64. "We feel a closeness to this church, and we hope we can share some of that with others."

Vestal United Methodist Church is located at 115 Ogle Avenue, Knoxville, TN 37920. Worship is offered each Sunday at 10:45 a.m. For more information, call (865) 686-6113. Beacon of Hope is located in Vestal's education building and offers a full schedule with a food coop and "Getting Ahead" classes. For more information, call (865) 599-5047. ■

# Pie in the face: Pastors collaborate on new special-needs ministry

**JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.** -- Natalie Justice, age 31, is a high-energy kind of pastor. Just a few days -- hours, actually -- before her surgery to treat breast cancer, Justice was campaigning to raise money and awareness for a new ministry.

Justice and her fellow pastor, 34-year-old Christi Taylor, are navigating their personal challenges while calling on churches to reach out to people with special needs. In the first week after it launched, the "Wonderfully Made Grant Fund" raised \$475 and engaged 30 people in the "pie-in-the-face challenge."

"There are families with special needs who do not get support and who feel alone," the Rev. Justice said. "We are using this pie-in-the-face challenge to raise money and awareness for our churches that need to start thinking about how we can reach this unreached group of people."

"Wonderfully Made" is a new ministry for the 65 churches of Holston Conference's Johnson City District in east Tennessee. Justice is pastor of the Greene County Parish, including Greenwood, Afton, and Stone Dam United Methodist Churches. Taylor is pastor at Fairview United Methodist Church in Jonesborough, Tenn.

The campaign calls on a church member or pastor to donate at least \$10 to the fund, then take a pie in the face while the videotape is rolling. The spectacle is then posted on Facebook and others are challenged to join in the fun. "We are modeling it similar to the ALS ice-bucket challenge," Justice said.

The two pastors said they become friends after meeting through Justice's dissertation, involving a study on special-needs families.

"I am the proud mother of a six-year-old special-needs child, so there is a personal component to this campaign for me," the Rev. Taylor said. "Once we met, we became a think tank for advocating for special-needs awareness and acceptance."

Both pastors said they noticed that congregations often overlook community members with conditions such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, or visual impairment.

"I will admit as a clergy I have preached often on the 'least of these' as the poor, the hospitalized, the elderly, and those in jail without including 'special needs,'" Taylor said. "My dream for this grant is it would encourage churches to look at how they can minister to special-needs families and how they can be a welcoming environment where these families feel acceptance."

The Johnson City District hopes to raise enough money to begin awarding grants in spring to churches that wish to offer, for example, a special Vacation Bible School, worship service, support group, or parents' night out, Taylor said.

The one-time grants will be designated for ministries only and not building development, Justice said. The grant's name is taken from Psalm 139:14: "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Justice, who underwent a mastectomy for stage-one breast cancer on Oct. 2, said she hopes to eventually see a special-needs grant made available to all of Holston's 887 churches.

Taylor's daughter, Emily, is participating in a study through Duke Medical Center and the Rare Genomics Institute.

For more information, call the Johnson City District office at (423) 926-7533 or visit [wonderfullymadegrant.com](http://wonderfullymadegrant.com). ■

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**The Call** is the news source for Holston Conference. ● The Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church includes 887 churches in east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, and north Georgia. ● Our resident bishop is Mary Virginia Taylor. ● Our executive assistant is the Rev. Carol Wilson. ● Our office address is P.O. Box 850, 217 South Rankin Road, Alcoa, TN 37701. ● (865) 690-4080 ● [www.Holston.org](http://www.Holston.org) ● [thecall@holston.org](mailto:thecall@holston.org) or [info@holston.org](mailto:info@holston.org) ● [Facebook.Holston.org](https://www.facebook.com/Holston.org) ● [@TheCall\\_Holston](https://twitter.com/TheCall_Holston) ● Free e-news: [hecaltwo.holston.org](http://hecaltwo.holston.org)