

Digest?

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The Call

Digest

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Appalachian Trail chaplain starts six-month hike with backache, hope.

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College, church help community grieve after family's violent death

When four family members died in a domestic-violence tragedy in Glade Spring, Va., United Methodists at Emory & Henry College and State Street United Methodist Church responded to help the community grieve and find hope.

Kristin Palmer, 46, her son Griffin Palmer, 17, and Palmer's mother, Nancy Griffin, 74, were killed by gunfire in the Griffin home on Feb. 25. Kristin Palmer's father, Terry Griffin, 75, was injured and hospitalized. Also dead was the shooter, Kevin Dale Palmer, 44, Kristin Palmer's husband.

Terry Griffin is a retired professor who taught German to Emory & Henry students for many years. Nancy Griffin was also retired after serving as an administrative assistant at the college for several years.

The Emory & Henry community began to learn of the early-morning horror about midday on Feb. 25, according to the Rev. Mary K Briggs, college chaplain.

"The students came in and said, 'What can we do?'" Briggs said. "We realized we needed to have a prayer vigil."

At 8 p.m. on Feb. 25, about 75 people attended an outdoor vigil organized by Briggs and students in freezing temperatures.

On the evening of Feb. 27, a visitation and memorial service for the victims was held in the Emory & Henry Memorial Chapel with about 250 attending. The Rev. David St. Clair, retired Holston clergy, former college staff, and neighbor to the Griffins, officiated at the funeral.

On Feb. 28, Briggs and the Rev. David Jackson, pastor at Emory United Methodist Church, officiated at the graveside service at Holston Conference Cemetery.

The response of the Emory & Henry community to a family so connected to the college was inspiring, Briggs said. Glade Spring is about three miles from the college's home in Emory, Va.

"Emory really has a way of pulling together," she said. "This was the first tragedy since the tornado in Glade Spring [in April 2011]. It's amazing how the people come out and cling together."

When the staff at State Street United Methodist Church began to hear about the shooting, they opened the church for prayer and began to plan afternoon and evening prayer services.



The Rev. Mary K Briggs (center) leads Emory & Henry students in praying for the victims. Photo by Isaac Short

"When we realized the gravity of the situation, we wanted to respond," said the Rev. Jeff Wright, senior pastor at the Bristol, Va., church.

The church is located across the street from Virginia High School, where Kristin Palmer taught drama, Wright explained. "A number of our students go to Virginia High and had [Palmer] as a teacher."

State Street Church has a long relationship with the high school, hosting teacher luncheons and inviting staff and students over for prayer and other activities. Many Virginia High students walk across the church lawn on their way to and from school, Wright said.

About 25 attended a 3 p.m. service, immediately after school, and another 30 attended an 8 p.m. service, said Wright.

"We had a very good response from the kids and adults, too. Talking seemed to help. I tried to tell them the best thing they could remember was how [Palmer] lived, not how she died."

On Feb. 26, Wright and the Rev. Mark Hicks, associate pastor, were invited to attend a Virginia High faculty meeting. The pastors also participated in a Feb. 26 Virginia High memorial service, connected by Skype with a simultaneous memorial service at Patrick Henry High School, where Griffin Palmer attended. ■

A.T. chaplain starts hike with backache, hope

When David Smith picked March 5 as the day to travel to Georgia for his 2,160-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail, he didn't realize it was the first day of Lent.

It just worked out that Smith began his epic journey on the same day many Christians begin their own spiritual journeys toward Easter. The difference is, Smith hopes to keep journeying past Easter, and he's giving up a lot more than Facebook or chocolate.

Smith, age 69, is serving as Holston Conference's second United Methodist chaplain to "thru hike" the Appalachian Trail. He departed Thursday, March 6, from Springer Mountain, Ga.

By Monday, March 10, he had already hiked 60 miles into north Georgia. His destination is Mount Katahdin, Maine, before October.

"Anxious" is how Smith replied when asked how he felt, on the night before his departure.

"I'm anxious about this body that is supporting my mind, and I'm anticipating the people that I'm going to run into along the way," he said. "That's what makes hiking the trail so special."

Smith and his wife, Lala, spent Ash Wednesday, March 5, at Amicalola Falls Lodge, along with members of Appalachian Trail Outreach Ministry (ATOM). Smith said he was concerned about back pain that had recently developed, while knowing most of his nights for the next six months will be

spent on the wooden floors of shelters or on the ground.

Lala Smith said she was concerned about the weather, which was forecast for rainy and cold in her husband's first few days on the trail.

"All of this has all been directed by God," Lala Smith said. "I can't see that God would bring him to this point without giving him the strength to keep going."

The Smiths are members at Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., where they retired in 2006. David Smith wasn't a hiker until his grandson, four-year-old Walker, died of cancer in 2008.

Smith discovered that walking was the best way to grieve the loss of Walker. People who decide to hike the Appalachian Trail are often in the midst of their own transitions, Smith notes. The purpose of the Appalachian Trail chaplain is to provide a spiritual presence for the community of seekers who hike the trail between spring and fall each year.

At 69, Smith is older than most of the hikers he will encounter. Each year, about 3,000 will attempt to "thru hike" the Appalachian Trail from end to end across 14 states, according to Appalachian Trail Conservancy. One in four will be successful.

On March 6, David Smith was the 259th hiker this year to register the beginning of his A.T. adventure.

With the encouragement of his pastor and friends, Smith says he's learned to accept that God has called him for the unique friendship and experience he can offer on the trail. His trail name is "Shortstop" because when he first started hiking, "I wasn't in the best physical condition. I had to make a lot of short stops along the way."

Today, Shortstop is able to hike 10 to 20 rugged miles in one day through all kinds of weather, carrying a 30-pound pack on his back while watching for snakes and bears.

What he looks forward to most are the unfettered trail conversations he cherishes – like the one that was prompted recently when a young hiker felt comfortable enough to ask, "Shortstop, what's really important in life?"

"There are not many things I will encounter out there that I can fix," Smith says, "but I can be a sounding board and a listener, and I can be a friend." ■

Follow Chaplain David Smith's progress at TrailJournals.com/shortstop or on the "Appalachian Trail Chaplain" page on Facebook.

PHOTO AT LEFT: David Smith visits with friends on Springer Mountain before departing on his hike on March 6.



The Call is the news source for Holston Conference. ● The Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church includes 897 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 ● thecall@holston.org or info@holston.org ● Facebook.Holston.org ● [@TheCall_Holston](https://twitter.com/TheCall_Holston) ● Free e-news: thecalltwo.holston.org