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The Call

Digest

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Buffalo Mountain Camp prepares for new phase, changes leadership.

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DeFur leads Cokesbury into growth surge

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. -- When the Rev. Stephen DeFur realized that his co-worker, mentor, and best friend was close to death, he immediately reached out to his congregation with news updates and appeals for prayer.

In the dark days before the Rev. Steven Sallee died of cardiomyopathy on May 2, 2013, the messages from DeFur -- through the social media of Cokesbury United Methodist Church -- served as a lifeline for a stunned congregation. The associate pastor, created a hashtag to mark his online updates: #cokesburystrong.

"It was intended to be a uniting phrase to remind ourselves that even with this magnitude of loss, God has not forsaken the people of Cokesbury Church," said DeFur.

One year after 62-year-old Sallee departed as leader of the denomination's then 13th largest church, Cokesbury seems to be #strongerthanever.

Since November 2013, Cokesbury's average worship attendance increased from 2,900 to 3,859, making it the largest congregation in the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. This past Easter, Cokesbury's total worship attendance was 8,099, more than 2,000 above its Easter 2013 attendance of 6,043.

"It's been like a tsunami, in the positive sense," says DeFur, age 43, on a recent Friday morning in his office. "Something crashed down on our church, and it hasn't stopped since."

A new Saturday night worship service, launched on March 22, is averaging 300 in attendance. A church-wide goal to lead 1,000 new people to Christ in 2014 (reflected through worship attendance) was 70 percent accomplished by late April. Membership is 4,725.

What's going on? "Nothing has changed, but everything has changed," says the pastor. "Our philosophy has remained the same: to try to position ourselves to meet and engage with as many people as we can so that we can love them into a relationship with Jesus Christ to change the world."

DeFur has served as a pastor at Cokesbury for 18 years, since he graduated from Candler School of Theology in 1996. A native of Chattanooga, Tenn., his home church is Hixson United Methodist.

It's unusual for a bishop to appoint the associate pastor as immediate successor to the senior pastor. However, Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor, resident bishop of Holston Conference, did just that a few weeks after Sallee's death.



Rev. Stephen DeFur: "It's been like a tsunami, in the positive sense."

"There was a tremendous sense of loss," said DeFur. "But there was also a tangible feeling of our people saying, 'OK, we're not going to let this stop us.' It was almost like a rally cry."

Not only did attendance take a hike, volunteer positions were quickly filled at ongoing ministries. For weeks, volunteers have been helping to prepare the former Wesley House Community Center for the opening of "Susannah's House" this summer. The new faith-based organization was envisioned by the Rev. Rebekah Fetzer, minister of discipleship, who in spring 2013 saw a need to help mothers recovering from substance abuse and their prenatally exposed babies.

Shortly before Sallee died, Cokesbury celebrated the 10-year anniversary of its recovery program, now averaging 400 to 500 worshipers each Thursday night. In the last year, the Rev. Mark Beebe, director of recovery ministries, has led his team in starting satellite ministries in churches and prisons from Lebanon, Va., to Ringgold, Ga.

In fall 2013, Cokesbury launched its online campus at Cokesbury.TV, which DeFur says is a "grassroots movement" reaching people all over the country.

After four years of worship at a high school, the church is preparing the Hardin Valley congregation to make a permanent home on the 22-acre tract purchased by Holston Conference in 2008.

So far this year, revenue from church member donations is six percent higher than the same period last year. ■

Buffalo Mountain prepares for new phase

JONESBOROUGH, Tenn. -- Jason Onks, a beloved Holston Conference camp director is completing his leadership and service as Buffalo Mountain Camp begins a new era with a changed focus.



Jason Onks

“As the Buffalo Mountain Camp board continues to deal with the aftermath of the flood of August 2012, clearly, everything has changed,” said the Rev. Randy Pasqua, executive director of Holston Camp and Retreat Ministry. “The job requirements of the camp director have changed from managing a camp operation to camp ministry development.”

Buffalo Mountain camp leaders have been working with Kaleidoscope Inc., a consulting firm, to determine “the best ministry offering, location and design, and the feasibility for rebuilding,” according to Brad Overturf, board chair.

“The gifts, talents and skills which Jason Onks shared so effectively as camp director during summer camp, year-round

retreats, and environmental education programs are not being utilized in this current phase of ministry,” Overturf said. “So our conference camping director, the board of directors, and Jason have determined that Buffalo Mountain Camp needs a new executive director to champion this phase of discernment for the ministry.”

The Rev. Walter Weikel, Johnson City district superintendent, said that Onks had served with “grace and distinction” following the catastrophic flood that led to the closing of Buffalo Mountain.

“We are about to embark on a new phase which we hope leads to recovery,” Weikel said. “This new phase would necessitate an interim director who would have skills in strategic planning, marketing, and new site development.”

Camp leaders encouraged those who love Buffalo Mountain Camp and Onks to express their appreciation with written memories, cards, and financial love offerings. Gifts and remembrances may be mailed to: Jason Onks, Camp & Retreat Office, 262 Bart Green Drive, Gray, TN 37615. (Please make checks out to Jason Onks.)

“Thank you so much for your continued prayers for Jason and his family, the Buffalo Mountain Camp board, and the discernment processes that are taking place,” Pasqua said. ■

Visit BuffaloMountainCamp.org for updates.

HOLSTON CALENDAR

Annual Conference/ June 8-11: Clergy and lay members attending Annual Conference in Lake Junaluska, N.C., should register online at AC.Holston.org by May 23. Participants in the June 10 “Education for South Sudan” 5K Run/Walk -- as well as parents seeking child care during Annual Conference-- should also register at AC.Holston.org by May 23. For more information, contact Connectional Ministries at (865) 690-4080 or connectionalministries@holston.org.

Youth in Mission/ June 8-11: Youth are invited to join in a week of service (home repair, community center) at Epworth Project in Slidell, La. Cost is \$400. Contact the Youth Ministry Office at (865) 690-4080 or email umyouth@holston.org.

Youth Assembly/ June 30-July 4: Junior-high and senior-high students are invited to share a week of discipleship June 30-July 4 at Emory & Henry College in Emory, Va. Cost is \$235 if postmarked by June 2, \$300 for walk-in registration. Contact the Youth Ministries Office at (865) 690-4080 or email umyouth@holston.org.

Calling All Men/ Aug. 1-2: United Methodist Men and friends are encouraged to attend an annual worship and fellowship event Aug. 1-2 at Tennessee Wesleyan College in Athens. Friday night will include a picnic, storytelling, music and worship. Saturday will be an evangelistic event with a speaker, praise band and worship. Visit CallingAllMen.net for information or call UMM President Eric Knoefel at (865) 388-9459. ■

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](https://www.facebook.com/Holston.org) ● [@TheCall_Holston](https://twitter.com/TheCall_Holston) ● Free e-news: thecalltwo.holston.org