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The Call

Digest

Back page

Pastors Boo and Phyllis Hankins recall how sick kids in Africa could have been saved with malaria meds.

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'Duck Dynasty' star speaks in Greeneville

GREENEVILLE, Tenn. -- Two years ago, leaders of a unique ministry at Mount Zion United Methodist Church booked a Louisiana duck hunter to speak at their banquet dinner.

They had no way of knowing that Phil Robertson would later star on a wildly popular reality TV show, "Duck Dynasty," with more than 8 million cable viewers.

On March 9, Robertson and his wife and co-star, "Mrs. Kay," came to east Tennessee where 3,300 fans – many dressed in camouflage – packed an elementary school gym to hear his Christian message and pay homage to hunting.

"[God] showed you that dead men -- dead flesh in a casket -- can be energized and stand back up on earth," Robertson said to the crowd. "I can see it now: A heaven full of ducks, and I'll be there forever and not a game warden anywhere."

Robertson was the star attraction of the third annual "Sportsman's Night Out," organized over the past several months by a congregation of 130, said the Rev. Kristen Burkhart, Mount Zion pastor.

"We call ourselves a little country-size church with a great-big God-size heart," said Burkhart.

A total 300 volunteers from local churches of different denominations were recruited to cook and serve a barbecue dinner, direct traffic, line up autograph-seekers, and help sell

Robertson's signature duck calls.

When the scraggly-bearded "duck commander" was escorted to the stage by seven local police officers, the audience gave him a standing ovation.

"It's a good show," said Britt Neas, explaining why fans love Robertson and the down-home antics of his "Duck Dynasty" family. "It's got values, it's wholesome, and it's funny."

"Sportsman's Night Out" was started in 2011 by seven Mount Zion members. As hunting enthusiasts, they planned a "wild game feed" with their own kills of deer, bear, elk, fish, moose, squirrel, possum, and groundhog.

On their second event in March 2012, Mount Zion members were elated (and shocked) when 800 people came to dine on deer and hear the message provided by Christian hunter and video producer Melvin Wright. It was the same month that "Duck Dynasty" premiered on the A&E network.

The congregation soon realized that the next "Sportsman's Night Out" required special planning. Organizers changed the menu and moved the event to Hal Henard School, enabling them to sell 3,000 tickets.

The tickets sold out in December, and the people started lining up outside the school six hours before Robertson was scheduled to speak.

"We're not into getting them to come to our church," said Pastor Burkhart. "We just want them to go to 'a' church. We're hoping to get people who may prefer being in a deer stand on Sunday morning to realize there is still a way they can connect to church."

After demonstrating some duck calls, Robertson referred to the Bible and the nation's founding founders to speak on blasphemy, atheism, abortion, education, and health care.

"With temporary health care – with government-mandated health care – we all die," he said, holding up a Bible. "It's just a waste of money. But God said I'll give you eternal health care if you just trust me, and it won't cost you a nickel."

Burkhart recruited 30 pastors of all denominations to pray with individuals responding to her altar call. Twenty-nine people committed their lives to Christ, and 218 made commitments, according to Mount Zion member Phillip Archer.

Mount Zion expects to receive a \$30,000 profit to apply to the fellowship hall debt and for missions, Burkhart said. ■



Mount Zion United Methodist Church invites reality TV star Phil Robertson to speak on his faith in Greeneville, Tenn.

Pastors share stories of sick children in Africa

Boo and Phyllis Hankins know more about malaria than most of their friends in Holston Conference.

The two pastors not only helped treat people who suffered the disease during their 2009-2011 stay in South Sudan. Phyllis and daughter Rachel experienced malaria first-hand during an earlier missionary stay in Liberia.

“It’s like the worst case of flu you could imagine,” says the Rev. Phyllis Hankins, who accompanied her pastor-husband to West Africa in 1980-86 and East Africa 23 years later. For two weeks, mother and daughter were sick with fever spikes and “pain running up and down my arms, legs, and spines.” Other symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, and headaches.

Now serving as pastors in Mountain City, Tenn., Boo and Phyllis Hankins recently reflected on their encounters with the mosquito-borne disease that annually kills 700,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa.

The United Methodist Church’s goal is to eradicate malaria by the end of 2015. The deadline for Holston Conference to meet its goal of raising \$1 million (saving 100,000 lives) for the Imagine No Malaria campaign approaches in June 2013.

The Rev. Boo Hankins remembers sick children who died in Liberia and sick children in South Sudan who lived because they received medicine.

“The drugs don’t cost that much,” said Hankins, now pastor at First United Methodist Church and Trade United Methodist Church. “Most of the time they couldn’t afford the medicine, which is so cheap to us.”

When Boo Hankins departed South Sudan in May 2011 – after a two-year stint as district superintendent in Yei – it cost about 10 Sudanese pounds to get a malaria test and medication. That’s the equivalent of \$3 in the U.S.



Phyllis and Boo Hankins

The Imagine No Malaria campaign will tackle the disease by providing protective bed nets and medication in Africa as well as health care, education, and prevention-planning.

The disease is even tougher to fight when desperately ill victims don’t have transportation to distant clinics, the couple said. In Liberia, Boo Hankins was once asked by his landlord to drive his sick 12-year-old daughter to Ganta Hospital, located 120 miles away across dangerous territory. Han-

kins arranged to get the child far enough for a taxi to transport her the rest of the distance.

“Before we could get her there, she developed cerebral meningitis,” Hankins said. “She was completely unconscious and unresponsive as we were bumping along the road.” The girl died shortly.

Phyllis Hankins remembers the terrible sound a sick one-month-old baby made as her mother carried her on her back.

“I never heard a child make that sound before. She was gasping for breath, really,” Hankins said.

The mother could not arrange to make the 15-mile trip to the nearest clinic in time to save her baby’s life.

The funds raised by Imagine No Malaria will not only make medicine and medical care more available, the initiative will help educate Africans in avoiding and treating the disease, the missionary couple said.

“We tried to help them understand that malaria was caused by an insect,” Boo Hankins said of his African neighbors. “Some still believed it was caused by witchcraft. It’s a real spiritual as well as physical battle we’re facing all the time.” ■

Write a check to your local church with “Imagine No Malaria #684” on the memo line. Or donate online at ImagineNoMalaria.org.

HOLSTON BRIEFS

Jubilation is Holston’s spring retreat for older adults. This year’s event is scheduled April 21-23 at MeadowView Conference and Retreat Center in Kingsport, Tenn. Some scholarship assistance is available. Registration deadline: March 31. Call Karen Wright at (865) 690-4080 or email connectionalministries@holston.org.

Youth Assembly is Holston’s summer spiritual retreat for junior-high and senior-high students. This year’s event will be held June 24-28 at Tennessee Wesleyan College in Athens, Tenn. Register by May 10 for fee discounts. Contact Laura Lambert at (865) 690-4080 or email umyouth@holston.org. ■

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 ● Twitter @TheCall_Holston ● Free e-news: thecalltwo.holston.org