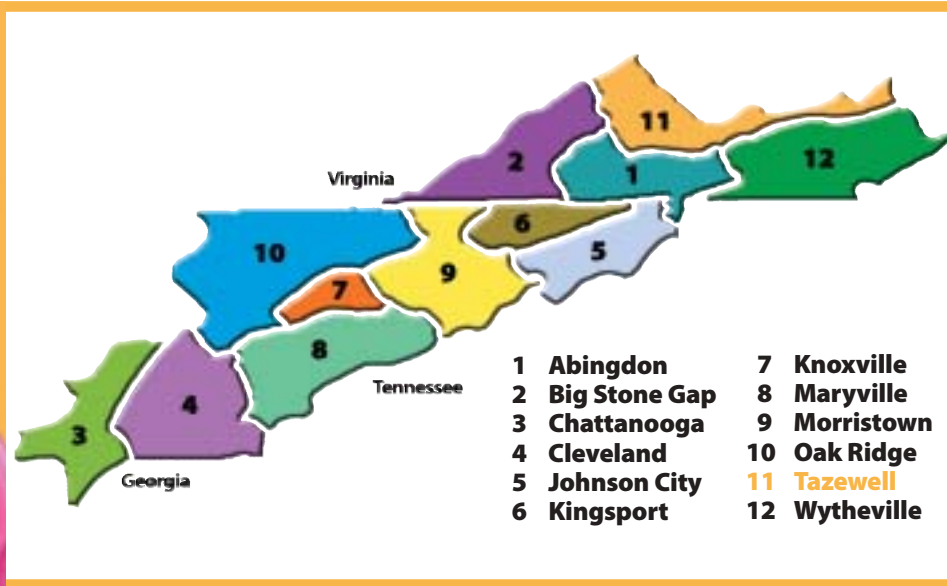


mydistrict TAZEWELL



Deborah Neal, age 57, is a lifelong member of Bethel United Methodist Church. She's been a 4th grade schoolteacher for 36 years, and she's a member of the conference Religion and Race Ministry Team. This is her district.



Fancy Strut | Rocky Gap | Rooster Fights | Richlands | Appalachian Trail | Millirons | Bland | Country Bacon | West Virginia | Bikers | Bluefield | Sunday Buffet | Coal Town

Tazewell District is one of 12 districts in Holston Conference. It includes 39 charges and 84 churches. Located in Virginia, the district includes all of Bland, Buchanan, and Tazewell Counties and parts of Giles, Pulaski, Russell Counties – and even one church in Mercer County, West Virginia.

- **Largest membership church:** First Pearisburg, with 703
- **Largest average worship attendance:** First Bluefield, with 207
- **Smallest membership church:** Strader, with 9
- **Smallest average worship attendance:** Strader, with 6
- **Oldest church:** Pisgah, founded in 1793
- **Youngest church:** First Christ, built in 1985 and dedicated in 1996
- **Congregation with largest growth:** Shady Grove of Mechanicsburg Circuit, with 18 percent

Who's the boss? The Rev. Don Nation has served as district superintendent since 2004. Before that, he served as pastor at Grundy (1980-84), Virginia Avenue (1984-90), and Bethel (1985-90). Jamie Boone, district administrative assistant since 1996, regularly attends Main Street UMC with her husband, parents, daughter, son-in-law, and nine-month-old grandson. The district office is located in a restored former newspaper office at 308 West Main Avenue in Tazewell.

Vroom, vroom. The district is home to the "Blessing of the Bikes," sponsored by the East Tazewell Circuit since 2002. This May, about 190 motorcycles and 300 people congregated for Sunday lunch followed by a pastoral prayer for the riders' protection. Several Tazewell preachers are bikers, including Rodney Lawson (East Tazewell Circuit), Raymond Klaiber (Macedonia/Midway), Steve Aker (Ebenezer/Bailey), Doug Hyndrich (First Rich Creek) ... and even the district superintendent.



She'll be coming round the mountain: Another celebrated ministry is hosted by the Round Mountain Circuit, specifically New Hope Union UMC and Pastor Alan Ashworth. Hikers who come through Bastian along the Appalachian Trail are delighted to find signs offering a free hot breakfast at the church. The congregation also places an ice chest of cold drinks – along with free New Testaments – on the trail. The longtime ministry has been featured nationally by UMTV.org and United Methodist News Service.

Love that Laurel: Tazewell members are mighty proud of Camp Laurel, visited by more than 2,500 people each year for church outings, youth retreats, family reunions, and weddings. The camp has a colorful history that includes a logging company and rooster fights. (A sign on the path to vespers reads, "A Gambling Site Turned to a Place of Worship.") Visit explorecampl laurel.com for some fun.

End to end: The district is long and skinny, with mountains that increase travel time from church to church. From Tazewell as the midway point, Nation can travel to either end of the district in 1 1/2 hours. At the northwestern-most point is Coleman's Chapel UMC in Buchanan County; at the southeast, Millirons UMC in Pulaski

County. Bordered by Kentucky and West Virginia, the district even dips into the latter to include Midway UMC. Because Bluefield sits on the state line, several Holstonians are also West Virginians (like Deborah Neal).

Famous name: Grundy UMC is the childhood church for author Lee Smith, who attended the former stone building in the heart of the coal town. "In fact, we came to church every time they cracked the door!" Smith said in an e-mail to *The Call*. The bestselling author of "The Last Girls" and "Fancy Strut" was married in the church and remembers eating pizza for the first time with her youth group in Myrtle Beach. "And every Christmas I got to be an angel in the church pageant. I have not been an angel since."

God's thumbprint: Among the scenic beauties in the district is Burke's Garden, sometimes called "God's thumbprint" because it's located in the bowl of a large valley. Burke's Garden UMC is located there – and there also Bishop James Swanson was stranded by a snowstorm in March 2007.

Best place to eat after church: Former district superintendent Gene Lovell (1998-2004) fondly remembers the Sunday buffet at Anna's Restaurant in Narrows. Jamie Boone likes the Chicken Francisco at K&W Cafeteria in Bluefield. But because the restaurants are limited and the best cooking is at home anyway, Deborah Neal and family love to gather for brunch after worship at Bethel. Neal's sister, Gilla Bradshaw, still serves up country bacon, eggs, and waffles, just like her mom did. ■



Author Lee Smith

What's cool in mydistrict



"Blessing of the Bikes" in Burke's Garden



Ministering to hikers on the Appalachian Trail