



Photo by Annette Spence, *The Call*

Signs placed in 250 Bristol lawns raised awareness and stoked pride among church members.

## Jan. 9 Proud, and here's the sign to prove it

Last summer, Joe-d DowlingSoka started thinking of ways to get more people to visit United Methodist churches in Bristol.

He knew there were 22 total United Methodist churches in Bristol, which sits on the Tennessee-Virginia state line. He also knew that September is a popular time for people to consider visiting churches, as they are returning to school and work routines after summer. That's why the denomination designates September as "Open House Month."

The Rev. DowlingSoka, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Bristol, wanted to get smaller churches to join with larger churches in inviting people to worship.

"It's hard, the relationship between churches of different sizes," says DowlingSoka. "Large churches like State Street can be threatening to a smaller congregation."

For example, First Bristol United Methodist Church has 120 in average worship attendance, while Paperville United Methodist Church has 23. State Street UMC has 270 in average worship attendance, while John Wesley UMC has 40.

DowlingSoka called Reed Shell, senior pastor at State Street UMC, and they started talking. DowlingSoka also called on his church's communications team to hatch a plan.

They decided to design a billboard that said, "Let me tell you about my church. The United Methodist churches of Bristol welcome you."

They also designed lawn signs that said, "Let me tell you about my church."

Next, they invited each of the Bristol churches to contribute \$100 toward billboards, and for individual church members to pay \$5.60 each for a lawn sign.

A key component on the lawn signs was the Web address, *Bristol.holston.org*, listing all United Methodist churches in the Bristol area. DowlingSoka worked with Donna Hankins of the conference communications staff to set up that page.

For the entire month of September 2007, signs appeared in the front yards of about 250 Bristol

residents, and a billboard was erected on Commonwealth Boulevard on the Virginia side of Bristol, close to the Tennessee line. What were the results?

Few of the 22 churches were able to contribute money toward the billboard, so State Street UMC paid the \$800 fee from a fund already designated for "media outreach," according to Shell. Twelve of the 22 churches purchased lawn signs.

Pastors said they were unable to assess whether visitors came to worship, just because of the signs.

"We had 30 visitors from the community during September," said DowlingSoka, "but I'm not sure they would or wouldn't have come because of the signs."

"I don't know that we gained any traffic through the front door, because we didn't have any guests that month," said Shell.

However, pastors and members were thrilled by the positive visibility generated by the signs – especially among United Methodists themselves.

"It was funny how many Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians came up to me and said, 'Wow, we didn't know there were so many United Methodists in this community,'" said Pastor Lloyd Jones of Addilynn Memorial United Methodist Church. "It not only opened the eyes of the community, but also the congregations. People could really see how many of their neighbors were part of a United Methodist worship community."

"It really got our logo out there in front of the public eye for a period of time," said Shell. "Congregants remarked that they saw signs in the lawns of people they didn't know were United Methodist."

DowlingSoka recalls that one church member joyfully counted the lawn signs she passed through town one day.

"There is a sense that we're not in this all by ourselves," DowlingSoka said. "There is a sense that we are proud to be United Methodist, because we've got something to offer. If I put a sign on my lawn, I'm making a statement, just like you do with political signs."

The Bristol churches do plan to revisit the campaign, especially during the times of the year when visitors are most likely to come to worship: back-to-school, Easter, or Christmas.

Members at Addilynn Memorial plan to get their lawn signs back out this month, just to remind people that church continues on "after the exhaustion" of the Christmas holidays, according to the Rev. Jones. "We want people to remember the church, even in the bleak midwinter."

DowlingSoka is considering a citywide effort again in September, but with more signs and more emphasis on inviting. While Shell hopes that State Street can pursue two billboards in the future, DowlingSoka believes that 1,000 lawn signs are also needed.

"250 signs is only a drop in the bucket," he said. "Also, for this to show up as an evangelism tool, members are really going to have to start inviting people to church."

"Evangelism isn't about marketing. It's about inviting."  
— Annette Spence



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The Rev. Clark Jenkins is senior pastor at First Broad Street UMC in Kingsport District.

## Jan. 16 Meet the preacher who left Hilton Head for Kingsport

This time last year, everyone wondered who would take the top spot at First Broad Street United Methodist Church, after the senior pastor announced his retirement.

Maybe they didn't expect Clark Jenkins, who wasn't a native of Holston Conference but of South Carolina. Jenkins was appointed as senior pastor of the Kingsport congregation in June 2007, following the Rev. Pierce "Jack" Edwards.

However, Jenkins knew about the active east Tennessee church long before most Holston members knew about him. From 1983 to 1990, the Rev. Jenkins was pastor of three small churches in impoverished St. Johns Island, S.C., where mission work teams from First Broad Street UMC frequently came to serve. Jenkins helped start a free medical clinic for migrant workers on Johns Island.

During those years, the pastor witnessed the commitment of First Broad Street mission workers, and he remembers thinking, "That is the kind of church I want to serve."

Today, the 54-year-old, third-generation pastor is leading the fourth largest congregation in Holston Conference, with 2,597 members and 837 in average worship attendance. On Jan. 6, the congregation moved into a new building, with staff offices and 25 sparkling new Sunday school classes.

"It's an exciting time to be in the life of this congregation," Jenkins says of his flock. "We've got a visioning team that's on fire."

Not that Jenkins came from an unsavory situation. Prior to arriving in Kingport, he served for three years as pastor at St. Andrews-by-the-Sea United Methodist Church in Hilton Head, S.C.

"I had no intention of going anywhere," he says, smiling. "It was Hilton Head. Who wants to leave Hilton Head?"

Located in an affluent community, the St. Andrews

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