



Photo by Dennis Loy for *The Call*

HANNAH WILLIAMS: The youth who shares God through her illness

By Annette Spence

Twelve-year-old Hannah is curled up in a blanket on a Sunday afternoon, weary from attending church. Yet, she emits energy as she chatters on about her medical trials and faith in God. Her baby blue eyes are the focal point of the room.

For more than two years, Hannah has battled cancer in her brain and spine. She has had two relapses since medulloblastoma was diagnosed in February 2006, the most recent relapse in March 2008.

Her cancer is now in remission, after surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. Today, Hannah is excited to talk about her journey and the special award she received in June.

Hannah Williams, a member at Mt. Zion United Methodist Church in Morristown District, is the recipient of the Harry Denman Evangelism Award for youth. She received the award during an emotional highlight of the Holston Annual Conference.

Hannah didn't know about the award until she was brought on stage at Lake Junaluska. Her family simply said they were taking a surprise trip to western North Carolina.

"When they announced my name, Preacher John said it was a high honor, an award for telling people about God," Hannah says, referring to Mt. Zion pastor John Thompson.

She was so surprised to find herself standing before 1,500 applauding people, all she knew to do was just – smile, she said.

Her smile, in fact, is frequently mentioned when people speak of Hannah's inspirational impact on her church and community.

"Just seeing Hannah deal with everything with a smile on her face and never failing to praise her Lord speaks

The Denman Winners

In June, three Holston members were recognized at Annual Conference for their efforts to lead people to Jesus Christ. Here are the stories behind the 2008 Harry Denman Evangelism Awards.

volumes," says Thompson. "There is something about that child that draws you to her. It is truly amazing."

Thompson – as well as Hannah's mother, Kathy Ogle – tell stories of how the girl freely shares her faith with nurses, doctors, hospital patients, church members, neighborhood children, and anyone else she encounters.

Hannah even inspired her mother and grandparents to return to church, after Hannah discovered Mt. Zion UMC about five years ago. The family previously had a "bad experience" with church, Thompson said. But Hannah found a church home after friends invited her to join them on the Mt. Zion van that transports children for Wednesday night activities or Sunday worship.

According to the young evangelist, her strong connection to God became evident when doctors diagnosed her brain tumor on Feb. 7, 2006. On Feb. 9, she underwent surgery with a dismal prognosis. Yet Hannah wasn't scared.

"God told me that I was going to be fine," she says. "He said he would take care of me."

On the morning of her surgery, Hannah lay in bed with a room full of family. People were crying, her pastor remembers. But the room became very quiet after the child spoke.

Hannah remembers the moment, too. "I said, 'It's OK. Why are you worried? We'll get through this,'" she says. "'God has already told me. I will be OK.'"

Hannah not only recovered from the surgery, her confidence didn't waver through the weeks of hospital stays and painful treatments, according to her mother.

"My faith has always been on the edgy side," admits Ogle. "But Hannah always says, 'Mom, don't worry.' That's how she is."

"You never ask why it happens," Hannah says to her mother, as if they've been conversing on this topic. "It's not God's fault. If it's God's fault, why is he helping me?"

Hannah is still undergoing chemotherapy, but she is well enough to attend school for the first time in two years. She cheerfully reports that her teachers are kind and the students haven't made fun of her hairless state.

As for the cancer, "it's likely to come back, but not in the same place," she says. In the meantime, she understands Preacher John when he says, "You have work to do."

"I know that God has called me," says the girl who was born on Christmas Day. She dreams of taking a mission trip, likes to volunteer in soup kitchens and buy gifts for the needy. She claims she prefers these activities to sharing her story, but then admits, "Once I get to talking, I tell everything."

"When I tell people about God, it makes me feel good," she explains. "I really want people to look at life differently. Because you don't realize, until you get sick, how wonderful life really is." ■

For more info

- Visit Holston's Denman page at denmanaward.holston.org
- Visit the Foundation for Evangelism at evangelize.org



Photo by Sarah Slack for *The Call*

By John Shearer

When Steve Sallee was a senior at a Chattanooga high school in 1969, he attended his prom on the same night a lay witness revival took place at his church, Forrest Avenue United Methodist.

About halfway through the prom, Sallee and his date felt an urge to leave and go to church. During a youth sharing time, Sallee, still wearing his formal prom clothes, made a bold and equally

STEVE SALLEE: The pastor behind Holston's two largest churches

formal announcement.

"All of a sudden I felt this strong, compelling feeling to announce that if it was God's will, I would probably be entering seminary in four years," said Sallee, whose father was a Baptist minister.

"I never looked back and never doubted it," says the Rev. Sallee, current senior pastor at Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville District. "Not that I have not had difficult times, but one calming thing is that I always felt wherever I was at that time, that was where God wanted me."

In the nearly four decades since that pivotal night, Sallee has continued to take bold steps for Christ. In recognition of his strategies for growing Christ UMC in Chattanooga District and later Cokesbury into the two largest churches in Holston, he received the Harry Denman Evangelism Award for clergy at Annual Conference in June.

As Sallee talked recently from his immaculate office, which features large letters of the word "Imagine" above his bookcase, he said he always felt compelled to lead growing and effective churches. "I don't know exactly where I got that," said the 57-year-old pastor. "I didn't get that at seminary."

One of his strategies is to combine evangelism and social action. Many churches, he said, focus on

one or the other.

Among the social outreach programs at Cokesbury is Celebrate Recovery, a Thursday-night ministry attended by about 400 people with addictions. Another program, Hope Initiative, helps families overcome their dependence on the church food pantry.

On the evangelism side, Cokesbury offers two traditional services and two contemporary services on two campuses. In the 12 years since Sallee has served Cokesbury, more than 900 professions of faith have been celebrated – more than the number of church transfers.

"We are really excited about that," he said.

"We are not interested in taking other churches' members."

Cokesbury, which now averages about 2,700 in worship, is also planning a third campus in the fast-growing Hardin Valley area of West Knox County.

Sallee began his ministerial career about a year after high school, when he served Tyner UMC while attending the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. After graduating from Duke Divinity School and serving at Tuckaleechee UMC followed by First-Centenary UMC, he was appointed pastor at St. Paul UMC in 1982.

At the time, the struggling Chattanooga church was hidden on Graysville Road in the East Brain-

erd area. "We were down to about 70 when I came," Sallee said. "Early on, I saw that the Methodist Church was not being well represented in East Brainerd."

St. Paul eventually merged with Shallowford Road UMC, purchasing 32 acres for a new church named Christ UMC. Attendance was enhanced by obtaining a visible location on East Brainerd Road, opening the building for community meetings, and providing a public walking trail. About 1989 or 1990, Christ UMC tried something that was new to Holston: contemporary-style worship.

"I received a lot of criticism," said Sallee, who organized the service after attending a Leonard Sweet workshop. "I had colleagues tell me it was just a fad, but it attracted people who were not coming to the traditional service and who never would have come."

By the time he was appointed senior pastor at Cokesbury in 1996, average worship attendance at Christ had grown to 750. Years later, Christ UMC continues to grow, which pleases Sallee greatly.

"One of the real tests of whether you are successful or not is what happens after you leave," he said. "If you are making this about the kingdom and not about yourself, someone can come in behind you and keep it going." ■

STEVE DIGGS: The lay member behind Emerald Youth Foundation

A former college football player and son of a United Methodist pastor, Diggs figured he could keep the job until he went to seminary within the year.

About the same time, Emerald Avenue United Methodist Church in North Knoxville wanted to reconnect with its surrounding neighborhood. The congregation decided to hire a youth worker.

After discussing his goals with then-Knoxville District Superintendent John Ripley, Diggs soon learned about the Emerald Avenue position. He met with the pastor, the Rev. Robert Bean, and was soon hired.

Eventually, that temporary youth job expanded into the position that Diggs holds today, as executive director of the non-profit Emerald Youth Foundation. What started as a ministry with an annual budget of \$50,000 now offers \$2 million in outreach services.

Diggs ended up not going to seminary, but he did go on to minister directly and indirectly to thousands of youths and others in Knoxville. He received the Denman Evangelism Award for laity at Annual Conference in June.

From an office next to the church, Diggs over

sees the foundation. With the help of 17 area churches and faith-based organizations, the foundation provides community outreach through a program called JustLead.

JustLead helps youth connect with the community in four areas – academic reinforcement, faith development, relationship building, and sports and enrichment. The academic reinforcement might include tutoring or homework assistance, while faith development might include helping the children connect with their families.

"We have to figure out ways to engage families in the faith development of young people," explained Diggs, age 42. "The truth is, most parents care about their kids."

Diggs tries to practice what he preaches, as he and his family have lived in the community served by EYF for many years.

Other Foundation goals include leadership building and empowering and equipping churches to carry out the ministries.

"People have been really generous and have a sincere appreciation for seeing young people in the community being disciplined and having the best

opportunity for enjoying life," he said.

Although Diggs has received much credit for the foundation's success, he said the ministry vision was already in place when he arrived at the church. He just tries to carry it forward.

"I am one of those who stepped into something God was already at work doing," he said. "I did not think urban ministry was going to be my calling."

Among those who have admired his work is Bean, who still serves as pastor at Emerald Avenue UMC.

"Steve is one of the most driven people you will ever meet," wrote Bean in his nomination of Diggs for the Denman Award. "He was given the spiritual gift of administration and never seems to tire in using it to advance Emerald Youth Foundation and Emerald Avenue UMC and improve his community and the neighborhood schools."

As for attending seminary, Diggs says he hasn't given it a second thought.

"I have been very humbled and honored by how good God has been with our work here," he said. "I can't imagine being anywhere else." ■