

The Christian Methodist Newsletter

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"Soldiering on" - Army of volunteers

With Memorial Day coming up, let us remember the courageous battle in which our troops are engaged overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan. We regret the actions of those United Methodist bishops and denominational employees who oppose the war and thereby put these brave men and women in greater danger by encouraging the terrorists. The reality is - we truly are engaged in World War III.

The blast blew the Humvee doors off, launched its outsized engine block skyward like a toy, and catapulted a flaming man out of the gun turret into the ink-black night. Less than a mile away, inside Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bernstein near Tuz, Iraq, radio traffic exploded: "Eliminator Five Alpha attacked by IED! Eliminator Five Alpha attacked by IED!"

Commanding a Humvee gun-truck and with two Bradley Fighting Vehicles in trail, Sergeant First Class James Sanders, 42, of the 278th Regimental Combat Team's 2nd Platoon ripped through the FOB's front gate. He could see a yellow-orange fireball lighting the horizon 1,400 meters away and hear machine-gun fire chattering across the distance.

SFC Sanders' squad closed the gap in less than two minutes. His driver, Specialist Clayton Crowell, braked hard and skidded to a stop behind the ruined Humvee, now an inferno. Two hundred fifty meters further on, another Hummer, commanded by Staff Sgt. Luis Aponte, was already on the scene, spraying bullets in arcs, securing the road ahead. Between the able Humvees, the burning gun-truck began to crack and zing as the thousand M240 rounds inside cooked off.

SFC Sanders shouted a situation report into his radio. Then from his left, he heard calls for help.

Aiming flashlights, SFC Sanders and his men spotted a soldier down, and sprinted toward him. The IED (improvised explosive device) blast had sent Specialist Kevin Downs, a 20-year-old gunner, 35 feet through the air. The 6-foot, 190-pound former wide receiver lay broken on the hard-pack, his right femur snapped, his desert-camouflage uniform burnt black.

Stricken, SFC Sanders bent over the injured soldier. "Are you in pain?"

"No," Spc. Downs rasped, unable to feel his charred flesh, shattered arm, or that both his feet had been blown nearly off.

A medical team hunkered over the gunner, assessing, tending. "Who else was on your truck?" SFC Sanders asked, feeling the press of missing men.

"Reese, Hawn, and Taylor."

A gurney appeared and medics hoisted Spc. Downs aboard. Suddenly, the young soldier grabbed SFC Sanders' hand and stared fiercely into his eyes: "Promise me you'll go get those [expletives] that did this to me and my crew," he said.

"I will," SFC Sanders pledged. "2nd Platoon will do so."

In the moments ahead, that promise would harden into iron: Reese, Hawn, and Taylor were dead.

For many members of the 278th, that day, Aug. 13, 2005, now seems like a different life, one that perhaps contained their last unstained moments. The Army National Guard unit out of Knoxville, Tenn., landed in Iraq in November 2004. Lt. Col. Jeff Holmes, 44, a Nashville architect, commanded 3rd Squadron—700 of about 3,200 troops, including SFC Sanders' 25-man platoon.

For 10 months, Lt. Col. Holmes' squadron braved blistering firefights, treacherous house-clearing operations, and high-tension hunts for insurgents and IEDs, all without a single death.

The number of U.S. casualties in 2006—most killed by IEDs—roughly parallels the number killed from January through May of 2005. But in response to progress in forming a new Iraqi government, insurgents have tripled attacks on Iraqi civilians, killing more than 3,400 since January.

The possibility of losing men haunted Lt. Col. Holmes late at night, before sleep. "My goal was to accomplish the mission and bring everybody home, period," Lt. Col. Holmes said. "But I knew that the longer we went without losing anybody, the odds grew against us."

The storied 278th had emerged from an 18th-century populist military tradition in which small bands of rough country men routinely whipped fancy English armies. In fact, the men of the region stood so ready to offer themselves for service in arms that Tennessee became known permanently as the Volunteer State.

Against such a backdrop it didn't seem too much to hope that the 278th might add to the legacy by bringing every soul home safe. And by last summer Lt. Col. Holmes had begun to think that 3rd Squadron might be able to pull it off. Then came the 13th of August, he said, "and all that kind of shattered."

The shattering continues, not only for the 278th, but for the friends and families of all 2,455 Americans killed in Iraq since fighting began in 2003. Every soldier interviewed for this article considers such sacrifices heroic and necessary. Still, with the fifth Memorial Day remembrances since the attacks of 9/11, the deaths in the war on terror hover over the present and—particularly for loved ones—cast long shadows into the future.

For SFC Sanders, it is a future with a hole in it. After medics carried Spc. Downs away, the sergeant retraced his steps. Rounding the right side of the Hummer, he saw a body-armored man lying face-down amid mangled radio parts and other debris. Rolling him over, SFC Sanders saw the face of Staff Sergeant Asbury "Fred" Hawn II, 35, his close friend.

"It surprised me when I found him," SFC Sanders told *World* magazine, his voice breaking. "I checked his pulse. There wasn't one."

A father of two from Lebanon, Tenn., Staff Sgt. Hawn imported his love for children to the 18 villages around FOB Bernstein. "He knew that the children would someday be the future of Iraq," SFC Sanders said. "Fred didn't speak Arabic, but with the children, he didn't need an interpreter." He brought them candy, gum, crayons, and paper, always gifting the smallest children first and teaching them to share. Chattering and happy to see him, the older children brought Staff Sgt. Hawn chai and he would sit and drink it with them, and with the older village men, SFC Sanders said. "You looked at him and he was on top of the world."

Edging around to the other side of the blazing Hummer, SFC Sanders found two more men lying dead under burning wreckage: Sgt. Shannon Taylor and Spc. Gary "Lee" Reese.

Only that morning, SFC Sanders had pinned sergeant stripes on Taylor, 30, a rough-and-tumble outdoorsman who cherished his country-boy upbringing in Smithville, Tenn. A born-again Christian who played guitar—he especially liked Alice in Chains—he passed out his grandma's homemade cookies to his platoon-mates, and wrote her letters to pass along their praise.

"He was very knowledgeable, very intelligent," SFC Sanders said. "If some guy wanted a little time off, Taylor would always fill in."

SFC Sanders remembers how the soldier looked when he was promoted to sergeant that morning. "There's no words to describe the glint in his eyes—the pride, the sense of accomplishment," he said, then issued a broken sigh: "He wore the rank for less than 10 hours."

Spc. Lee Reese, 22, of Ashland, Tenn., had wanted to celebrate Sgt. Taylor's new rank, which was why he was in the lead vehicle that day, instead of in the trailing Humvee. "He was usually driving for me," said Staff Sgt. Aponte, 40, who was in command of the gun-truck traveling just 50 meters back when Spc. Reese's Humvee exploded. "He wanted to go in the first vehicle because he and Sgt. Taylor were getting close."

Besides that, Spc. Reese preferred dangerous missions to sitting bored in the FOB. In letters home, he was adamant that fighting for democracy in Iraq was the right thing to do. And he loved the people, Staff Sgt. Aponte said. "He used to be one of those guys who, every time we'd stop to search someone, the next thing you know, he's embracing the other guys, the Iraqis . . . letting them wear his sunglasses."

After he died, Ashland residents taped posters of Spc. Reese, smiling and waving the way they remembered him, in the windows of their homes and businesses. The National Guard promoted him posthumously to sergeant.

Specialist Kevin Downs, the only survivor of the Aug. 13 IED attack, also earned his sergeant stripes after the incident. But for the next four weeks he hovered near death. He suffered severe burns over 60 percent of his body, including his hands, rendering them useless. Unable to salvage his ruined feet, surgical teams amputated both his legs below the knees.

Doctors and nurses sat and cried with Joe Downs, 62, and his wife Catherine, twice telling them the young soldier would not live. As Christians, the Downses leaned heavily on prayer and ultimately, Spc. Downs did live, surviving more than 24 operations. Nine months after the explosion, he is still in the ICU at Brook Army Medical

Center in San Antonio. Just this month, he has regained the use of the thumb and two fingers on his right hand, and the thumb and one finger on his left hand.

Back in October, SFC Sanders and Tennessee National Guard General Gus Hargett traveled to San Antonio to promote Spc. Downs in rank. By then, SFC Sanders had kept his promise: The village mutar who planned the Aug. 13 attack was locked in a Baghdad prison.

When he learned that his platoon sergeant was coming with a general to promote him, Spc. Downs "told the nurses that he didn't want to see us unless he was standing at attention," SFC Sanders said. "So we go in and here's this young man, standing at attention on his prosthetic legs with pride. I pinned his stripes to his hospital gown. He told me he accepted his situation, that God has different things for us in our futures."

In all, 3rd Squadron lost six men. On Aug. 22, Sgt. Joseph Hunt, 27, and Staff Sgt. Victoir Lieurance, 34, died in a roadside bomb attack. On Oct. 13, Sgt. Robert Tucker, 20, died when IED exploded near his Humvee.

SFC Sanders, who himself was injured in an Oct. 13 IED attack, doesn't want to forget the past. Every day, unbidden, memories play like video clips through his mind: Fred Hawn, completing paperwork with military precision, then inviting him to play Battlefield 1942 on linked computers . . . The live-wire Lee Reese hollering through the halls, "Mail! Mail's here!" . . . and affable tough-guy Shannon Taylor, traipsing to the latrine in flip-flops and pajama pants, toting an M-4 rifle.

SFC Sanders gazes sadly at the pictures of his fallen friends he keeps in his living room. "I miss them," he said.

Architects, businessmen, paramedics, moms, and dads by day, historic Tennessee National Guard unit paid the ultimate price in Iraq by night. This [next] Memorial Day, we will remember.

- *World Magazine*; May 27, 2006.

Church Official Playing Diplomat Again

A delegation of U.S. religious leaders to Iran includes James Winkler, general secretary of the UM General Board of Church and Society. The delegation, which arrived in Tehran Feb. 19, met with the Archbishop of the Armenian Church in Iran and the Tehran-based Ayatollah who leads Friday prayers and is a member of the Iranian Council of Experts. The group also met with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Representatives participated in a 3-hour "Quest for Truth" meeting on Feb. 20 sponsored by the Islamic Culture and Religion Organization. We sincerely regret this action. This is one of many by Winkler and other church employees that undermines the diplomatic initiatives of our own government officials. Unfortunately, our church officials have shown a woeful lack of expertise in dealing with international relations and seem to have amnesia when it comes to remembering what some of these other governmental leaders do and the repression against their own people as well as others. This is one general board that would be better suited to following its original mandate – to fight against the alcohol problem facing our nation.

- Commentary by Allen Morris

1/3 of Protestants – not Convinced to Stay in 1 Church

Of those Protestants who attend worship at least once a month, a third say they may not continue attending the same local church in the future. A recent study by Ellison Research also says that of those who do switch, one fourth would only consider a congregation of the same denomination.

Nevertheless, on average, adults have been attending the same church for 13.7 years, though Ellison Research says this may be skewed by a few who report high number of years. The median figure (half of respondents said more, half said less) is 6.6 years. Older attendees are more likely to stay in one church for longer periods of time, as are Lutherans and Presbyterians.

However, those churches with attendees of less longevity also have more active worshippers. While 28% said that if they had to change they would only consider a church of the same denomination, another 41% said they would have a strong preference for the denomination even as they would consider others. According to Ellison Research, Methodists (as a denominational family) are slightly less likely "to express loyalty to their current church," with 19% considering only their Methodist denomination. However, 59% of current Methodists have a strong preference for the denomination. The least denominational loyalty is seen in Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and non-denominational churches.

- UMNewscope, February 16, 2007

The National Council of Churches Should Have Died

A restaurant that serves lousy food, a bad movie no one goes to see, a book no one reads, and a church that empties its pews and runs out of both people and money, should all meet the same fate. They should all go out of business. It's the natural dynamic of all market endeavors. Failure is a great teacher. The market shouts "you're doing something wrong."

We've all witnessed the plummeting attendance of liberal mainline denominations for decades. The market has been shouting. Go soft on the authority of the Bible, preach church-lite fluffy "be happy" messages every Sunday, avoid calling sin by its name, abandon orthodoxy and replace the message of the cross with the social gospel and you eliminate the primary reason for going to church in the first place – to be convicted of sin by the Word of God. If you're not a sinner, you don't need to be saved. Eliminate teaching the Bible at church and you're just a social club and/or a political organization.

On the other hand, as in Field of Dreams, "if you teach it, they will come." Evangelical churches have been growing while the liberal churches have been shrinking, across all demographics, precisely because of their fidelity to teaching the Bible. People don't really want a therapy session, they want the Spirit of God to speak into their lives. They're properly convicted, and they want help. That's the church. Sinners reconciled to a Holy God, and now working with Him against evil in the world in fighting units called "ministries." And though we may lose many battles, we're assured victory because of what Jesus did on the Cross.

There are only two things that can happen when sin and the Bible clash: either sin will change the Bible, or the Bible will change the sin. When Barack and Hillary say homosexuality is not immoral, they're telling you volumes. When the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ are all proud members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (www.rcrc.org), they're shouting.

Today, the strongest indicators of where a church is theologically, politically, socially, and thereby economically, is their view of homosexuality and abortion. If they are sins, you're likely looking at a healthy, Bible-believing church. If they are not a sin, you're looking at a political group fronting as a church. The Religious Left is far more "Left" than "religious" – they may look like a church on the outside, but on the inside, they're a political organization advancing a leftist social agenda. And now, there's hard evidence to back it up.

John Lomperis and Alan Wisdom at the Institute on Religion and Democracy have put together a 90-page report entitled *Strange Yokefellows: The National Council of Churches and Its Growing Non-Church Constituency*. It's free from

their website www.ird.org. I encourage you to read the whole thing. But for now, here are the main points you need to know.

The National Council of Churches represents 35 denominations and claims to represent 45 million people. From their website (www.nccusa.org) the Preamble to their Constitution reads, The National Council of Churches is a community of Christian communions, which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, as Savior and Lord. These communions covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church. Relying upon the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the communions come together as the Council in common mission, serving in all creation to the glory of God.

Nice sounding words. Do you think they believe them? In the beginning, no doubt, the founders of the NCC believed every word. Solid foundation. Noble goals. Good for them.

But, let's take a look at what it means these days to "manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church."

[Note: We profoundly agree; this is a sound analysis. – AOM]

- By Frank Pastore, March 25, 2007

Pastor takes in Homosexual as Member

The pastor of a Virginia United Methodist church has granted membership to the gay man whose 2005 denial of membership by the previous pastor prompted controversy across the denomination on the issues of homosexuality and pastoral authority. During worship services on March 11 at South Hill (Va.) United Methodist Church, the Rev. Barry Burkholder accepted the man's transfer of membership from a Baptist church to South Hill United Methodist Church.

So the story reads as put out over the United Methodist News services. This has caused an uproar among the people in that church. I have already had multiple meetings with them in answer to their anguished question, "What

can we do?" It turns out that the preacher Burkholder took him into membership in a somewhat "under the radar" manner without informing the church's members of what he had planned.

If you will remember, this is the man whom The Rev. Ed Johnson was counseling about his lifestyle in the hopes that he would be brought out of it; it looked as if he were about to leave it when Rev. Johnson's efforts were short-circuited. When the bishop Charlene Kammerer found out about it, she brought tremendous pressure on Rev. Johnson, then worked it to where he was removed from his pulpit with out pay, benefits, or housing. When his case was appealed to the Judicial Council, Rev. Johnson was upheld and Bishop Kammerer was ordered to restore him to his pulpit with back pay. - Commentary by

Allen Morris with *UMNS* report by Linda Green, April 4, 2007.

Commentary: How to become a General Conference delegate

As United Methodists gather for their annual conference sessions this year, their 2008 global assembly will be uppermost in their minds. In addition to acting on legislation to send to the 2008 General Conference to be held in Fort Worth, Texas, the annual conferences will elect a total of 1000 delegates to represent their areas. In order to be a delegate, you must have been a member of the United Methodist Church for two years and active in a United Methodist congregation within the boundaries of the annual conference for four years.

Step one: Consider whether you really want to be a General Conference delegate. Don't expect a lot of free time to spend in the pool and to visit; [you'll be] working on legislation from early in the morning to late at night. Finally, pray about this decision. Is this what God wants you to do? If you still want to be a delegate, here are the next steps:

Step two: Gain visibility beyond your local church [by becoming known to other UMs in the district and conference.

Step three: Read rules governing election in the conference journal.

Step four: Publicize your interest in becoming a delegate

If conference rules allow, prepare a brochure with a photo, a biographical sketch, and how you stand on specific issues facing the denomination. Mail these brochures to the lay members of your annual conference in advance of the conference session.

Step five: Seek the counsel of others.

Step six: Campaign at the 2007 annual conference. Before the conference, read Paragraphs 601-655 of the 2004 *Book of Discipline* so you are familiar with the operating rules. Arrive early and introduce yourself to members while they are registering. If conference rules allow, ask friends to hand out brochures and talk about you. Lay members may only vote for lay delegates and clergy for clergy delegates

Step seven: Your work begins immediately after elections, newly elected delegates will gather to select a delegation chairperson and choose legislative committees. Odds are great that delegates will select legislative committees in the order in which they are elected. If you are a General Conference delegate, you are also a jurisdictional conference delegate, and that delegation will schedule a meeting at annual conference. At that gathering, members may elect representatives to the jurisdictional committee on the episcopacy and set times for future meetings.

- By Rich Peck, United Methodist News Service; March 15, 07

Worth Remembering:

A Father's Anguish

After a few of the usual Sunday evening hymns, the church's pastor slowly stood up, walked over to the pulpit and, before he gave his sermon for the evening, briefly introduced a guest minister who was in the service that evening.

In the introduction, the pastor told the congregation that the guest minister was one of his dearest childhood friends and that he wanted him to have a few moments to greet the church and share whatever he felt would be appropriate for the service.

With that, an elderly man stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak. "A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific coast." he began. "When a fast approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to the shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright and the three were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized."

The old man hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time since the service began, looking somewhat interested in his story. The aged minister continued with his story, "grabbing a

rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: to which boy would he throw the other end of the life line. He only had seconds to make the decision.

The father knew that his son was a Christian and he also knew that his son's friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves. As the father yelled out, 'I love you, son!' he threw out the life line to his son's friend. By the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells into the black of night. His body was never recovered.

By this time, the two teenagers were sitting up straight in the pew, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of the old minister's mouth. "The father," he continued, "knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus and yet he could not bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into an eternity without Jesus. Therefore, he sacrificed his son to save the son's friend.

How great is the love of God that He should do the same for us. Our Heavenly Father sacrificed his only Begotten Son that we could be saved.

I urge you to accept His offer to rescue you and take a hold of the life line He is throwing out to you in this service." With that, the old man turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room.

The pastor again walked slowly to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon with an invitation at the end. However, no one responded to the appeal. Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old man's side. "That was a nice story," politely stated one of them, "but I don't think it was very realistic for a father to give up his only son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian."

"Well, you've got a point there," the old man replied glancing down at his worn bible. A big smile broadened his narrow face he once again looked up at the boys and said, "It sure isn't very realistic, is it? But I'm standing here today to tell you that story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up his son for me. You see... I was that father and your pastor is my son's friend."

Spiritually Speaking:

A baseball star, Billy Sunday played for the Chicago White Stockings (Sox) in the 1890's. Born during the Civil War in a log cabin in Iowa, his father, a Union Army soldier, died of pneumonia when Billy was a month old.

At age 15, he struck out on his own, working several jobs before playing baseball. His career took off and he became one of the most popular athletes in the nation.

While recovering from a baseball injury in 1887, he heard a group of gospel singers after leaving a Chicago saloon. They invited him to their mission where he experienced a conversion.

He began attending YMCA meetings, quit drinking and got married. A national sensation occurred February 17, 1889, when Billy Sunday preached his first sermon as an evangelist in Chicago.

He went on to pioneer radio broadcasting so enthusiastically that the FCC was formed in response. During the next 46 years, till his death on November 6, 1935, over 100 million people would hear him.

In his animated style, Billy Sunday said: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile."

- American Minute, Bill Federer, Feb. 17, 2007