

Older Adult Retreat

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MYRTLE BEACH — The Older Adult Retreat held each year is “one of the best kept secrets in the conference,” said Bayard Lindell of Greenwood’s Main Street UMC.

Three hundred United Methodists came to Myrtle Beach to enjoy the spirit-lifting hymns led by the Rev. Paul Frey, the fun and fellowship, worship and, most of all, the challenging messages of Dr. Leonard Sweet, author, futurist and professor at Drew University.

A tree, painted by Lallage Jones years ago, was the logo used for the retreat. Jones, a member of First UMC in Lancaster, is 101 now.

Older Adult Council Chairperson Betty Shuler called an impromptu Founders’ Day for the Older Adult retreat, singling out such leaders as June Willson, the Rev. Hazel Bennett, Betty Bruner and Harold Scipio. Scipio’s late wife is memorialized with a scholarship fund. Donations of more than \$1,500 made at the retreat provide opportunities for more older adults to attend. Applications are due Oct. 31.

Rachel Shupe was chair of the 2010 retreat to which St. John UMC in Aiken brought the most people, 39. Shupe, from Grace UMC in Williamston, said each year she thinks the retreat can’t be any better, but “it always is.”

Congregational specialist Cathy Joens serves as the council’s coach.

The Rev. Mary Green Kearse, chair of Mission and associate pastor of Shandon UMC, invited participation in the Older Adult Mission Event to be held April 20-22, and asked for names of churches that “need a little boost.” The group paints, does light yard work, installs handicap ramps and other jobs some churches are not able to do. “It’s a lot of fun,” she said. This year, they are going to Pleasant Grove UMC in the Marion District.

Ruth Hughes, Leisure Ministries director at Aldersgate UMC in Greenville, kept attendees hopping with line dances, Wii action and chair-exercises set to the rhythms of “Jailhouse Rock.” A talent show kept attendees laughing more than an hour and featured Betty Shuler, a member of Providence UMC, Holly Hill; Janice Ramsey and Doris Thomas of Philadelphia UMC, York; Therlon Joiner, Silver Hill Memorial UMC, Spartanburg; Robert Scarborough, Bethel in Pelion; Cathy Joens, congregational specialist, and Doris Sullivan, Aldersgate UMC, Mount Pleasant; and Steve Wilson, Union UMC, Columbia.

Sweet dragged everyone kicking and screaming into the 21st century with a warning that the church is dying and it had better learn the language needed to reach 2010 people, and had better get with the program, doing the dirtiest of jobs in order to be in relationship with “the least of these.”

Jesus often said, “Verily, verily . . .” which Sweet said means “listen up, pay attention.” “Pay attention: every bush is burning,” is one of Sweet’s latest MP3 releases and was his retreat theme.

“God’s up to something. Do we know God well enough to know what God’s up to?” Sweet asked. The first rule is not “show and tell,” but to shut up and listen. “How can we join him in what he’s already doing. It’s not the church’s mission; it’s God’s mission. Is God going to have the church as part of his mission?”

“Why is the church the last one to get this? Advertising gives you images and metaphors, not words. When you dream, you dream images, not words,” Sweet said.

“We’re losing our kids because we don’t know how to talk to them. Church, learn your culture! Nobody is buying a product; they’re buying relationships. We’re not paying attention.”

Missionaries, he said, spend two years learning the language before they go on the mission field. “There is a mission field out there and we’re not learning the language.”

“What do the natives do when they find themselves in a new world? They create a little enclave to ‘preserve the old country,’” Sweet said, suggesting that that’s what denominational churches such as United Methodists are doing.

Sweet told the story of a Jewish family escaping over the mountain before the Hitler’s soldiers came. The grandfather kept stopping, telling his family to go on, but they kept insisting he come with them. He made it halfway and

said, "I can't go on. Let me tell you goodbye and you go on." "Father, it's your turn to carry the baby," the son said, handing him the baby. The grandfather carried the baby across the mountain to safety. "The future is going to leave you behind; no, you've got to carry the children and the grandchildren over the mountain," Sweet told the older folks.

Generations ago, the church had a farm system, just as baseball teams do. Children were nurtured all the way to seminary, he said, suggesting that the older adults must "carry the baby."

"The greatest failure in the church is to provide this culture with a culture other than 'Shop 'til you drop.' Here's the problem: We dropped."

Sweet said we have gone from Descartes' famed quote to "I consume, therefore I am."

"This is exactly how you all define church: the ABCs — Attendance, Buildings and Cash — in your annual reports. Annual reports have all the consumptive models of success."

During the dialogue session that followed, Dorothy Quist of Centenary UMC in Hartsville, said the value placed on consuming is an important message. "I think we're at a crossroads."

Sweet has another idea to replace consumers: "You were born to be 'conceivers,' … to birth Christ. But 'how do you know Christ is being conceived?' Sweet said it is when we use St. Thomas Aquinas' three transcendentals, 'when you see beauty, truth and goodness.'"

The church and the planet are dying of consumption, Sweet said, taking note of the historic meaning of the word.

Sweet led the group on a study of the Bible — from beginning to end, in an hour!

The first and last commandment to humankind are important, he said.

The earliest creation story in the Bible, the seminary teacher said, is actually the second creation story — verse 15 — wherein God gave mankind his first commandment: "Tend my garden and till it." "Conserve" is the best translation of the Hebrew for "tend."

"Notice I didn't say 'preserve,'" Sweet said.

God was clear we are not "co-creators," but "sub-creators. We're not to go off on our own creativity, but to 'take what I (God) have done and be creative.'"

"The story begins in a garden, and it ends in a garden city — a new Jerusalem."

God's first commandment was, "Feely eat … ." Then God put Adam in the position of conceiving by asking him to name the birds and beasts. After that, God created woman from Adam's rib, a parallel Sweet connects to Jesus' heart bursting on the cross and, and thus when the "second Adam's body is split, the church is born."

"God loved to walk in the garden when the dew was on the ground. We were meant to walk and talk in the garden with him," Sweet said. But Adam and Eve "weren't happy with 999 trees. … they broke their relationship with God. ('And we killed the last dodo bird, the last passenger pigeon … .' he said.) 'It's called 'choice and consequences.' God said, 'Get out of the garden. Your future now is work. All creativity is play, but now you'll work.'"

God attempts to bring us back into the garden, to heal the broken relationships (sin), Sweet said. God tries everything, covenants, burnt offerings. Finally God says, "I gotta go for broke. God steps in through Jesus the Christ. Jesus came to show us how to be the original Adam/human and return us to the garden.

"And who is the first person Mary sees at the tomb? Who does she think he was? She thinks he's the gardener."

Sweet moved to the last chapter in the Bible, verse 17, for God's last commandments to juxtapose his first in Genesis, "eat freely," against Revelation's "And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

"The Bible has bookends, and anything in between is a table. It's a full life-course meal," the retreat leader said.

Sweet presented a jarring reality. While he credits one of Andrew Carnegie's 1,700 public libraries with changing his life, he noted that Carnegie built these over a 35-year period. In 1971, the cell phone was invented and, 30 years later, 3.3 billion cell phones are in use in a world of 6.6 billion people.

"There is a whole new world being born all around us," Sweet said, continuing to hammer home the need for a change of language as well as a change of life. In today's jargon, Jesus "was a master re-framer," Sweet said. "You have heard it said, but I say …" What followed, he said, were not the usual seven points, but an image, a metaphor.

Sweet said things will pop out if you read the Bible holistically, not by the later invention of verses. He cited the paradoxes in Jesus' language, Alpha and Omega, Lion of Judah and Lamb of God. "You want to be first? You have to be the last."

Wesley rediscovered the word, "holiness," and Sweet laid out what the word means. With talk of incarnation and the word becoming flesh, Sweet asked, "How far down did he go?" he asked. He went all the way down to wash the smelliest, filthiest part of the body in that day, the feet. "We have this image of holiness as keeping our hands clean. If you're not getting our hands dirty and wet, you have a problem; Jesus does a 're-framing' of the holiness code."

A rescue mission director said folks love to come down and ladle out food, especially when the TV cameras are there at Christmas, but "to get you Christians to be in relationship with the homeless" is impossible.

"There is a reason why God raised up the Methodists, for the doctrine of holiness," Sweet said. "I believe God raised up John Wesley more for the 21st century than the 18th century."

Theologian Karl Barth occasionally preached in the local prisons and, in one sermon, "he was on a tear about any portrait of Jesus on the cross by himself. That does violence to the story."

The crucifixion story is a story of three men considered to be criminals on crosses, "one good, two bad, one of whom became good. This was the first Christian church," Sweet said. "You call yourself a church? Show me all your bad people. All good people? This is not a church! We've become the Pharisees. Wesley scandalized the church of his day because he sent the Methodists to be in relationships with everyone. Can you see Jesus in everyone? Pay attention to the Jesus in every one you meet."

Kearse, who led the final worship and Holy Communion, put Sweet's provocative statements and focus on the "burning bushes" into the framework of the story of Moses, an 80-year-old who tried to make excuses when God called.

"Yes, but – we say, or 'Lord, just let me give a bigger offering,' Kearse mimicked. "God doesn't acknowledge Moses' age. God is frustrated with our excuses.

"Our simple minds cannot conceive the mystery of God. When we are called from our comfortable places, God works in our lives where we go," Kearse said.