

SENIOR *Spotlight*

Vol. IV Issue 3 | June 2020

A MESSAGE FROM YOUR OUTGOING AND INCOMING DIRECTORS



Dear friends,

Some weeks ago, Dede Casad and I sat down at her dining room table and turned on the voice recorder. The idea was that our conversation with each other might be a useful way to introduce you to me and announce the transition from her to me becoming the new Director of Senior Life Ministries. Like most people, we had only a vague idea of what kind of impact this Covid-19 virus would have on the routines of our lives and how long things would be disrupted. (Actually, it's been one of the reasons this issue of The Senior Spotlight has been so long in getting to you.)

I still think Dede's and my original idea about publishing our conversation is a good one. So, with the understanding that some of it is a little dated, and with a little editing, here's what was said around the table:

Dede Casad: We've had quite a run on the Senior Life Ministry for the past three years, which I have been excited about and a part of and loved every minute of it. With me is Stephen Fleming. Most of you know who he is, and it is my good pleasure to tell you that he's going to take my place as the minister of Senior Life Ministries starting right now. Stephen, I want to welcome you and tell you that I am more than delighted that you have consented to do this, that you will certainly build on what we have started, and it will be even better than we have had it. And I look forward to everything that you're going to do. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Stephen Fleming: Dede, thank you so much. You know I am looking forward to this opportunity, too. I love this church. I grew up in it, I was baptized here back in 1950 not long after I was born, was confirmed here by Rev. Alsie Carlton, grew up through the Sunday Schools, was in the youth group, and was endorsed for entering the candidacy process for becoming an ordained minister by University Park's administrative board back in 1975. I had done my undergraduate work at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. From there I studied at the Claremont School of Theology in California for two years, interned in a Clinical Pastoral Education program at Parkland Hospital for a year, then finished my seminary education at Perkins School of Theology. I graduated in 1978 and began serving churches in the Louisiana Annual Conference. I had made a lot of connections with people in the church over in that conference while at LSU ...

Dede: Then that was your choice to go to the Louisiana Conference rather than stay in the North Texas Conference?

Stephen: I know people in the North Texas Conference hear that with disbelief, but yes, it's true. (both laugh) I wanted to explore a new country. And I know Texas has sometimes advertised itself as "a whole 'nother country," but, believe me, so is South Louisiana.

Dede: How'd your parents feel about that?

Stephen: Well, they let me know they were going to miss me, living over there not closer to them, but...

Dede: Tell folks who your parents were.

Stephen: My parents were Ed and Mary Fleming, and Frank Fleming is my brother. I do have some pretty strong historical and sentimental attachments to this church. So after having served for 41 years in churches and hospital chaplaincy in Louisiana, I moved back here for those reasons and because this is also where my wife Libbie's parents were living, and her daughter's family, too, including a new grandson. I had thought, though, that I would take some Sunday mornings to visit many if not most of the different United Methodist churches in the Dallas area. But I started off with University Park and liked it so much that I came the next Sunday, and the next Sunday, and, you know, I just got hooked. I mean, I couldn't really come up with a strong enough reason for going anywhere else.

Dede: Well I learned right away after you arrived here how you felt about ministry, about your dedication to God in his service, and I can tell you – and I think you can remember the date, it was at least two years ago – that I said, “Stephen, prepare yourself...” (both laugh) because I instinctively knew that you were the one to follow me whenever I decided I was too old to carry the burden any longer. So I will be at the church, of course. It's my church, too, and regardless of what the church does conference-wise or nation-wise, or however, this is going to be my church. And I think it will be yours, and I think we have a distinct service to perform because of all the uncertainty that is going on today.

Stephen: I do feel the same. But I want it known by everyone that I wouldn't be taking on this responsibility if I didn't know you were going to continue your involvement with this church as Director Emeritus of the Senior Life Ministry. It has been your vision and your enthusiasm that have shaped this into a wonderful and vital ministry of University Park UMC. There's such a strong sense of community I feel among those who are participating in this Senior Life Ministry. It's almost like a church within a church, or a Sunday School class at least, just all the things we do together. And I want to continue with your vision to keep us connected and keep us in touch. It seems especially precious to me right now in this current environment when we're not supposed to shake hands or touch or sneeze or cough or come within six feet of each other ...

Dede: ... or be connected in any way.

Stephen: Yes, our connectedness is having to take place in other ways.

Dede: But it will be good for us, Stephen. I think this will be good for our country; I think it will be good for our church. Just like what happened to us in January with EQUIP 2020. Nobody anticipated, least of all myself, but you and Maryam took immediate charge of it. It was as though it was planned that way, and like I said to somebody, you know when I said to God, I said, “Did you miss the weekend on when I was supposed to be sick?” And he said, “No; I have my reasons.” And as you know, God has reasons of which reason has no knowledge. And his reason was that you two would perform so well, along with all the members of the Steering Committee who rallied to the cause and made it a huge success! And that's thrilling to see and it's thrilling to me to realize that leadership is all over this church. We have such tremendous talent in people who are retired and people who are beginning to retire. You are one of the Baby Boomers, which is another reason why this is a natural fit for you. Because look at the people in our church who are Baby Boomers and will be part of your ministry now.

Stephen: So many are moving into that over 65 and 70 category, and there are people in that age group I've already been thinking about who are making decisions now about how and where they are going to structure their time and invest their gifts and graces. I want this church to be at least one of those places. And I want to tell you this, that you and I were doing something coincidentally at the same time, wondering when you got sick, asking God, “Why?” and you said he had his reasons. And I know right then Maryam and I were asking God, “Why have you done this to us?” (laughing together) And he said, “I have my reasons.”

Dede: Well, I hope we appreciate what really transpired, because I think it was the grace of God that pulled us through.

Stephen: It truly was. But the lion's share of the credit goes back to you. I don't know if you're humble to a fault or just unaware to a fault because it was really your leadership that got us to the point of being able to do what we did in your

Dede: It was a beautiful experience, and it says to me that you are ready, you are prepared, you have the skills, you have the knowledge, you have the intellect, you have all the ingredients that will make for a minister for, not only the current involvement of people who are in our church who are over 60 and 70, but also of those others who are coming right away. So what is your vision of what you'd like to see happening at UPUMC in the next year or two?

Stephen: Well, I'm still getting my feet under me. We've kind of been in upheaval, adjusting to the restrictions of this pandemic which, as you know, is so dangerous for people in our age group. But it's coming together. We're having to do a lot of things as video presentations rather than as live events. And we're going to keep having our Senior Life Thursday presentations on the Internet. And for now I'd like to perpetuate all the good things you've gotten rolling here, certainly including the EQUIP event. We need to continue it, not necessarily in the exact same format, but in some form or other. It has been such a success – not just for the people who come from all over as participants and then take their training back to their local churches, but for us here at University Park. It has been a team-building and spirit-enriching event to work together and exercise the spiritual muscles of our gifts for ministry in working together for the sake of the greater body of Christ.

Dede: Well from what I've heard from others, and they agree it was very successful, that there's something about the momentum that we've started here that we really should maintain. We've formed as a community of people who like to be together, who want to meet every year, and who want to learn from others how to do senior adult ministry even better and better.

Stephen: Another thing I want to try is to do some well-thought-out surveys of our senior membership to find out what people would really like to do. I know you've been thinking about this, too. I know we've been doing a good job of responding to the interests and opinions of those who regularly show up to the events we have. But I'm sure we're missing out on what we need to hear from less involved members. We need to find out what would appeal to their interests enough to motivate them to join in more. Maybe regularly having some day trips together to some of the many interesting places and events in and around Dallas – finding out what level of participation we might have if we were to do that.

Dede: I also think, Stephen, that one result we should be surveying for is finding out what people did before they retired. We need to have that information, because the talent in this church is unbelievable! I just tried to do it informally as I got to know people one at a time. I would like to see you do it fifty at a time. (laugh together) And if you had that knowledge you could then look and see how to use that, because from the discussions we had when we were making recordings of the Wisdom Seekers for EQUIP, one the first things we learned is that people want to be useful.

Stephen: Definitely! And another thing I got out of those sessions is that sometimes people can be a little shy when it comes to speaking up about what their gifts and graces are. People don't want to be arrogant or boastful, but God doesn't want us to bury our gifts and talents in a hole in the ground, either. God has equipped us the way we are to use our gifts productively for building up the community of faith. It brings out the best in us when we do, as well as being a benefit to others.

Dede: And it's such a gift. It's a gift people would like to give to the church. It's amazing! I had people absolutely thank me over and over again for asking them to do something. So I learned very quickly that it was okay to ask. If there's anything I can give you I will give you that: that people want to be asked.

Stephen: Well I know how true that is for me personally, right here, right now, because I wouldn't be talking to you here in your home and consenting to try to do this job if you hadn't asked me. I really wouldn't. I wouldn't have raised my hand or volunteered for it. But I'm so thankful you did ask me, because it has brought about a focus and an enjoyment in my life that I don't know that I would have found any other way. I've still got time to do other things in my post-career years that I have been looking forward to, but I would have missed out on something so rich and rewarding if you hadn't asked me, well, really TOLD me that this is what you wanted me to do.

Dede: Stephen, your talent is immense. I want you to know I recognized it a long time ago and I've learned more about it each time we meet and each time we talk. Every time I read what you've written and listened to what you say ...

Stephen: Enough, enough. I've accepted the job now so you don't have keep persuading me ...

Dede: Well, but I want everyone to know that you're well-suited for this.

Stephen: Thank you, Dede. With your help I'm looking forward to it. I think we're all just so blessed to have each other and the community that we've got here. And we need to respond out of the thanks in our hearts. Sometimes that means doing things we weren't expecting to be doing. But when we do, it ends up being a good deed which strengthens our connection with God and is a blessing to others and to ourselves.

Dede and Stephen

Stay Connected to UPUMC

Senior Life Thursdays

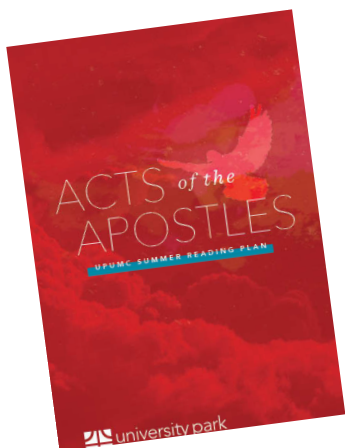
It surely isn't the same without actually physically being with each other on Thursdays at 11 o'clock. But second-best is the wealth of material found on our church's website: upumc.org. Over the past many weeks of quarantening with our church doors closed, those who were prepared to be our speakers on Thursdays have recorded their presentations! Our website, www.upumc.org, is undergoing some changes to adapt to our sudden increase in video programming, but you should be able to find many videos of our Senior Thursday speakers by clicking on "Ministries," then clicking on "Seniors." While you're on the website, check out all the other programming that has been provided for you there, too, including: Charles Hosch, Monica Frazier, the choir, and of course the weekly worship services.

News of Members

Fred Christen and his fellow "Woodies" at CC Young are highlighted in the latest issue of *The Advocate*, the Lake Highlands weekly newsletter. Fred and friends have re-focused their skills at woodworking and are now making protective masks for the residents of CC Young, workers at the SoupMobile, and for the homeless. To read about it, follow this internet link: <https://lakehighlands.advocatemag.com/2020/05/retooled-woodies/>.

Condolences

Our prayers, sympathies and condolences go out to the families of Evelyn Pospick, Robert Jackson, and Lori Anderson. Each precious gift of life from God transmits to us untold blessing that defies death's power to erase.



Church-wide study of the Book of Acts to kick-off the season of Pentecost!

This past Sunday over 500 study books, wonderfully written by our own Monica Frazier, were distributed, personally, to members of our church. This study of the Bible's Book of Acts is a great way to enter this liturgical season of Pentecost, which began on May 31st. You should have received a book at your front door yourself. (If you didn't, please call Stephen at 225-776-5753 and let him know!) This study will be extra meaningful knowing all of us at University Park UMC are engaged in it together!

FIND US ONLINE: To view detailed information about our Senior Life Ministry, please visit our website at www.upumc.org/ministries/seniors