

Devotional celebrates 70 years of connecting people, God

by LINDA GREEN

For 70 years *The Upper Room* has been bringing people together to experience Christ.

The daily devotional is a spiritual companion for more than 2.5 million Christians seeking to know and experience God more fully.

The magazine, along with an organization of the same name, is celebrating 70 years of helping people make space for God in their lives every day and of teaching ways to live in faithful response to God's calling, said the Rev. Stephen Bryant, editor and publisher for Upper Room Ministries, a division of the General Board of Discipleship.

The Upper Room helps people pay attention to what is central to faith — their relationship with God. The magazine "keeps people in touch with the here-and-now reality of God's presence in their lives," Bryant said.

The story of *The Upper Room* begins in the 1930s in San Antonio, when a group of women discerned, through prayer, that families needed daily worship and Bible study to sustain them through the economic depression. They asked their church for a devotional guide.

That request inspired the Board of



The women's prayer group at Travis Park United Methodist Church in San Antonio took a request to the former Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church to publish a quarterly devotional booklet which became *The Upper Room*.

INSET: The first issue

Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to publish a quarterly devotional booklet to be sold in the local church. The magazine was born in 1935.

Today *The Upper Room* is published worldwide in 73 editions and 44 languages. It is used by individuals and families and in meetings and other ministry settings in vastly different cultures in 100 countries.

A free e-mail edition of the daily devotion is available. It can also be read on the Internet at www.upperroom.org/devotional.

The magazine has lasted, says Sherry Elliott, director of administrative services for Upper Room Ministries, because it continues "being true to the intention of the prayer group. Those women knew exactly what Christians needed, and we have stayed on the path and keep that at the heart of the ministry."

Upper Room Ministries is at a critical juncture in its efforts to support people's spiritual lives, Bryant said. "We are in a time of revisioning and working closely with churches to find their deepest needs and respond."

Part of the 70th anniversary cele-

bration is redesigning the magazine with a new cover, photos of the writers and small group discussion questions.

The Upper Room gives Christians "very simple ways to practice the presence of God every day," Elliott said.

The simplicity is also a challenge. "People do not realize that you can do so much with it. It is perfect for outreach, evangelism. There is so much to it," she said.

Both Bryant and Elliott say *The Upper Room* is the most accessible resource in the church today. It is unique as it "is reader-written. Readers see God working through the lives of ordinary people," Elliott said. The writers, lay and clergy from around the world, represent many different denominations.

"The devotions come out of the real experience, needs and surprises of grace in people's lives," Bryant said.

However, he said, the Upper Room ministry is more about building community than simply about individual meditation.

A community space, created at www.upperroom.org/devotional/stories.asp as part of the anniver-



The Rev. Stephen Bryant, editor and publisher for Upper Room Ministries



Editors at The Upper Room in Nashville, Tenn., share a laugh during a meeting to evaluate manuscripts. From left are: Jim Stafford, associate editor, *The Upper Room*; Mary Lou Redding, managing editor, *The Upper Room*; Jorge Berrios, associate editor, *El Aposento Alto*; and Melissa Tidwell, editor, *Alive Now*.

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sary activities, asks “How did we meet?” and “When did you first come in contact with *The Upper Room* daily devotional guide?”

“We are always creating space for people to come together to experience Christ and learn practices of the faith,” Bryant said.

—Linda Green is a United Methodist News Service news writer based in Nashville, Tenn.

Upper Room devotions provide comfort for 60 years

Inspiration and comfort is found in the devotionals from *The Upper Room*, says a United Methodist who has read the magazine daily for the past 60 years.

Gladys Johnson, 82, a member of **Seay Hubbard United Methodist Church** in Nashville, Tenn., began reading the devotionals in 1945 after noticing the joy her brother, a Methodist minister, received from reading the magazine.



Gladys Johnson

“He used it every morning, and he inspired me to do the same. It has been a custom for me to read it every morning,” she said.

“It speaks to me,” she says of the guide. “The devotionals speak to things that happen in my life and give me inspiration for the day.”

She finds comfort as she discovers people from across the world with whom she shares similar life experiences. It is satisfying to her to know of God’s presence in her life and in the lives of the devotion writers.

Johnson recently gave her niece a subscription as a source of consolation when she encounters difficulties at college. “I want her to continue the tradition of reading *The Upper Room* daily,” Johnson said.

For Johnson, her daily devotional time “is a discipline. I have to read it every morning. It helps me be on a spiritual wavelength where I can be with God, see God in my life and how God works in my life and be able to do what God wants me to do,” she said.

“The first book I read every morning is *The Upper Room*.”



A magazine – and much more

Upper Room Ministries, a division of the General Board of Discipleship, began with the publication of the daily devotional guide that remains the heart of its ministry.

The offerings have expanded so that today they include additional publications, spiritual formation and nurture programs, prayer support through the Living Prayer Center (see article on page 34) and other resources to serve believers of all ages and denominations.

Upper Room resources are grouped in five areas:

- Personal spirituality
- Children, youth, young adults and families
- Small groups
- Spiritual leadership
- Cross-cultural and international ministries

Upper Room Ministries continues to respond to the spiritual needs of people and communities of faith through five other magazines (*Weavings*, *Devo’Zine*, *Pockets*, *Alive Now* and *El Aposento Alto*), books and other printed and online resources.

Upper Room Ministries has also developed seven events that bring people together in face-to-face communities for spiritual nurture. Among those are the Walk to Emmaus and the Academy for Spiritual Formation. All provide spiritual renewal and a nurturing of the mind, body and spirit.

Many of its resources are designed to support individual meditation and build community. Upper Room provides discussion space and other interactive features on the Web sites for each of its magazines.

Learn more about Upper Room Ministries at www.upperroom.org or by calling (615) 340-7200.

—all stories by Linda Green

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