

# FOR RELATIONSHIPS & LEADERSHIP, *the gift of renewal*

An Arkansas-based program called Renew offers a retreat and relationship support to United Methodist clergy and their spouses.

By: Sally Hicks, Editor of Faith and Leadership at Duke Divinity School

April 23, 2013 | Last October, Margot Porterfield and her husband, the Rev. Mark Porterfield, faced big changes in their life together. He was starting a new appointment as pastor at First United Methodist Church in Port Lavaca, Texas. She was going back to full-time work after five years. And with their two girls in college, they were coping with an empty nest.

So when they were invited to take part in Renew, a retreat designed for United Methodist pastors and spouses, the timing was exquisite. Being able to relax at an inn in the Texas Hill Country, eating delicious food -- including homemade cookies -- and taking part in fellowship and workshops with other couples was a profound experience at an important time.

"This was truly life-changing for us," Margot Porterfield said. "I'm very thankful for the gift."

This gift has been bestowed on more than 1,400 participants since 2003 through the generosity of anonymous donors -- a couple with a passion to help UMC pastors. The donors approached The Soderquist Center for Leadership and Ethics, which is affiliated with John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Ark., to help put their ideas into action on a large scale.

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Renew began by serving UMC clergy in Arkansas but has since expanded to serve the 10 episcopal areas of the church's South Central Jurisdiction, which covers a swath of the Southwest from Nebraska to Texas. It serves both clergy couples and single clergy.

The program has a number of goals, said Gary Swyers, the center's senior program manager. One is simply to offer pastors and spouses a relaxing, luxurious experience they might not be able to afford. Participants pay only the cost of travel to and from the retreats, which are held in a variety of locations. Another is to provide relationship counseling, both for couples and for singles. But the ultimate goal is for participants to strengthen their leadership skills.

"We want their relationship to be strong so that they can work together as a leadership couple," Swyers said. "Whether they want to or not, they are influencers in the arena that they find themselves in."

Bishop Janice Huie of Houston, Texas, who worked with the donors to create the program when she was bishop in Arkansas, now encourages all entry-level clergy in her Texas Annual Conference to take part.

"I believe they are getting tools that will help them over a lifetime," she said.

The Rev. Stephen Sanders, pastor of Spring Creek UMC near San Antonio, attended the same retreat as the Porterfields. He said he and his wife, Mary, loved being able to relax at The Inn Above Onion Creek, sip a glass of wine on the back porch and visit with other couples.



*The Inn Above Onion Creek in Kyle, Texas*

"It was a lovely bed-and-breakfast, and we had two nights away from kids at a great place with wonderful meals, and we got to enjoy fellowship time with other clergy," he said. "And it wasn't meetings."

One important facet of the experience is delving into what it means to be a clergy spouse, said Chuck Hyde, the CEO of the Soderquist Center. Organizers wanted to move away from the old stereotype of the wife who plays piano and teaches Sunday school and to engage spouses as leaders, Hyde said.

"The spouse that holds the position of clergy is clearly called into that, but the spouse that married into that by default finds themselves in a leadership role, whether they have aspired to that or not," Hyde said.

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For the Sanderses, an important lesson was learning to set boundaries and not let the church become "the other woman" in their lives. Margot Porterfield said that Renew helped her see herself as "more of a leader and less of a worker bee, and that that's OK."

Huie said it was very important from the outset to offer skills and experiences useful both to female clergy and to clergy spouses. One of the values of the Renew experience is that couples have an opportunity to clarify and agree upon what is expected of the spouse, she said.

"What is the new, more appropriate role for a clergy spouse as a leader in the congregation?" Huie said. "If the couple can clarify the role between the two of them, then congregations do fine. What congregations don't do well with is lack of clarity." She said her conference has not done formal tracking but that the reports from participants have been enthusiastic, so much so that they don't have to recruit anymore. "We fill it up every time," she said.

Aleze Fulbright, the associate director for the Center for Leadership Development for the North Texas Conference, is charged with filling up the Renew roster in her conference. But she was a participant herself two years ago with a group of single, female clergy.

For Fulbright, the experience was both relaxing and invigorating, as well as being a great networking opportunity.

"It was fantastic," she said. "After the three-day experience, we were laughing and joking, and now [when] we see each other around conference, we know each other." She said the biggest lesson for her was the

value of sabbath. And it's one she tries to share with others in the conference.

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"People are so engrossed in their work, and they don't give themselves permission to take time away," she said. "There was one person that I specifically recruited and told them, 'Oh, you're going. Just carve out the time,' and when they came back, they said that was the best thing that could have happened for them." Margot Porterfield feels the same way.

"For us, it happened at an important point in our relationship, so that the information helped us talk about things and helped us to grow our relationship, to feel a little bit more vulnerable than we had been before, perhaps ... and helped our marriage be stronger," she said. "I truly feel it was God who arranged it for us."