

January 6, 2013

**USING OUR LIGHT - MINISTERING TO OUR YOUTH**  
by Rick Carlberg

**Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Due to this time of year the dawn is later in the morning and sunset earlier in the evening than in summer. I am acutely aware of this every Monday through Friday, when I get up at 5 a.m. to get ready for work. That means I stumble around in the dark, trying to be quiet, as Joanna is still sleeping, until I find my smart phone, which I use as a flash light. After I shave, shower and dress, I need to go downstairs for breakfast. As I tiptoe past the sleeping Joanna, I again use my smart phone as a flashlight. It produces just enough light to stop me from stepping on one of our two cats, the one that is primarily black in color, who likes to sleep at the bottom of our stairs I must take to get to the kitchen. While my Android smart phone has a flashlight “app” that really cranks up the wattage of the display, I find that the regular display works OK to get downstairs without hurting Minerva the cat, where I can turn on a light that lets Joanna sleep undisturbed.

I realize we take light for granted. It is the byproduct of the sun during the day and we just flip a switch in our homes to make a light come on at our whim, even during daylight if we choose. But in the scripture we read today, light guides just not our physical steps, but our spiritual life as well.

The readings today are typical for this time of year. The Isaiah and Matthew readings are about the coming birth of Jesus and his early life: Isaiah predicts, some 700 years before, about his birth; from Matthew we learn about his first month or so of life.

Isaiah encourages us to look for the light. We need to lift our eyes. We need to wake up. We need to see the glory of the Lord in his brilliant light. It is better than wallowing in our own darkness, a darkness that covers the earth and the people who do not have the lord in their heart. Nations will come to the light, along with their kings. The light gives them hope, a hope of a new dawn.

In verse 4, Isaiah turns his attention to our sons and daughters. They too will come to see the light. Like us, their hearts will swell with joy.

In Matthew, we read about how God used light to guide the wise men so they could find the baby Jesus. The star guided the wise men from afar. News of their arrival made it to King Herod, who asked them if they could let him know where the baby Jesus was, so he could “worship” him. The wise men knew better and later King Herod would try to kill Jesus, ordering the murder of all males less than two years of age in the area of Bethlehem. But through an angel, God directed the young family of Jesus to leave the area.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians we read today, emphasizes that we are all heirs to the good news the light brings us. It carries down from generation to generation. It does not matter what your lineage is, whether you are Jew or gentile. We need to nurture the next generation, to assure the body of Christ continues.

So, while we probably have not thought too much about it, even taken it for granted, the role of young people in our worship community, is a key part of our Christian life. It is the reason we have Sunday school and other youth activities. We need to nurture our youth... and the remainder of my message today will introduce you to a ministry Living Waters is paying for in 2013, a part time Youth Group Director.

First, a bit of background. With Tom Reilly retiring from his position on Dec. 31 as our Lay Leader, and my taking on that position, I have attended the last three Living Waters Ministries meetings. It quickly became clear to me that the core focus of Living Waters is helping our youth. They helped with the startup of Imagine Kenosha, a group that meets across the street from Bristol town hall, to help children with after school care and tutoring. They continue to donate scholarship monies and volunteer effort to help make Imagine Kenosha a success.

However, there is a sharpening focus in Living Water Ministries to educate and provide services to our youth outside of normal church hours. While they are planning a Vacation Bible School at Bristol grade school this summer, today they are focused on supporting a part time youth group director to mentor our junior and senior high school students. At the last meeting of Living Waters on Thursday, Dec. 27, 2012, we made an offer to

Louis Hurd, a pastor in the AME church. He lives with his wife and two children in Kenosha and is active in Youth for Christ in Racine and also in a dance company, that I believe he founded. Louis is a dynamic, Christ centered individual. Perhaps, just as important, he is a professionally experienced youth group leader.

As part of the interview process, Louis shared his vision, philosophy and plans for making this new ministry a success.... And I want to share it with you now.

Vision: Louis wants to motivate our youth to become passionate in worship and proud to be called Christian. He wants them to be hungry for the word of God, be in service to the church as well as the community.

Ministry philosophy: Louis recognizes that this ministry needs to consider the whole person: the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and financial components of our life. In order to meet these needs, he believes five areas need consideration:

1. Worship of God. This is not necessarily conducting a service, but individual worship of God. He wants to help our youth so they are hungry for spiritual growth, to the point where it pours out of them, affecting every area of their life.
2. Discipleship: Louis wants to encourage our young people to be long term Christians. Our Christian life is not for the short term, just to enjoy a pre-adult social life – it is for the long term. He intends to focus on the sustaining development of Christ-like character.
3. Fellowship: Group meetings and activities are keys to success of the program. These meetings will focus on developing fellowship with worshipers of Christ. As I understand it, he will give some history lessons of how the church developed, why it developed its structure, so they gain an understanding of how and why the church is organized the way it is today.
4. Ministry: Louis wants to help each participant in the program understand their unique abilities. You will hear the acronym SHAPE. It refers to:
  - a. Spiritual gifts
  - b. Heart desires
  - c. Abilities
  - d. Personality traits

- e. **Experiences...** With these unique abilities, our youth will be encouraged to use them to help the church grow and become relevant in their lives.
5. **Mission:** Developing a meaningful youth program includes outreach and mission work. It may not happen immediately, but the youth will be encouraged to participate in helping others who are less fortunate than themselves. This may be through local, regional or national missions.

Ideally, this youth ministry will reach out to other youth outside our churches. Youth outside of our local United Methodist Church circuit are welcome to attend and participate. Although this ministry is only just now getting started, Louis is aware of the Youth for Christ outreach at Central High School. So do not be surprised if you see other Central High School youth show up to the meetings conducted by Louis.

This ministry cannot work in a vacuum. It needs the support and involvement of the parents and guardians of each youth participant. Also, each church is asked to have one to two adult representatives attend each meeting and event, to help with the liaison with the local congregations, as well as making other parents / guardians feel comfortable with the direction the group is taking.

Church Council: We need to consider having one or two members of our youth who participate in this ministry, be on our Church Council. Not only is it allowed per the Book of Discipline, it is encouraged. This is a great avenue to keep the congregation informed of their activities and help our youth participate more in the worship and governance of the church.

Administrative needs: Louis is not here to handle administrative detail. He is here to minister to our youth. He appreciates having at least 1 person in each congregation schedule meetings, arrange transportation and facilitate communications. Now given the technology available to our youth, communications may be less of an issue as we use Facebook or Twitter to let each other what is going on. Still, having someone who knows the local congregation well will be needed to handle many of these details.

So, I throw three challenges to the congregation:

First, to the parents and guardians of our youth: During our fellowship time today, Jane and I are going to hand out a letter to you. The letter introduces Rev. Hurd and what he is trying to accomplish. It is signed by Clarissa and me on behalf of Living Waters Ministries. We ask your support and involvement for this ministry.

Second, to the youth: Are you willing to make time for this? If you are, are you willing to pick up your cell phone and call this number? It is the home phone number of Louis. You do not have to wait for him to contact you to begin this journey. By the way, I believe the first official meeting is set for Sunday, Feb. 10, 2013 at 4 p.m. for two hours at Bristol Town Hall. This date and location will be confirmed and communicated to the youth and their parent / guardians. To the extent it is feasible; meetings will be held at off church sites.

Third, to the congregation: I ask your support for this ministry. While Living Waters Ministries is paying for this, and paying for someone who has experience doing youth ministry, it still needs our support. Given our current church budget there is no way we could pay for this ministry ourselves. It took a group of churches, working through Living Waters Ministries, to make this a reality. Please encourage our youth, their parents / guardians and others to make this a success... and please pray for this ministry. Let's commit to making this ministry a success.

Our youth are our future. They have plenty of light to share with the world. I know that, you know that. We only need to consider their leading worship a few weeks ago when they stood up here and told their stories from Convo. We need to let their light so shine before men, so that others may see their good works and glorify our father, who is in heaven. Who knows where their light will take them, and us adults with them, as they live their lives in Christ, not just for now, but forever.

Amen