

**“Hearing and Responding to the Call”
by Amy Johnson**

**President’s Address to
2008 WNCC UMW Annual Meeting
September 6, 2008**

Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-10

When I learned that the theme of the Southeastern Jurisdiction meeting held this past April was going to be “Called by Name,” the first thing I thought of was the Bible story that I learned as a little girl in Sunday School of God calling to Samuel in the night. Samuel thinks that the voice he hears is Eli calling him. But it is not Eli. Upon going to Eli for the third time, Eli realizes that it is the voice of God calling to Samuel and instructs Samuel that if he should hear that voice again during the night that he should respond by answering God that “his servant” is listening. And that’s what he did when God called his name a fourth time during the night.

One would probably think that God would speak to an adult instead of a child. After all, Eli was a priest. He was older, experienced, and held the proper position. But we know that God’s works do not depend on age or position. God may use unexpected channels to call upon his faithful followers.

Hearing the voice of God. In the busy lives that we lead, there are so many things that “call our name” that there are times when God probably gets a busy signal when he does call us. Our bodies are not equipped with “call waiting” or “voice mail.” If we are not paying attention, we may not hear the call.

A few months ago, my Sunday School teacher asked our class if any of us had ever heard the voice of God. Had God spoken to us? I was astonished that I was the only person in the class to say that I had heard God's voice. There were others who had felt the "nudge" of God leading them in the path they should go, but they had not heard an audible voice. I was asked to share with the class some of my "conversations" from God. There have been several times when I have heard God's voice – usually when I've been nagging God about a certain problem I was having. The voice was not an audible sound that anyone else could hear; it was more like a whisper in my ear.

The first time I heard God speak to me was during the first year I was serving as the Spiritual Growth Coordinator for the Conference. We were preparing for Annual Meeting and I was in charge of the memorial service. I wanted the service to be meaningful and to go along with our theme for that year – something to do with seeds and flowers, but I just couldn't come up with what I wanted to do. I had prayed about it and asked God to give me an idea. I was on my way home from our August meeting at Brooks Howell thinking that Annual Meeting was just about a month away and I still didn't have a clue what I was going to do. Well, on the ramp from 240 onto I-40 in Asheville, I heard this voice say as plain as day, "Use houseplants." I thought, "What did you say???" And I heard it a second time, "Use houseplants." Okay, that's a good idea. That's something that had not been done before. I could use houseplants in the memorial service, but there was another problem. I don't have a green thumb and I didn't have 14 houseplants to use. I could buy 14 plants, but that would be expensive – and how would I transport 14 potted plants to Lake Junaluska, etc... I heard the voice again, "You have 14 District Spiritual Growth Coordinators!"

Everything began to fall in place. I contacted the District Spiritual Growth Coordinators and they each brought a potted plant – all of them were different – and we formed a garden as our worship center for the memorial service. The moral of this story is that God provides...he gives us what we need to do the job that he has called us to do. When he speaks, we must listen and respond.

This morning during our service honoring our mission personnel you heard from Lynn Sloan Barnes and how she responded to the call that God had on her life. Every one of the mission personnel that were with us this morning has a story about their call to be in mission. Did they hear their name called by God or were they led into the mission field by an acquaintance – someone who had meaning in their life? I don't know, but the important thing to remember is that they responded to the call.

Listening and responding is vital to any relationship, but especially a relationship with God. There are times when we may not hear an audible message from God. God can speak to us through other individuals or objects; he spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Moses hadn't paid any attention to the burning bush...if Noah had not built the ark? These are just two examples of people responding when God called their name. In order to hear His call, we must be ready to listen and then to act – to be obedient – to what he tells us. We need to be like Samuel, to say “Here I am” when God calls us to action. We must be prepared for the Lord to call our names in any place, at any time, and through anyone he chooses.

One of the most delightful things that I do each year as Conference President is to interview scholarship applicants. They speak of following God's call on their lives. Some plan to go into the ministry after they complete their undergraduate degree. It is very rewarding to see these young people and some second-career people as they grow in their faith from year to year and as

opportunities open up to them to follow their call. Hearing and then responding to the call.

Tonight, I want to ask you, “What is God calling you to do?” Perhaps he is calling you to be an officer in your local unit or on the district level. Perhaps he is calling you to make a career change or go back to school. Perhaps he is calling you to run for public office. Perhaps he is calling you to volunteer in your local school. Perhaps he is calling you to go on a building team.

Look at your occupations...you don't have to be an ordained minister in order to serve others and show God's love. I feel that we minister to others through our occupations. Teachers – they may be the only love that some children will experience that day. Firefighters, police officers – their lives are on the line every day as they show the love of God by helping people. Whatever our occupation, we can show God's love by our actions to those people we come in contact with.

But also consider what God is calling your local unit of United Methodist Women to do. Perhaps God is calling you to begin a new circle. Perhaps God is calling your unit to go on a field trip to one of our mission institutions. Is there an area of United Methodist Women that you want to expand upon, to become more involved in social issues? Has your unit met the requirements to be a Mission Today unit for this year?

Are you participating in the Reading Program?

Has your unit given in all five channels of Mission Giving?

Are you using the Prayer Calendar and reading Response magazine? I encourage you to use these resources. You learn so much about the journey of your mission dollar by using them. Each month, my local unit sends a Gift to Mission card to someone

from the Prayer Calendar. We sent a card to Fran Lynch in January. Fran serves in Willow, Alaska. A few weeks later, we received a letter from Fran thanking us for her card and telling us about her work. Then in March, when I attended the anniversary celebration of the Deaconess movement at Brooks Howell, we were all given an older copy of a Response magazine where the focus was on deaconesses and their work. One of the stories was on Fran Lynch and this story told how she felt the call to work in Alaska. She sold her home in Tennessee and moved to Alaska and she flies into remote areas to teach Sunday School. It was really fascinating to read her story and learn how she was called by name to move across the country and serve in Alaska.

Has your unit become a member of the Charter Club – doing activities to help you understand and implement the Charter for Racial Justice?

Have you prepared health kits, school kits, baby layettes, etc., for mission?

Have you added new members to your unit...young women?

How is God calling your unit to respond to the Public Education Initiative? Will you monitor school board meetings – pay closer attention to newspaper reports on No Child Left Behind? Will your unit adopt a school?

You still have time to complete the requirements to become a Mission Today unit.

Hearing and Responding to the call....At times I wonder if we really want to hear from God? It seems that there may be more times when we talk to God – and we talk to God – and we talk to God, and we don't leave any time for God to speak to us. We may be having a one-sided conversation with God or we suffer from

selective hearing! You may only listen for God when you need his advice. Listening is an ability that must be developed by practice. Take the time to be still and listen for God.

God has a plan for each of you. He sees potential in each of you. If you remember some of the stories in the Bible when God called people to action, what did they usually do? They made excuses. I have heard excuses such as, “I can’t do what you do.” “I’m too old...the younger ones need to take over.” And then when the younger ones take an office, things are likely to change...and we don’t like change. But remember one thing. “Retirement” is not mentioned in the Bible! You are never too old to serve our Lord.

One thing I’ve learned is that if you want peace in your heart, you might as well give in and submit yourself to whatever it is God is calling you to do. And, in everything that we do, wherever we may be, God is with us.

In closing, please ponder this question again – what is God calling you or your local unit of UMW to do and how will you respond? I want to share this promise from Isaiah 43:1-3 from The Message:

*But now, God’s Message, the God who made you in the first place,
Jacob,*

The One who got you started, Israel:

“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you.

I’ve called your name. You’re mine.

When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you.

When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down.

*When you’re between a rock and a hard place it won’t be a dead
end –*

Because I am God, your personal God,

The Holy of Israel, your Savior.”

What a wonderful promise. Yes, we are called by name. As our theme song states, we are called to be light in a darkened world. We are called to be hope for the hopeless. As United Methodist Women, we are called to act with justice. We are called to love and to serve one another, and we are called to walk humbly with our God.

Is God calling your name tonight? How will you respond to the call? AMEN.