

Whatever God Has In Store Early Years

By Katy Kiser
Dallas/Denton District Lay Leader and Free Lance Writer

On Saturday, July 18, 2008, members of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church met the newly elected bishop, Earl Bledsoe, his wife Leslie and one of their six children. At that early morning breakfast, Bishop Bledsoe shared just a glimpse of who he was and how prayer and faith had shaped his ministry. When Leslie Bledsoe introduced herself, she told a remarkable story and how God had helped her meet the challenges that total blindness had presented. Earl Bledsoe's long and distinguished history in the United Methodist church is well known. But the Bledsoe story is more than the distinguished accomplishments of the Bishop.



Bishop. W. Earl Bledsoe

“Whatever God has in store – we want it! But if it is not of God, we don’t want it.” That is a remarkable statement coming from Bishop Earl Bledsoe considering all God has brought him and his family through - not the least of which is his wife’s sudden blindness brought on in 2002. Bishop Bledsoe makes this statement with conviction because he has witnessed the faithfulness of God. Earl Bledsoe has been faithful to God’s call which began in 1950, the year his father was called into ministry and the year of Earl’s birth. His father, Wilbart Bledsoe, pastored three small churches. Church was an all day affair. Every Saturday Earl prepared the church bulletin on an old mimeograph machine, and in the winter, he turned on the church heat in the early Sunday hours. During the week he read various articles and summarized them for his father whose service to the church did not give him adequate time for reading. Earl’s brother would later remark that Earl had a love for service despite being a “preacher’s kid.”

The Bledsoe family lived in a two bedroom parsonage which presented a fair share of challenges in itself. Earl recounts that his two sisters shared the second bedroom while he and his two brothers slept on a couch in the living room. This worked reasonably well except for the evenings the Woman’s Society of Christian Service met at the parsonage. On these nights Earl and his two brothers would sit in the hallway, waiting for the conclusion of the meeting. Bishop Bledsoe recalls his family never went without, but he was left with disappointment in the church. So when it was time for him to leave home, he left his church going days behind him – at least for a time.

Earl’s father could not afford to educate all his children, but he instilled in them a desire for education. They were told it was “better to suffer and sacrifice for four years to get an education than to suffer and sacrifice all life long without one.” So his father made his children an offer; he would pay for one semester of college, but then they were on their

own. Earl was able to secure a scholarship running track. When his associate degree was finished, and he applied to West Texas State, he was surprised to discover that his excellent grades earned him an academic scholarship. "You mean I don't have to run," he exclaimed. It was there that Earl would develop a deep love for English literature under professor, A. K. Knott.

After college, he went to Amarillo where he taught in Palo Duro High School. It was the early days of desegregation; black and white students were at each other's throats. When he went to his principal to discuss the difficult time he was having teaching, he was told, "You have been hired to be an English teacher – not a social worker." He began to work with students outside the classroom at the local YMCA as he had done in college. He loved his work there, so when Terry Peale, the director of the Y offered him \$100 more a year than his teaching salary, he took the offer.

It was during this time that Robert, his future brother-in-law, paid him a visit and told him, "I am going to church and I want you to go with me." "Oh no, I have had enough of church," Earl replied remembering his childhood as a preacher's kid. Nevertheless, they did go and during the service, Robert gave his testimony. As he shared his relationship with God through Jesus His Son, Earl realized what Robert had was real. Even though he was sitting on the back row, he remembers the message "got to him" and he felt God drawing him. Earl continued to visit Wyatt Memorial United Methodist Church and began singing in the choir.

One Saturday afternoon Earl got a call asking him to give the message the next morning. He began to search the scriptures settling on the book of Revelation. Although he does not remember just what he said that morning, he does remember someone telling him, "Give an invitation. Give an invitation!" So he did. That morning many of the young people from the YMCA gave their hearts to Christ and joined the church. Earl would be asked to preach on many more occasions so he obtained a preaching license through correspondence. People continued to join the churches where he served, sometimes getting baptized in the YMCA pool.

One morning when Earl was giving a message on faith, he felt God saying to him, "When are YOU going to step out on faith? When are you going to turn loose of your job and go into full time ministry?" So he called his superintendent who encouraged him to go to seminary. He went to Perkins Theological Seminary on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas and received his Masters of Divinity. Professor and Methodist pastor, Dr. Zan Holmes encouraged Earl as well as Dr. Eric Purness at St. Andres United Methodist Church in Ft. Worth.

But it was not an easy time. Earl found himself in the middle of a divorce and with joint custody of his three children. The pain of divorce and the resulting adversity would have discouraged many men but not Earl Bledsoe. He learned what it meant to love God and have faith in difficult times. He began to see what had motivated his father's ministry. His ministry began to flourish. God had brought him through many challenges and opened many doors. Some off Earl Bledsoe's greatest challenges lay ahead.

Whatever God Has In Store Part II

Earl Bledsoe was a Methodist “preacher’s kid” with a call on his life. His story is one of opportunity and challenge. The challenges he faced in his ministry began early when he went to St. Marks UMC in Baytown, Texas to do an internship. At that time, there were no black Methodist churches in Baytown. Even more challenging, St. Marks was located in the Hispanic community. Earl wondered how this was going to work. However he very early learned to trust God even when he did not understand. He found the church very supportive and before long, he met an Hispanic pastor who helped him start a service in Spanish which built bridges into the surrounding community.

It was during this time Earl was introduced to Leslie who would become his wife. Leslie was a social worker who shared Earl’s love of community service. They were married in April 1985 and almost immediately left for Hanham, England. They served a church at the very location where George Whitfield and John Wesley preached their first message in an open field.

Eventually the Bledsoe family came back to Texas, to an all white church in the Houston area. When the *Houston Post* showed up to report on the 12 members who had left the church, Earl told reporters that the real story was the 1,000 members who had stayed. He would grow that church to 2200 members before moving on to his next assignment. In all the churches that Earl Bledsoe has served, he has been able to grow his congregation. He does not take credit but gives God the credit for blessing his work.

His success in church growth is not only due to his talent as a preacher, and his love of service, but he also understands the importance of Bible Studies. He knows first hand the difficult job that pastors have balancing their work in the church and their personal lives. As a district superintendent he brought understanding and leadership to stressed pastors. He remembers the time in his own ministry when he was giving out 24/7 and getting by week to week. He went on “Walk to Emmaus,” a spiritual retreat weekend and describes what he calls a “dying moment” when he recognized his need for balance and an accountability partner. He chose his long time friend, John Drew, President of Southwest Bank of Texas. He gave Drew permission to tell him “the straight truth” whether it be about his role as pastor, husband, father or friend. He believes that being in an accountability relationship helps him “walk the walk.” Bishop Bledsoe is a believer in accountability and undoubtedly will encourage accountability not only in this conference but also beyond.

Although Earl Bledsoe has had his share of the difficult challenges, another challenge would come – this time to his wife Leslie. Leslie would have been a busy woman had she confined herself to the responsibilities which are common to pastor’s wives. But Leslie was also working as a part time local pastor at St. Pauls UMC in Spring Texas.

She was on staff at Hurst Community College where she ran a back to work program that provided vocational training and job placement for the unemployed. She volunteered in a center for displaced and battered women. And she gave her time to the Coalition for Life, an organization whose work reduced abortion by 28 percent in the College Station community. If this was not enough, she was headed for Perkins School of Theology at SMU that coming fall.

When Leslie developed severe headaches, it was little wonder doctors would conclude they were stress related. She saw many doctors, but her headaches only grew worse. Finally Earl called Methodist hospital where he served on the board and after extensive tests, doctors found that Leslie had a mass on her brain. The Bledsoes felt encouraged that the doctors thought it was most likely an infection and might respond to medication. But on the first Sunday in March in 2002 Leslie woke with bulging eyes and pain that signaled a true emergency.

She was rushed to surgery by 11:00 that morning and did not come out until 7:00 that evening. What the doctors found would make medical history. Leslie had an acute staff infection in one of the cavernous sinuses. The doctors surmised the infection had started in a tooth, traveling through the sinus and on into the brain. The infection had also attacked the optic nerves. A day later, Leslie would wake up in her hospital bed, blind.

The news was devastating. But the faith of Leslie and Earl Bledsoe was not shaken. They began to see every barrier knocked down that might be a hindrance to life as they had known it. God would use every church where Earl had served to meet their needs. They had 24 hour care from church members who reached out with more than just food. Church members provided drivers for Leslie and helped her when the family had to move by packing, decorating and setting up their new home. Even the sororities at A&M University volunteered to help the family. Chris Cole of the State Commission for the Blind reached out to the Bledsoes. God's provision was total.

In the beginning, Leslie was afraid to venture out of her home. Just going to the mailbox was a challenge. But her strong sense of self reliance and independence, her love for her fellow human beings, and her faith in her God came forth. Before long, she was speaking in public and sharing her testimony. Even as full and service oriented as her life had been, she and her family were amazed at the opportunities brought her way. God used the loss of Leslie's sight to minister to a host of people who had suffered losses of all kinds whether it was the loss of a child, a limb or a relationship. One Sunday, at Aldersgate UMC Leslie was scheduled to speak to a group of singles after the morning worship service. The pastor that Sunday spoke of faith. Half way through his sermon, he unexpectedly turned to Leslie and said, "Leslie, I bet you could finish this for me." And with that, she mounted the podium and spoke a message of faith that was made all the more relevant by God's faithfulness to her.

Leslie knows first hand what it is to be wounded whether that is physical, emotional or societal. But through it all, she shares hope. Leslie's hope is more than the fact that

promising research may one day lead to treatments which regenerate the optic nerves. Her hope is sure; faith in the great physician is the hope we can all embrace.

Once a bishop told Earl Bledsoe, "If you get in trouble for preaching the gospel, I will help you, but if you get in trouble for anything else, you are on your own." Humor aside, the gospel has not failed Earl Bledsoe. Experience has taught him about successful programs and given him leadership skills, but he credits God for giving him the faith necessary for any true success. In 2008, now deceased bishop, Ben Oliphint told Earl Bledsoe "this is your time." Earl Bledsoe replied, "Whatever God has in store, we want it. But, if it is not of God we don't want it." No doubt our community has much in store with the appointment of Earl Bledsoe as Bishop of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

|