

## Bible study leader teaches members to ‘make space’ for God

By Kitty Carpenter | June 28, 2010 { 1190 }

LAKELAND — God wants people to listen for his word and be ready to do his work — a difficult task for many, given the busyness of people’s lives.

The Rev. **Juanita** Rasmus acknowledged that dilemma while speaking with laity and clergy during her early morning Bible studies June 11 and 12 at the 2010 Florida Annual Conference Event. She also gave them advice on how to achieve that goal.

Rasmus is a certified spiritual director, national speaker, author and a recent cancer survivor. She is currently writing a book that chronicles her experiences suffering from a major depressive episode in 1999.

She is also co-pastor at St. John’s Downtown United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, a daughter church of the 14,000-member Windsor Village United Methodist Church.



When she and her husband, the Rev. Rudy Rasmus, were appointed to the church in 1992, it had fewer than 10 members. The church would close if they could not turn it around.

Today, the church has 9,000 members and is one of the most diverse congregations in the nation. It and Bread of Life Inc., an outreach ministry co-founded by Rasmus, provides Houston’s less fortunate residents with education, counseling, housing and HIV/AIDS testing, among other services. Bread of Life also provides 7,000 hot meals to the homeless each month and distributes 9 tons of food to the hungry each week.

“Who better to help us listen to the scriptures in the light of ministering to and with the poor, than the Rev. Juanita Rasmus,” said Florida Conference Bishop Timothy Whitaker in his introduction of Rasmus. The theme of the annual session was “Transforming the World by Eradicating Extreme Poverty.”

### Ministry for all

When visiting St. John’s for the first time, Rasmus said, she and husband had to step over the homeless men and women sleeping in the doorway. With what she recalls as no confusion, she said God told her clearly and forcefully at that moment, “This is your ministry — to the last, the least and the lost.”

Rasmus admitted to being naïve about most aspects of that ministry early on: about the immensity of circumstances, addictions and problems that brought people to such devastating places in life. Wisdom has come along with the challenges, she said.

One-third of the congregation is or has been homeless, Rasmus said, and one-third is living on what she describes as the margin — very close to the edge. Only 500 of the 9,000 are able to contribute \$1,000 or more annually to the church.

“God has taken our oil, the little that was left, and said go and get all the empty containers from our neighbors,” Rasmus said. “Then he filled them up so the needs could be met,”

One of the greatest church challenges, she noted, has been the struggle between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” “Our church is for anybody, but it is not for everybody,” Rasmus said, adding the church’s ministry is to make God known to all those who come through the door. “We do not stand at the door and decide who comes in,” she said. “We have to decide do we want to be a yacht club or a light house.”

She told those gathered that nearly 100 supporting members of the St. John’s congregation left the church this year

because of the growing numbers of gays and lesbians attending the church.

“We believe that John 3:17, ‘For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved,’ stands right alongside John 3:16, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish but have eternal life,’ ” Rasmus said.

Unless there is a different divine revelation from God, Rasmus said, St. John’s will continue to live by that word and minister to all.

### **From Listening to Action**

A divine revelation from God through scripture reading, prayer, listening and contemplation was the heart of Rasmus’ messages. She told members that she felt God saying, “My people need to listen.”

“The beauty of Jesus’ life on earth was that he spent quality time with God and got his instructions to then move purposefully,” Rasmus said.

People’s lives today are full of so much other business, she said, that most people have a difficult time “making space” for God’s word. Believers need to allow God to be in the middle of their business, making space and time to be present in his word, so they can be ready for his plans.

The Lectio Divina or “divine reading” — a spiritual practice begun centuries ago to teach scripture and increase communion with God — can make that kind of relationship easier.

The practice, Rasmus said, involves selecting a few verses of scripture and reading them four times, with several minutes of prayer and listening in between. This allows God to illuminate a phrase or a verse, she said.

“Listen as he says, ‘I am your bread. ... Come closer; there is something for you here,’” Rasmus said. She instructed members to pay attention to the word or phrase that jumped out at them and ask God for clarity, so they could move into action.

“It is like jelly donuts. We are all showing up, but many of us just want to be glazed, while God wants to fill us up,” she said, which was greeted with applause and laughter.

Rasmus told members there are resources that can help them improve their practice of Lectio Divina, including “The Message/Solo,” a devotional guide inspired by “The Message” Bible translation by Eugene Peterson, and “Life With God, Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation” by Richard Foster.

Rasmus read Matthew 25:34-40 from The Message/Solo during the Friday morning devotional. She instructed members to breathe deeply in preparation, listen to the scripture reading and allow God’s word to become “life and light.”

The scripture shares how serving “those overlooked or ignored (the least of these) is serving Christ himself,” Rasmus said. It is the scripture upon which St. John’s ministry was founded, she added, citing a portion of it: “I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.

“I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me — you did it to me.”

Rasmus reiterated the practice Saturday morning, using John 14:5-17 and John 15:5-10. Ken Blackman, president of the South Central District’s United Methodist Men, said the Lectio Divina approach was “an amazing way of looking at scripture.”

“Each time she (Rasmus) read the verses, it went to a deeper level, and certain verses jumped out at me immediately,” he said. “Each time the scripture was read, you got a different perception of your role,” added Osie Dwyer, a lay member from St. Peter’s United Methodist Church in Wellington. “Yes, I believe I will use this on my own.”

More information about the ministry at St. John’s Downtown United Methodist Church is available at <http://www.stjohnsdowntown.org>.