

Local News

New pastor of Landenberg church believes that religious faith should be 'More than just Sunday mornings'

By Richard L. Gaw
Staff Writer

"Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God." Hebrews 6:1

Pausing over the rough draft of "The Necessity of Spiritual Growth," the sermon he is currently writing for the upcoming Sunday service at the Landenberg United Methodist Church, Pastor Hun Ju Lee points to a Bible passage that led him to the message he is now writing and will eventually deliver to his congregation.

There it is, illuminated by the brightness of the Dell computer screen at his office desk: Hebrews 5:11 – 6.3. It's the fire and brimstone message, the one that implores us to leave the kids' table of faith and sit among the grown-ups; the one that tells us to leave the elementary doctrines of our faith behind and begin to pursue a life of spiritual substance. The sermons he writes are never very far from his mind. He works all week on them, tinkering, editing, spell-checking, reading Scripture and reading it again, and meditating on the text and its content.

In this regard, he is a columnist on a weekly deadline, banging out copy in the hopes of telling a compelling story, introducing a nugget of truth to contemplate, only in his case, the audience he is reaching is not in their pajamas cracking open the Sunday papers but gathered in church pews, seeking guidance and direction.

"Very often when I am searching for what to speak about on Sunday, I find it in the Bible," he said. "Lately, I've been feeling that too many people choose to remain what some call 'Peter Pan Christians,' in that they do not wish to ever grow up in their faith. In this case, I read through Hebrews and I found the passage that addressed the same topic."

Soon after Lee, 36, was appointed as head pastor of the church in July, he began to fall in love with the rolling hills and pastures of

Landenberg. If his life has been a slow march toward a life spent in the calling of faith, it has also been mostly an urban one. Prior to moving to Chester County, he spent nine years of living in suburban New Jersey while pursuing his Master of Divinity degree from Drew University in Madison and working in New York City at the Zoni Language Center. He grew up on the outskirts of metropolitan Seoul, South Korea.

"Being in Landenberg has made me calm and focused and prepared for my ministry here," said Lee, who lives in the Skycrest area with his wife Jessica, seven year-old son Brian and four year-old daughter Grace. "Similarly, I'm finding that the congregation I'm getting to know is a kind and supportive one, and they've welcomed me openly."

As a young boy in South Korea, it was not originally Lee's intention to lead a life of faith and service. It was his parents'. "In my native country, it is customary to attend church several times a week, and my parents took me to church on Wednesdays, Fridays and for two services on Sunday, not including the times I needed to go for prayer meetings," he said. "When they first led me into the possibility of becoming a pastor, my feeling was, 'Okay, this wouldn't be such a bad job.' He liked the way a pastor's robe looked. After he entered the seminary, however, the more he became involved with activities like church camps, youth groups, mission trips and midnight candlelight services on Christmas Eve.

"The more I studied and the more I became involved with helping others, the Holy Spirit began to lead me," he said. "The more I realized I was really happy to be used as God's instrument. The Holy Spirit began to lead me. Once I received Jesus, I figured out that God was indeed present and active."

Lee obtained a Bachelor of Theology from Mokwon University in Daejeon, South Korea in 1999, followed by a Master of Divinity from Drew University in 2005. The fol-

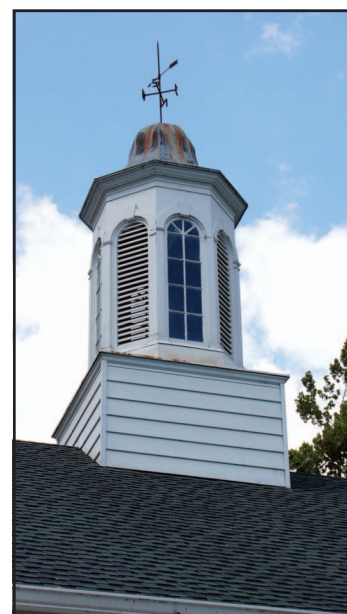
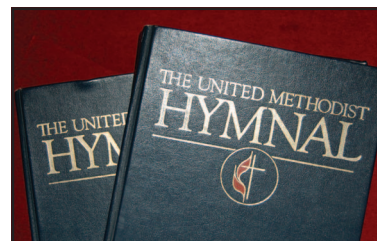
lowing year, he graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary with a degree in Christian education. Throughout his education, Lee focused much of his energy on fostering religious growth and opportunities for children. While in Korea, he served as a superintendent for two church elementary schools and a department chairman of a high school. While in New Jersey, he was a youth pastor at two churches, and a later a youth director at the Korean United Methodist Church in Bethlehem, Pa.

"I feel very strongly that the role of a church is to help raise the young people who will someday become the leaders of the community," he said. "The church has a responsibility to continue to be an influence in their lives, so that if they are ever able to rise to a high standing in the community, then it will be second nature to them to give back to their community."

Their role doesn't end there, according to Lee. A good Christian must also shape their life intellectually, spiritually, socially and physically. "In terms of a Christian identity, I believe that they will live a joyful life if they develop a healthy self," he said.

The history of the church dates back to 1847, when planned construction of a new building in the village of Landenberg, when members of the Chandlerville Methodist Episcopal Church raised \$112 dollars toward the expected \$800 cost of constructing the building. A century-and-a-half later, the Church – often called "The Church by the Side Of The Stream" and "The Little Church in the Valley" -- has expanded both in its physical structure and in the breadth of its meaning. Lee acknowledges that the life blood of the church is in its long-time members, some of whom have been attending for several decades. "They're the lifeblood of his church," Lee said, but the problem plaguing most churches he sees is in the widening blank spot of active participation seen in the 20- to 50-somethings who leave the church.

Lee is encouraging his denomination not just to read Scripture but to actively engage in its teachings.



The history of the Landenberg United Methodist Church dates back to 1847.

"In Korea, there is more of a sense of leaning on God, for Him to serve as a guidepost through a person's life, whereas in America, there is more of a 'maximizing the possibilities' sense of getting through life on our own," Lee said. "It's like that Nike tag line: 'Just Do It.' Maybe these people have God, but they don't feel the need to call on Him. People need to begin looking at the church as a place to go to more than just on Sunday mornings."

The solution, Lee said, is to develop faith-based programs for children that foster a sense of life-long connection with the church. To that end, Lee is interested in becoming involved with several of the many programs aimed at children and teenagers in the congregation. The Church is doing a good job so far: its elementary education programs for children from Kindergarten through fifth grade conduct "Where is God?" treasure hunts and navigate chil-

All photos by Richard L. Gaw



Appointed in July, Landenberg United Methodist Church, Pastor Hun Ju Lee feels that the strength of a church lay in the ways it teaches its youth.

dren through the Bog of Fear, the Valley of Sorrow and the Swamp of Unfriendliness in their search for God. Operating under the tenet Trust, respect, and the 3Fs (fellowship, friendship and fun), the church's 25-member youth group is made up of teenagers from several different denominations and schools. In addition to a weekly worship and Bible study, the group is involved in supporting Invisible Children, a world-wide, grassroots association dedicated to mobilizing American teenagers to raise money to rebuild war-torn schools in northern Uganda and provide scholarships to African youth.

For the hundreds of families and individuals who drive by the church every day, Lee wants

them to know that its doors are open to anyone. "Even though we may have a different denomination background, the truth is that we are all brothers and sisters," Lee said. "Yes, we will still need to follow the teachings of the Methodist church, but all the people will be welcome here. Our Lord made us as we are, one in the same, and the best thing we can do is to create a better dialogue between denominations."

"No matter what a person believes, I would like him or her to know that this church is a family extension, a place of love, blessing and compassion, a light-house for Landenberg."

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