

2024 Ministry Assistants Conference makes spirits bright with a springtime Christmas

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At Garaywa Camp and Conference Center, the 2024 Ministry Assistants Conference & Training took place March 18-19 with a surprising theme: “Keep Calm – Christmas is Coming.” From across the state, 70 ministry assistants arrived with humorous yuletide wear, from crazy Christmas sweaters to festive T-shirts and the jingling holiday jewelry they had tucked away for next year. Fortunately for the attendees and their wardrobes, Christmas in Mississippi is often just as warm as mid-March.

Why the Christmas theme? For a ministry assistant, December may as well be around the corner. As events and projects require months of preparation ahead of time, that constant advancement toward the future can exhaust the ministry assistant in her present. Thus, this annual conference strives to not only develop her talents and diligence but also serve as a reminder that her work impacts the Kingdom of God, she has fellowship in likeminded servants, and her Lord sees her faithfulness to His church.

The conference opened with a worship service led by the popular singing trio Promised, from Highland Colony Church, Ridgeland. In 2020, the trio’s members – Jason Easley, Melissa Duncan, and Jennifer Leach – combined their gifts for a virtual devotional. Since then, they have performed for churches all over the South and continue to bless others with

their voices singing praise to God.

Laura Leathers, famous for the encouragement she brings through the written word and her inspiring speaking, led a devotional on the theme of "Keep Calm: Christmas is Coming."

"I always wanted to be an executive secretary," said Leathers in her speech. "I know we don't use that term much anymore. We now call you a ministry assistant, but in the Bible, the word 'secretary' is used 36 times, of which 35 are in the Old Testament. Now the word 'secretary' comes from the Latin, 'secretus,' and came to mean 'confidential officer,' or one who is entrusted with secrets.

"You will find usage of the word 'secretary' focused around the scribes in the Bible. Scribes were called to write the Word of God perfectly. If they made any error, they had to start all over again. But the word goes deeper than that. They were individuals who were to inscribe, to enumerate, to recount, to tell, to talk. Your job as a ministry assistant is very broad, but a lot of your time is spent talking and writing.

"As I thought about your job description, about Christmas, about keeping calm, my question became, how can I take these three things together and try to encourage you in your daily responsibilities? The answer came from Matthew 1, Matthew 2, Luke 1, Luke 2 – the Christmas story."

Leathers illuminated each Biblical character's role as they prepared for the arrival of the Light of the World. She commended Mary's discernment when God delivered life-changing news, "Here is a woman who is trustworthy with the things God has laid upon her heart. She was able to take what God had given to her and keep it to herself until He revealed when the news was supposed to be told. Who told Joseph? Who told Elizabeth? God did. I thought about ministry assistants, and about all the things that go on within your office, all the

things you see, the people who come in with hurts and needs, people who need counseling. It is your job to keep the secret. Mary knew when she needed to tell or when she needed to depend upon God to work in that situation.”

Leathers also lauded Joseph’s obedience to the Word of God, and extolled Elizabeth’s hospitality toward Mary and their celebration of the Savior’s coming. How often do we allow our busyness to keep us from knowing the Word of God, extending hospitality to visitors, and celebrating the work God has done?

From the shepherds to wisemen and Simeon to Anna, Leathers encouraged the ministry assistants to fearlessly share the Gospel, to have hearts filled with worship, and to be persistent in prayer. “Are we not supposed to enter our office in prayer?” Leathers addressed the audience. “Are we not to be praying throughout the day? Are we not to pray before we answer the phone? Are we not to pray before we sit down and do other things? If you’re like me, I forget and I get so busy with my task that I just barge right on in, and then I wonder, why isn’t this flowing? And then I realize: it’s because I didn’t pray. I didn’t take this to the Lord first.”

As a busy ministry assistant, it is difficult to pause and reflect on the work God has done. It can seem like every day is just one step ahead of yesterday or that the labor is in vain, but Leathers reminded the women, “Never in their wildest imagination could the characters that make up the Christmas story have known that they would be chosen to be a part of the fulfillment of God’s plan. You are here serving as ministry assistants within your local church, your association, your state office, and you have been chosen, you have been called out by God. He has placed you where you are for a reason and a purpose. He is using your spiritual gifts, your talents, your abilities for His Kingdom purposes.”

Following a worshipful morning, the ministry assistants

divided into breakout sessions. Rita Hodges, experienced part-time Financial Ministry Assistant to First Church, Terry, and other churches and ministries, led a breakout on Basic Church Finances. Benita Gruchy, seasoned Ministry Assistant at Meadowood Church, Amory, taught Canva Basics. Sara Renick, longtime Bible study leader at Morrison Heights Church, Clinton, guided a breakout on Scripture Study. Sandra Sartor, consultant and motivational speaker after serving 16 years as the Ministry Assistants Specialist for LifeWay Christian Resources, led Tuesday's training session on Event Planning.

Monday night, laughter and banter filled the room as the ministry assistants participated in an "Ugly Christmas Sweater" contest and painted together. In the midst of Easter preparations, the conference served as a pause, a reminder to keep calm, and a breath of fresh air and fellowship. No matter what the season of life may be, Christmas is coming, and Christ is here.