

## ***SPIRIT TRACKS IN SUNNYSIDE, WA***

Al Johnston a veteran pastor of the Northwest District had a quandary. While he was greatly enjoying his ministry as a parish pastor in Tillamook Oregon, he felt compelled to relocate to be near his children. Al's wife Judy is fighting cancer and it seemed as if that was the best of all possible scenarios. But what to do occupationally when the three churches of the Yakima area all had at least two pastors with his arrival. The only ministry position available was to be the music minister for Bethlehem Lutheran church. This of course was not sufficient to live on so Allan took on a second part time position as Chaplain for Lower Valley Hospice in Sunnyside Washington.

This change of location and of "kind of ministry," has been one of those life changing situations. Without any clinical training in being a chaplain Al set out to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. He braced himself for his first patient. He asked the man if he was frightened about being in his situation. He replied that he was very frightened. In the conversation that followed the man was led to Christ and the assurance of his salvation. Al then went to the wife after this visit and asked her if she was aware of her husband's spiritual state. She stated that while she thought her husband was a great man she was frightened because he had never given his life to Christ. When Al was able to get the husband and wife in a conversation he was able to celebrate with them that this man who had been afraid of dying had been blessed by God with faith. The man later was baptized by a local pastor hours before he died. His wife has since been regularly attending the local church that she had not been in for over 20 years. Wow! What a blessing to have such impact with the first person you encounter in a new position.

Al is rejoicing with each day as he finds one person after the next who does not know Christ and is eager to hear about true grace. Many of those he works with are members of denominations in which they are directed to their works in some fashion. The response to "by grace alone," makes him very glad to be in this unique outposts at the edge of death's door. Recently he was visiting with a man who had made it clear that he enjoyed Al's visits but he did not want to hear about religion. A Chaplain has to honor that and Al simply was present and heard the man's story each time he visited. The man had a crisis and almost died. The nurse called Al and said he might want to come since the man was a bit frightened. Al had to wait in the hallway as the man was in the bathroom. Al had some paperwork to do and was busy doing that when the man finished up. Spying Al about 30 feet away he made his way to his side and he initiated the conversation. He told him how bad his heart problems were and how he almost died. Al simply asked. "Well if you had died where would you be right now? Heaven or Hell? The man began telling his story again. Al stopped him and said. "What does your story have to do with the question about heaven and hell? he continued with the story a bit confused. Al waited for him to finish. When Al asked the question again, "So, would you be in heaven or hell?" He said his works answer that he had lived a good life so he thought he would be in heaven. Al quoted two references about grace. Suddenly the man began to talk about going to Sunday school as a child and started quoting one verse after the next he had learned. He talked about how he had given his life to Christ. Suddenly there was a real epiphany as he said "Now I understand what Jesus has done. "I believe in Jesus!, so I would be in heaven if I were to have died." Al Johnston said that this was one of the easiest conversions he had ever participated in as God worked faith in him so profoundly in those moments of remembering all the man had learned over 70

years before. With an average of a conversion a week or reaffirmation of a lost or forgotten faith, Al is very excited about his new work.

A Hospice chaplain works about 1/2 of his time with those who are dying and the rest of his time working with family members before and after the deaths of their loved ones. One particular family was very memorable for Al. The family was totally dysfunctional. Almost no one was talking to other members of the family. The husband and wife were not even talking to each other. One child was in jail, one was in not talking to her dying mother and was drinking heavily, the other daughter had moved home with her child and was out of guilt caring for her mother. In the three weeks the family was walking with mom through the death process the entire family with one exception of one were reconciled. The one daughter is now in alcohol treatment, the husband was reconciled not only to his wife before her death but to



his Lord. In essence the 4 members of the family came to or returned to a relationship to Christ. What an exciting journey this was at the gates of hell as these souls were snatched out of Satan's hands. Al rejoiced to be able to preach at this woman's funeral. He sates "I was right in the right place at the right time, and it felt great to be so mightily used by our Lord.

It is truly amazing how God can use us when we are willing to be moved about by his Spirit and to try something brand new as we trust God's Spirit moving through us.