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## Pastor says career path reflects God's sense of humor

### Lester, Blakemore UMC gain new perspective

*By Wendy Lee*

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When Herbert Lester watches movies, he sees it as homework for Sunday.

Lester, who began preaching at Blakemore United Methodist Church this summer, is the church's first African-American pastor in its more than 100-year history and occasionally uses a movie like *The Dark Knight* or *Traitor* to teach his congregation about the Bible.

"It's like Jesus taught people in parables, and movies are parables," said Lester, who watches three to four movies a month. "They are reality plays and people get into them and young people like them."

Lester, who grew up in Memphis, preached for 18 years at Centenary United Methodist Church in inner-city Memphis, where nearly all of his audience was black. Blakemore, in one of Nashville's wealthier neighborhoods, is about 96 percent white, Lester said.

"God really has a sense of humor," Lester said, adding that the congregation has been open-minded and welcoming. He said Blakemore is a great place but he never imagined himself preaching there.

Lester said he knew he wanted to be a pastor when he was just 8 years old. He was inspired watching *Boys Town*, a 1938 biographical movie starring Spencer Tracy as a priest who founded a community to help disadvantaged and troubled youth.

But he was reluctant to tell others he wanted to be a pastor because he

was afraid of being teased, and African-American pastors were rarely portrayed on the silver screen.

Lester graduated with a sociology degree from Tennessee State University in 1975, with a minor in political science.

Before college, Lester served during the Vietnam War in the U.S. Navy. He was on board the U.S.S. Forrestal when it caught fire and more than 130 people died. Lester said he would have been on the portion that caught fire, had he not left that area during his lunch break.

Church officials said the lack of a pastor of color in Blakemore's history hasn't been intentional and they look forward to working with Lester to see the church grow in membership. The bishop selected Lester for Blakemore after considering the needs of the church as well as other pastors.

## Challenges await him

"I think he understands people well. He made worship service an interactive thing," said Bill Sneed, chairman of the church's parish council. "At one point we were a sit-and-listen congregation and now we are an interactive congregation and that's a wonderful thing."

As the new pastor, Lester will need to continue to grow the congregation, which tends to be an older audience, and to work with the church's finances, which rely on donations, church officials said.

Donations for the United Methodist Church's Tennessee Conference, made up of 618 churches, including Blakemore, saw a 2 percent decline or \$60,000 drop from January to September this year compared with a year ago, officials said. The troubled economy might have contributed to that decline, officials said.

Already, some church members said they have noticed a difference in the church demographics.

"He is attracting viewers who probably would not have come before ... college students, other races and denominations who are interested in hearing what he has to say," said Jim Allen, chairman of the staff parish relations committee.

