

How United Methodists around the world find faith through beekeeping

by [Crystal Caviness](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



Beekeeper Jay Williams examines a frame loaded with honeybees and honeycomb at Williams Honey Farm in Franklin, Tennessee. (Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News)

Jay Williams says he never feels more connected to the earth and to God than when he's "surrounded by a million venomous insects."

While Williams's statement may surprise some people, he and other United Methodist apiarists—or beekeepers—say delving into the complex world of bees has deepened their faith.

"When you're working with these little insects and they are doing all these things, you see all this wonderment," said Williams, a member of Christ United Methodist Church in Franklin, Tennessee, and the founder of Williams Honey Farm. "It's like a tap on the shoulder that says, 'Hey, there's more than you think. Celebrate it and

tell as many people about it as you can.’”

The average honey bee weighs three grams. Recognizing the significant impact of something so small has influenced the faith of Tate Abbott, an 18-year-old wildlife biology major at Lees-McRae College.

“Even the simplest things, like when bees go out to pollinate flowers and do chores—it’s little, but that stuff matters,” she said. “Even if I’m doing simple acts of faith for God, it may be little, but it can make a huge difference.”

Abbott knew at a young age that she wanted to be a beekeeper. She first asked for bees when she was seven, said her father—a request that Tate’s parents waited to fulfill until her tenth birthday. The Abbotts, members at Covenant United Methodist Church in High Point, North Carolina, now keep a few hives alongside their fruit trees and vegetable garden.

Kristen Bell grew up around bees. (Her 91-year-old father still keeps bees in Shelburne, Vermont.) When Bell and her husband, Steve, retired to Utah ten years ago, the United Methodist couple decided being in the Beehive State was a good reason to get into the bee business, a pastime the Bells shared with their church.

Today, First United Methodist Church in Marriott-Slaterville, Utah, boasts a bountiful community garden that flourishes with pollination from the church’s hives, an effort aided by training from the denominational group EarthKeepers. The church also partners with nearby schools to introduce beekeeping to students, and it organizes an annual honey sale to support local and global missions.

“The bees are always teaching us something,” Bell said. “They are a community, too. One honey bee cannot live by itself. . . . Every creature in the beehive is working for the success of that colony. I think God is telling us that we are to be doing the same thing.”

A portion of the church’s honey sales helps support the United Methodist Committee on Relief’s sustainable agriculture and development program in West Africa, where for 20 years Mozart Adevu has been helping farmers get into beekeeping.

“Beekeeping has become the single highest source of income for most farmers,” said Adevu, the Ghana-based regional director for UMCOR’s program. “Some have indicated that their annual incomes have increased more than tenfold.” He added

that “bees have helped in tremendous ways to feed the poor and hungry in communities which I have served.”

Beekeeping is not only a way to care for others but also a way to care for God’s creation.

“Beekeeping is a kind of divine stewardship of keeping the earth and God’s creatures,” said Mark Price, pastor of congregational life at Christ United Methodist Church in Franklin. “We are in care of, not in charge of. You’re keeping bees safe and healthy so they can tend to themselves.”

Bell, in Utah, added that the health of bees directly affects our food supply: one-third of the food we eat requires pollination.

While United Methodist apiarists are abuzz about the virtues of bees, they know bees make others fearful. Therein lies a deeper significance, Williams said.

“The lesson here is that what may seem scary from the outside—venomous, stinging insects—is quite beautiful and calm and therapeutic and serene. This will ground you and make you slow down and listen more than run from it,” he said. “This is my version of faith.”—United Methodist News Service