

Signs of Hope

Small Wonders

Paul Escamilla

On a recent Sunday morning, our congregation's prayer concerns reminded us of the suffering ones in our church family, as well as in disaster-stricken and war-torn regions of the world. Our budget is strained as we near year's end, as it is in so many churches, and we wonder how we'll make it through. We've had several losses in the church family in recent months, both to death and to migration. All of these realities accompany us into the sanctuary. As Kit Kuperstock once put it, when we gather for worship, "we bring the dust of the world on our feet."

In that same hour, crowded as it was with sobering reminders of our finitude and frailty, the sacrament of baptism was administered to a three-week old baby with eyes as clear and deep as if they possessed some secret assurance that all would be well. The child squirmed and wriggled ever so slightly as she felt the baptismal water run down her head, then settled again to quietness as she was drawn back up into my arms, and a high school sophomore began to sing, "I want to walk as a child of the light; I want to follow Jesus . . ."

As I carried the new creature up the aisle of the sanctuary and back, faces lit up as this wee little sister in the faith passed their way. There were myriad expressions--wonder, delight, awe, affection, amazement, gratitude. Our concerns for a hurting church family and a hurting world; our consciousness that things are tight for the budget just now; our sense of grave uncertainty about prospects for world peace in the coming year; these and all discouragements were, without a finger having been lifted, briefly set aside for another realization: God still fashions creatures whose lives begin in simple, wide-eyed trust, and gifts the church with the immeasurable privilege of making the journey of life and faith not only in the company of such small wonders, but even by their leading.

In the sanctuary that day I saw a sign of hope.

Paul Escamilla is Pastor of Walnut Hill United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas.

New Leadership

Ray Rhoads

Where do I see God at work? I answer this way – the signs of hope are evident in the newly commissioned probationary ministers who soon will be ordained elders and deacons in our United Methodist Church!

My answer comes from experience as a member of the Board of Ministry of the Northern Illinois Conference and as chair of the probationary work area. Four years ago I was charged with implementing a totally new design for the three-year probationary period. The first class was ordained this year. These forty-eight ministers are proof of the hope I see.

These probationers are making the connection strong. They have spent time [15 overnight retreat sessions] getting acquainted with each other– sharing their life as well as ministry experiences, telling their faith stories and witnessing to their faith understandings with colleagues who differ. In all those encounters I saw appreciation for one another develop. I saw thoughtful reflection and discussion occur through the entire theological spectrum. That has to be a sign of hope!

Part of each gathering is devoted to voicing joys in family and church as well as revealing pain and hurt. These probationers are genuine people. They care for each other and they care for those to whom they devote their love—more often than we realize to those who are not church members. They love God's people! All of them and wherever they may be. That has to be a sign of hope!

These probationers have finished their formal theological education. Now as they begin full-time ministry they begin to unpack their learnings to enrich how they do ministry. They have been good learners. I see competence that enables them to connect the heritage of faith with the challenges of contemporary existence. They are above average preachers of the gospel of Christ. That has to be a sign of hope!

We need leaders in our church. God is providing. What a sign of hope!

Ray Rhoads is a retired United Methodist elder living in Caledonia, Illinois.

Right Direction

William C. Nelson

I have hope! My congregation is filled with hope. We are seeing God's moves in our church, Beaver Meadows, that are far different than when I first began fourteen years ago.

Retired from the Wyoming Conference, I refused to be so. I accepted the call to Beaver Meadows United Methodist Church in Meshoppen, Pennsylvania. Six came the first Sunday. It's been a slow roller-coaster ride ever since. My people have finally come to know, they have a "retread" for a Pastor.

Although, part-time (forty to fifty hours a week) this long pastorate is finally seeing God's desire for us. Over the years I tried several times to start a Bible study. Three years ago it "took." It was not until the second year that they began to bond as the "body of Christ." Five of the eight in the class are completing their training as lay speakers with our Conference. In fact, two of them led the entire service yesterday, as thirty of our small congregation were blessed by it.

After almost a year of struggle, our task force has given us our Vision and Mission statement. Our Leadership Team helped. Our Worship Team is functioning. Our Adult Class on Sundays is starting their third year. Our Bible study on Wednesday night is also in its third year.

Ours is a church beginning to move with the spiritual gifts, as nurtured by a resource from our UM Publishing House. We are beginning to see the results of using a spiritual gifts inventory with the leadership of our small church.

The only direction we have seen all these years is "up." I start my fifteenth year in two weeks. □

William C. Nelson is pastor of Beaver Meadows United Methodist Church in Meshoppen, Pennsylvania.

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