

David A. Bard

The Wild Energy of Hope

*What is hope,
that it can both be disappointed
and fulfilled at the same time?*

We do not always get what we hope for: *sometimes we get something better.*” I read those words from a meditation about hope from the book *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality* about a year ago as I was sitting in my car on a cold November day. I was in a town park of a very small community in my district. Winter winds were blowing, and I was biding my time before that evening’s church conference. I thought back on my life with a smile. Ten years before,

I had been nearing the completion of my doctoral dissertation in Christian ethics. I was hoping to find a teaching job at a college or seminary. That was not to be. Instead, a few months later, I was appointed to serve in a larger parish on Minnesota’s Iron Range; then, a few years after that, became a district superintendent. I would not give up those experiences for anything. I did not get what I hoped for – I got something better. What is hope, that it can both be disappointed

and fulfilled at the same time? Where are we to find signs of such hope?

The poet Emily Dickinson imagined hope to be a bird: "Hope' is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul/And sings the tune without the words/And never stops at all." I think of hope as a wild energy, as necessary for the spiritual well being of a disciple of Jesus Christ, and for the body of Christ, as the electro-chemical impulses that fire our nervous systems. *Without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a faint-hearted and ultimately dead faith* (Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*). The energy of hope feeds on itself, thriving when it initiates a chain reaction.

Paul's statement in Romans 5 provides a decisive clue for identifying signs of hope. "Hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." This suggests that wherever the Spirit of God is active in love transforming human lives, there is a sign of hope. It is a joy and a delight to share some of the signs of hope I've seen, places where God's Spirit has been at work transforming human lives.

Last summer, I heard the story of a young man applying to become a certified candidate for ordained ministry. He was raised by a single mother, and times were often tough. He recalls leaving church one Sunday morning, and as he and his mother got into their car, they discovered that someone from the church had loaded the back seat with groceries. This powerful act of love and care became one part of a young man's journey into ordained ministry.

As I was leaving my last local church appointment to accept my appointment as a district superintendent, I received a note from a church member. Her life had not been easy – her husband had died unexpectedly, she had gone back to school to become a teacher in order to support her young family, her life had taken some major twists and turns. Her note to me read, in part: "You have encouraged me enormously in going forward in my journey of faith. But more than that, you have somehow, and I really don't know how or

when this happened, brought me back to allowing myself to feel things. I had cut myself off from feeling real emotions, not wanting to get hurt again. You have made me realize that to live fully one must feel things – love, caring, sadness, pain." This is the kind of note a pastor treasures. I really could not say how or when change had come for this woman, but God's Spirit was at work in her life. She became a lay speaker and often preached in the parish of which her church was a part.

The energy of hope is truly a wild energy, for the Spirit often leads in surprising directions and works in unanticipated ways. To see and celebrate signs of hope, to continue to feed its chain reaction, does not guarantee that we will always get what we hope for.

A church in my district in northwest Minnesota sent a group as a part of a conference mission team to Jamaica. The people were so taken by their experience and saw such need that they set up their own mission program to the island, JUMP, Jamaica United Mission Partnership. Now this congregation of 385 members located in a town of 10,000 people in northwest Minnesota sends two to four teams of people a year to Jamaica to engage in mission work, teams that include non-United Methodist people from their town as well as members of nearby United Methodist churches.

Over the past months, I have heard more people discussing in deep and significant ways what it means for our United Methodist Churches to re-connect with our mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. There seems to be a growing sense that we simply cannot continue doing the same things the same ways and expect to get different results. If we want to touch people's lives with the good news of the gospel, if we want to see human lives transformed, if we want to see our churches and our church members work for justice and peace and reconciliation, then we need to be more intentional about our

mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. What is especially encouraging is that some of these conversations are taking place across theological and ideological "fences."

Signs of hope are signs of the on-going activity of God through God's Spirit, transforming human lives in love. Isn't that what we ultimately hope for as Christians, that God continues to work toward the transformation of human life? To identify signs of hope, however, does

not guarantee that all that we hope for will come to pass. These signs of hope are signs of hope for the future of The United Methodist Church. They are signs that God continues to work within and through us despite our shortcomings and failings. But I must confess that the energy of hope is truly a wild energy, for the Spirit often leads in surprising directions and works in unanticipated ways. To see and

celebrate signs of hope, to continue to feed its chain reaction, does not guarantee that we will always get what we hope for.

The signs of hope I see for The United Methodist Church don't assure me that there won't be dramatic changes in the church, but they do assure me that God's Spirit remains active in love even amidst dislocation and difficult change. Ultimately hope does not disappoint, because God's Spirit remains active in our lives, our churches and our world. Furthermore, the energy we need to meet the challenges we face as individuals, as The United Methodist Church, as a world, is to be found as we celebrate the signs of the wild energy of hope. □

David A. Bard is Northwest District Superintendent in the Minnesota Conference of The United Methodist Church.

