



Kevass Harding

When Little Is Much

There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people.”¹ Feeding 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread is truly a story about “Signs of Hope.” A hope of how Jesus took little and made much. And even today, Jesus is still taking little and making much.

Regardless of what the statistics indicate of how the United Methodist Church is a dying church, with a graying membership and declining roll, I see other signs. One sign of hope is at Dellrose United Methodist Church, located in Wichita, Kansas. Yes, at Dellrose, I see a spirit of God moving with zeal and aspiration that cannot be touched by statistics alone.

- At Dellrose I see signs of active ministry, not maintenance.
- At Dellrose I see signs of a thriving church, not a slowly dying church in the grasp of institutional death.
- At Dellrose I see signs of new Sunday school classes, new Bible study groups, new worship styles, and more and more people boldly living faithful for Jesus Christ.
- At Dellrose I see signs of organized small group fellowships, outreach ministries for the entire community, a youth center called ‘De La Rosa’, and a counseling center to help those who struggle with vices of the world.
- At Dellrose I see a vital congregation no longer playing church, but through its vision and mission, being a church focused on relationships more than on structure and organization.

However, these signs did not happen over night. There was no magic potion or a six-steps to success book. Resources were limited, encouraging words were few, doubt was bountiful, anger stood afar, and fear ran rapidly. Yet, just as in the feeding of the five thou-

sand, where resources were limited, Jesus took little and is making much at Dellrose.

In the fall of 1997, while I was an Associate Pastor at Saint Mark United Methodist church in Wichita, Kansas, I received a phone call from my District Superintendent. When I arrived home from Phillips Theological Seminary in Enid, Oklahoma, my wife Teketa informed me the District Superintendent had just called. He wanted me to return his call when I got home. Although I was weary and exhausted from the commute, which was an hour and a half drive from Wichita, one way, I returned his call quickly.

As we were talking he informed me he had a new appointment for me. The new appointment was Dellrose United Methodist Church, one mile east of Saint Mark United Methodist Church. Dellrose was a declining, predominantly white church with a graying membership sitting right in the middle of a rapidly growing, working middle-class, predominantly black neighborhood.

In the late 1980s a transition began to take place in the church and in the neighborhood. The church began to get older and the community began to transition from white to black. During this transition, membership and attendance began to fall drastically. In the early to mid 1970s worship attendance was approximately three to five hundred. By 1992 attendance was 124. Truly this was a church in the midst of institutional death.

It was during this time Dellrose put together a study group to see how Dellrose could overcome an institutional death. Dellrose concluded that if they wanted to continue to do ministry, the church would have to alter its ministries and worship style to meet the needs of the new community. The first attempt was in the early 1990s. The attempt to transition was not successful. The second attempt was in 1998 when I was appointed to Dellrose United Methodist Church. When I arrived on August 5, 1998 membership was 131 with an average worship attendance of 63.

During my introduction meeting with the staff-parish relation committee and the District Superintendent, I was advised it was time for the church to make the transition needed to minister to the surrounding neighborhood and community. My launching pad for this transitional change came from the 1996 *Book of Discipline*, Para. 21 Sections IV: 'Churches in Transitional Communities.'²

Part of the section states, "When the communities where the church is located experience transition especially identified as economic and or ethnic, the local church shall engage in the deliberate analysis of the neighborhood change and alter it's programs to meet the needs and cultural patterns of the new residents. The local church shall make every effort to remain in the neighborhood and develop effective ministries to those who are newcomers, whether of a cultural, economic, or ethnic group different from the original or present members."³

However, I soon discovered that when people talk about transition, that is all it is, talk! As soon as we began the transition by altering Dellrose's programs according to the *Book of Discipline* to meet the needs and cultural patterns of the new residents, I was met with strong opposition from the original members. The opposition was so strong that at times it brought tears to my eyes. My heart was so heavy; I felt I wanted to quit the ministry. Yet, during the transition I saw signs of hope in how Jesus could take little and make much. Those signs enabled me to keep my hands on the plow.

What were the signs of hope? For starters, the support of my wife and family, new members, some colleagues, and my District Superintendent. However, the former members complained just as the children of Israel at the red sea who complained to Moses, ". . . What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?"⁴ They complained the transition was too fast, and if we didn't stop they would leave, believing it would hurt the church financially. September 1998 marked the beginning of the exodus of the former members. All the former members except for three households withdrew, transferred, or removed their membership, leaving Dellrose to fail.

By December of 1998 the total membership was 25 and the average attendance was 63. However, God didn't leave Dellrose to fail!

One of the **first signs** of hope came when Dellrose changed its worship style. The music was changed to lively instruments, bass, guitar, drums, Hammond Organ, and heavy on rhythm. No longer was the pipe organ our main instrument. We asked special groups to sing and soloists from the community while varying the groups and music weekly. We use many people in worship to keep the worship fresh. The sermons are relevant, with focus on issues of being young, transient and stable, multi-ethnic, working blue-collar environment, with worship length being immaterial. However, worship tends to last an hour and half.

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Once people started coming and joining Dellrose through our worship experience, the **second sign** of hope was reaching through Church school. We started this with "Sunday School: Its for life!" From the growth of Sunday school, we now have seven *Disciple* Bible study groups, mid-week Bible study, men, women, children, single, and couples small group ministries. The **third sign** of hope is reaching through ministries and outreach. Dellrose's youth center and counseling center has healed and allowed many people to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Personally, I believe through our outreach ministries, we have reached pre-Christian people we would have never reached any other way.

Through our youth center many children in the surrounding community and church are able to get tutoring and mentoring on a daily basis. The center is open Monday through Friday from 3:30pm to 6:30pm. During the summer months when children are out for the summer, the center is open from 10:00am to 4:30pm. Our counseling center is open Monday through Friday by appointment only. Both of these ministries have allowed signs of hope to shine throughout the church and community.

These are just some of the signs of hope

at Dellrose. I can safely say since the first Sunday of January 1999, by transitioning Dellrose to meet the needs of the community, someone has joined Dellrose on an average of every Sunday. The active membership has grown from 25 to over 600 members, and the average attendance has grown from 63 to 400. The annual budget has grown from \$1,500 a Sunday to over \$5,000 a Sunday.

In Ezekiel 37, the prophet goes into a valley of dry bones. The bones represent past lives from a different time. God asks Ezekiel, "mortal, can these bones live?"⁵ Can there be life again, where there is now death? Is revitalization and transformation possible? Can Dellrose be transitioned and revitalized into a vital congregation where a relationship with Jesus Christ is more

important than having your name on the membership roll? To all those questions, God says yes!

Yes we can live, and from out of the ashes, I see and believe there are signs of hope at Dellrose and in the

United Methodist Church. What we must do as a church is allow Jesus Christ to be our first love and let him do the same thing he did with the two fish and five loaves of bread. When we have faith and do this, Jesus can take little and make much—truly, a sign of hope. AMEN! □

¹ John 6:9

² The United Methodist 1996 *Book of Discipline*: Para. 21, Sec. IV: Churches in transitional communities.

³ The United Methodist 1996 *Book of Discipline*: Para. 21, Sec. IV: Churches in transitional communities.

⁴ Exodus 14:11

⁵ Ezekiel 37:3



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